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All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life Tate Britain



Lucian Freud *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet, 1996*



Euan Uglow *Georgia, 1973*

Long ago, in the far-off mists of time, I earned a modest living as a figurative painter, with a side line in portraiture. At art school I had been a reluctant congregant of the Holy Church of Life Painting. This was the religion practiced in the hush precincts of the Life Room at Chelsea School of Art, under the tutelage of its high priest Euan Uglow, himself an acolyte of the Slade's Sir William Coldstream. Often called the Euston Road School (due to the location of the Slade) my fellow atheists and quislings secretly called this religion "Coleslaw" - a conflation of Coldstream and Uglow.

You get the gist. We were silly, young, rebellious and arrogant and thought we knew everything about the human condition and painting it too. It definitely did NOT involve plumb lines and mathematical measurement and anchor points of noughts and crosses flickering like little asterisks permanently strewn across the canvas. Unsurprisingly, I was eventually banished forever from the Life Room for talking to the model (so much for treating the model as a human being), for refusing to use the requisite plumb line machine, and finally for rejecting the secret scripture.

Seeing Uglow's 1973 portrait of Georgia Georgallas today at Tate Britain - whom I knew whilst she was sitting (suffering?) for this painting - brought it all back home, and I remembered with relief why my work is now about Nature, not human nature; nature that has no need that I am compelled to fix, or exhaustion that makes me feel guilty, or vanity to be flattered, or ego that requires soothing. To engage another human being in the collaborative act of seeing and being seen, looking and being looked at, is a complex, very serious and sometimes painful act. Too painful for me.

This show, which invokes in its title the relationship between artist and sitter among many other (often very confusing) ideas is a valiant attempt to pin down what happens when an artist paints another human being. It contains over 100 paintings, and its narrative journey takes the viewer down some strange rabbit holes.

There are some very odd detours. What are the abstracted figure-less cityscapes of North London by Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach doing here? The Paula Rego room is immensely powerful and contains her usual autobiographical fairy tales, but her engagement with the figure - often in the guise of enormous stuffed dolls - seems out of keeping with the show's stated aims. It's very welcome that there are so many women artists included ... Rego, Dorothy Mead, Jenny Saville, Cecily Brown, Celia Paul, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye ... but what is the connection between them aside from the fact that they use figures in their work? It all feels arbitrary. The curators posit the old "frenemies" Bacon and Freud as two opposing magnetic poles in the middle of the show, and with two large rooms devoted to them we are treated to some of their most important work. But somehow it all feels like déjà vu all over again.

Maybe it's brave to put on a show like this. The curators are certainly wearing their hearts on their sleeves. And there's certainly lots of heart here. And guts. And tissue and flesh and meat. But isn't the aim to explore "what makes us human" the very definition of all art?

Robin Richmond