

MICHAEL HOPPEN

‘I feel at home here in this chaos because chaos suggests images to me.’

In 1998, six years after his death, the walls, floor, ceiling and the architectural features of Francis Bacon’s London studio were excavated and reinstalled in their entirety at the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. Bacon had found 7 Reece Mews, three rooms off Brompton Road, South Kensington, in late 1961 and he lived and worked there for most of the rest of his life.

The living quarters were modest and spartan, the studio by contrast chaotic. The resting place for the sedimented litter of three decades, there was space only for one large-scale painting to be worked on at a time. Discarded tubes of paint, oil-stained rags and coagulated paintbrushes covered the available surfaces, abandoned canvases leant against pigment-smearred walls. The floor strewn with Bacon’s ‘working documents’, paint-accreted photographic prints, half-tone reproductions of photographs, film stills taken from newspapers and magazines, mass-media imagery, the plates sections of books and often the books themselves — he owned four copies of Eadweard Muybridge’s *The Human Figure in Motion* — the exhumation was a feat of forensic archaeology as much as conservation. The sheer accumulation of paper ephemera meant that damage was an everyday occurrence, the disintegrating items shuffling like a pack of cards, new aesthetic properties revealed as surface, form and texture shifted. The vagaries of accident and the random play of chance would always stimulate Bacon the painter and he would treat with the scantest respect the images he valued the most.

Six months after Bacon acquired Reece Mews the first of his two Tate retrospectives opened. Though a solitary painter he was not a reclusive one and hardly unknown — he had fifteen works in British public collections and sixteen in the USA, articles were published, monographs planned and the early preparatory stages of his first catalogue raisonné were underway — but the exhibition further raised his public profile leading to requests for interviews, and photographs. Among those drawn to the studio to scrutinise those distinctive features were Irving Penn, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Arnold Newman, Snowdon, Jorge Lewinski, Peter Beard, Peter Stark, Michael Pergolani and Larry Burrows, but it would take all their professional skills to disarm their subject. If Bacon did not actively enjoy the process, the transaction was a sound one: the results provided him with the elemental material for a series of self-portraits made in the 1970s.

MICHAEL HOPPEN

Early on there were two photographers in Bacon's immediate social circle, Daniel Farson (1927-1997) and John Deakin (1912-1972). Farson enjoyed a brief career as a photo-journalist for the popular features magazine Picture Post, though is better known as a firsthand authority on Soho, London's post-war bohemian quarter and for producing the first full-length biography of Bacon.

Deakin was the more accomplished, his career longer if sporadic (he had two interludes as a staff photographer at Vogue). He was indifferent to success, preferring painting to the camera, but produced enough impactful portraits to secure his reputation as the foremost chronicler in photographs of artistic life in London in the early postwar years. Like Bacon and Farson he was a habitué of the pubs and afternoon drinking clubs of Soho, the lure of which would lead him away from Vogue and regular employment and like them both again, Deakin could be malicious and abusive in the fashion that Soho denizens seemed often reportedly to be. Lucian Freud, who painted a forceful portrait of Deakin in 1963, recalled him as both unworldly naïf and careworn realist, *"Cinderella and the Ugly Sisters at the same time."*

On Deakin's death in 1972 (Bacon was named, shamelessly, as his next-of-kin), the haphazard remnants of his life's work were retrieved from his Soho flat by the writer, picture editor and later photographer Bruce Bernard, who recognised a remarkable talent: *'He seemed more of an acute and unmerciful eye than a photographer,'* he recalled. These relics, typically tightly-cropped headshots and often larger than life-size, made few concessions to vanity, every pore and blemish exposed with a brutal frankness. Farson described them, admiringly, as 'prison mugshots taken by a real artist', occasionally too unflattering for Vogue to publish. Their frontality of composition and very lack of 'style' — he had no discernible antecedent — Set Deakin apart from his contemporaries and anticipated by around ten years the fashionable starkness of Richard Avedon's and Diane Arbus's portraiture.

During the 1950s Bacon rarely painted from life finding the presence of a sitter intimidating and unwilling, as he would later explain (or excuse) it to David Sylvester, 'to practise before them the injury that I do them in my work.' After 1962, a year into his tenure of Reece Mews, Bacon relied not just on the found image but began to commission fresh source material.

MICHAEL HOPPEN

Possibly as early as 1959 Bacon assigned Deakin, now with no regular source of income, to make photographs of those he wished to paint to be used as he put it with studied circumspection, as 'memory traces of them', their content dictated by Bacon to conform with preconceived ideas for a painting.

Three hundred of Deakin's prints were salvaged from the studio floor, their power further enhanced by their brittle, fragmentary state. These subjects included Bacon's lovers Peter Lacy and George Dyer, both of whom would die unexpectedly, and friends such as Isabel Rawsthorne, Lucian Freud, Henrietta Moraes and Muriel Belcher. Deakin's first commission was of Peter Lacy at London's meat market at Smithfield and followed by two sets of nude studies of Moraes, an occasional artist's model. Isabel Rawsthorne en plein air in Dean Street, Soho, would directly inform *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in Street in Soho* (1967), for Bacon an uncommonly descriptive title. By far the biggest haul of prints showed George Dyer, an East End petty criminal of limited talent, whom Bacon had met in 1963 and struck up a relationship. A series taken in Reece Mews around 1964 of Dyer in his underpants was likely the most significant of Deakin's commissions for Bacon, freely improvised upon in the years to come. After Dyer's suicide in 1971 Bacon memorialised him in a series of portraits, the celebrated the 'black triptychs'. In his grief for his dead lover, Deakin's resource never more valued.

Bacon appeared to hold Deakin in high regard, recognising perhaps the power of impassive scrutiny. 'His photographs to me are the best since Nadar and Julia Margaret Cameron', he wrote to Bruce Bernard in 1984, but photographic formalism would always be of secondary concern. Bacon could be moved by a torn and creased newspaper picture or an out-of-focus tear-sheet as he might a pristine Victorian master-print. 'Some photographers are artists,' he also said, 'But I'm not particularly interested in that aspect of photography...'

As much as he admired Deakin, he could be witheringly dismissive of him and his statements on the significance of photographs to his work remain ambiguous and contradictory. Perhaps unsurprisingly; for a painter to admit a reliance on the mechanical as well as a dependence on another's work was a risk to reputation, stature and legacy. And in their great number Deakin's prints would exist as a source of spontaneous visual references, a dictionary of gesture and attitude, stasis and motion. They were 'triggers of ideas', certainly, but often in the cold light of the studio, they were reality itself.

MICHAEL HOPPEN

Bacon first encountered the American photographer Peter Beard (1938-2020) in 1965 at Bacon's Marlborough Gallery exhibition, their friendship cemented at the launch of Beard's book of photographs *The End of the Game* at the Clermont, a fashionable gambling club in the heart of Mayfair. The younger man made his reputation with photographic prints, large both in scale and ambition, made in Africa on wildlife themes, overlaid with paper ephemera, torn-out diary pages, letters and postcards smeared with the blood of dead animals and occasionally his own. An articulation of Beard's foreboding for an Africa already vanishing, Bacon, who had close family ties to South Africa and modern-day Zimbabwe and had visited both countries in the early Fifties, shared with him a grim fascination with the slaughter of African big game. Well-thumbed copies of Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore's *Camera Adventures in the African Wilds* (1910) and Marius Maxwell's *Stalking Big Game with a Camera in Equatorial Africa* (1925) would be discovered in the studio.

Beard appeared in counterculture films, partied with Salvador Dalí at El Morocco and would again with Truman Capote at Studio 54, made artworks with Andy Warhol, numbered Jackie Kennedy Onassis as a friend and toured with The Rolling Stones. Bacon was entranced with his restless energy and social agility and as a good-looking younger man he performed a vital role. He entered Bacon's world at an auspicious moment, Bacon telling David Sylvester that latterly he had 'nobody to paint but myself', but it would take several more years before he embarked on his first portrait of Beard. In the meantime they kept up a correspondence, Beard sending him copious amounts of photographs, letters and postcards. Bacon would paint Beard on several occasions between 1975 and 1980, mostly from self-portraits supplied to him.

Beard photographed Bacon many times mostly in and around 80 Narrow Street, a house on the river Thames at Limehouse which Bacon had acquired in 1969 and conducted an extensive and important interview with him in spring 1972, known as the "Dead Elephant Interviews". 'Dead elephants are more beautiful,' Bacon had confided to his friend, 'because they trigger off more ideas to me than living ones', a sentiment — if one were dispassionate — that might have found a parallel in the posthumous paintings of dead lovers.

When in 1984 Bruce Bernard organised John Deakin: The Salvage of a Photographer, a small photographic exhibition at the V&A, London, Bacon lent several prints and supplied in support his tribute to Deakin as the equal of Nadar and Cameron. The exhibition was a succès d'estime, its influence on a generation of enthusiasts and photographers far exceeding its

MICHAEL HOPPEN

modest claims for a forgotten master. One exceptional image showed the Neo-Romantic painter John Minton, also part of the Soho merry-go-round, staring into Deakin's lens with all the melancholy of a man out of time (he would die by his own hand in 1957). In 1994 the print, lent to Bernard's show by the photographer Roger Mayne, was acquired by Michael Hoppen at auction, and was the starting point for this impressive collection.

Bruce Bernard (1928-2000) would write with unique insight on several major figures in modern British painting, including Lucian Freud, Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach and Bacon himself, not least because they also happened to be his friends. They had also met for a memorable group portrait taken by Deakin in 1963 at Wheeler's restaurant in Soho. When Bernard later picked up a camera — Deakin had taught him how to use a Rolleiflex in the late Forties — the painters would also become his subjects. To me his portraits of Bacon, whom he met in 1948 at 20 years old, and taken in Reece Mews many years into their friendship, are among the most sympathetic ever made of this mercurial, almost unknowable figure and Bernard recalled him with generosity, 'I will never forget what exhilarating company he could be, or my conviction that in his greatness as a twentieth century artist he will be acknowledged as long as anyone cares about the painting of pictures.'

In the years since Bacon's death in 1992 much has been made of the responses to the material he amassed, how precisely they informed his paintings and the complex cultural contexts in which both gestated and interplayed. And in its preserved state 7 Reece Mews now stands as something of a self-mythologising work of art in itself, a grand dénouement, an unexpected coda to a life defined by the furious application of paint on unprimed canvas.

That Bacon was self-contradictory, disingenuous and a magnificent dissembler is clear, but his appropriation of imagery was neither haphazard nor hastily reactive, nor did he consider for one minute the sanctity of the document. How potent then these survivors born out of chaos and now brought into the light.

Robin Muir
London, July 2026