
Review of Lucian Freud Portraits and Drawings

Art: Column



'Benefits Supervisor Sleeping', 1995, by Lucian Freud - © The Lucian Freud Archiv

By Ossian Ward

There's terrible beauty and lost innocence in the portraits and drawings of the late I discovers

Wives, lovers, kids, fatties, freaks, friends and fellow artists populate the oddly claustrophobic Lucian Freud's studio. Bare wood floors, clogged brushes, dirty sheets and the occasional animal are the only meagre distractions from the evidently serious business of sitting for art. Freud has both preceded and now outlived him.

If on canvas he seems to treat his twisted, grimacing figures with no more regard than he does in precisely these protracted, intimidating encounters with Freud in his creative cocoon, his subjects' brows or freeze their faces in fear. Everyone looks nervous, as though waiting for an audition or an unwelcome appointment.

Freud's early works are his most disturbing in this regard, with his first wife Kitty gripping the neck of a cat in apparent terror. The goggle-eyed look of his '50s portraits gives the artist a sense of standing up behind the easel, hovering over his sitters, before bearing down on them as he begins to pummel the painted surfaces until they submit to his will, almost sculpting craggy, chiselled bodies. By the '80s his pictures take on an even less flattering, grumpy quality, with clumps of dry paint. In fact, no one but Freud's mother, Lucie, comes out of the [National Portrait Gallery survey of his portraits](#) smelling sweet or sitting pretty.

Most of the men look like ogres and many of the women look like men. Two of Freud's portraits, a jumble of oversized heads and awkward limbs on a sofa, while David Hockney appears normally sneering, superior figure of the artist himself is reduced to a withering old man, as if he were consciously in the 2002 'Self-Portrait, Reflection'.

It's easy to say that Sigmund Freud would've been proud of his grandson, given the theories - from the death drive and the sex drive to the uncanny and the repression - that have provided interpretational fodder for these portraits. But instead of each person's psychological being laid out, it feels as if Freud's perspective is to penetrate the fleshy masks sat before him. The pictures, in turn, are tough and ugly but necessary things.

The best that can be said about Freud, who has neither quite revolutionised painting nor loosened his grip on reality, is that he brings out the worst in people. He finds weakness in everyone. Freud's reclining nudes are magnificent expanses of honesty, especially so in the case of the artist's mother, Lucie Tilley, who appear variously beached, exposed, knackered and distressed. These are people as they are the day they were born, but naked as the day they were painted - their innocence laid bare and visible.

Just as the National Portrait Gallery's successful reappraisal of Freud was wholly convincing, the exhibition of the artist before his death last year, a small but spectacular [drawing show being staged at the Tate](#) gestating alongside and provides the perfect complement to the NPG's acres of oil.

The exhibition begins with a nine-year-old Freud's coloured-pencil-on-paper of birds, which continues, through some more fascinating juvenilia of boys being evacuated in WWI, to his work of 2011. The early drawings show an easy assurance with line and detail, when any subject considered worthy of a sketch.

Freud's fascination with surrealist juxtapositions, sadly lacking in the museum's strict adherence to realism, with a unicorn, drawing a dead monkey on a plate and experiment with a squid placed on a plate, animals, interiors and landscapes were clearly as important to the young Freud as they would be for the mature artist. Arguably, drawing was the basis on which all of Freud's work was built, but it was merely the first layer to be obliterated by his patient impasto.

Take the gem in this show, an outline for a portrait of Harold Pinter (abandoned in 2 that tells you everything you need to know about Freud's technique. The merest hir gaze, before Freud begins to apply more and more planes, folds and layers of skin -in quality of his best pictures, a stratification that recalls something Pinter once wrt is being said.'

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