

The Freudian Gaze

For most of his career, British painter Lucian Freud was obsessed with the human form. Heavily impastoed and exceptionally realist, his paintings are polemical studies of the human condition.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai

'Reflection with Two Children' (1965) shows the artist and his daughter and son, Rose and Ali Boyt

As a portraitist, how would you choose to represent Leigh Bowery, one of the greatest drag queens of all time? You could paint him in one of his signature looks – perhaps go with the polka dot suit with matching polka dot make-up, or maybe paint him in the famous 'fabric face', seen in so many of his outfits that covered not only his body but his head, with slits for the eyes and lips. You could even include lightbulbs taped to either side of his face, which was one of Bowery's more mellow looks. Instead Lucian Freud, known in his lifetime as one of the greatest living British painters, chose to ignore the weird and wonderful glamour of Bowery the artiste, and painted Bowery the man, naked with scars and warts and all. Often called 'merciless', 'unflattering' and 'pitiless', Freud's portraits are in fact anything but clinical. In Bowery's case, they are forensic studies of gentle physical strength, for he was a large man, and stripped-down vulnerability. That Freud found him 'perfectly beautiful' is telling, that he translated that beauty on his canvas is staggering. It is no wonder then, that in spite of his share of controversies, and reclusiveness, Freud was also the most sought-after artist not only at auctions but also by sitters who wanted him to paint them in a way no one else could. His one-time muse and ex-wife, writer Caroline Blackwood, once said he had a 'genius ability to make the people and objects that come under his scrutiny seem more themselves, and more like themselves, than they ever have been – or will be.'

In spite of his share of controversies, and reclusiveness, Freud was the most sought-after artist not only at auctions but also by sitters who wanted him to paint them in a way no one else could

A life less ordinary

Freud was born in Berlin in 1922 to Lucie Brasch and architect Ernst L. Freud, the youngest son of legendary neurologist and psychotherapist Sigmund Freud. He lived a privileged life, coming from a family that was, in his own words, liberal when it came to 'education, wealth and leisure.' The rise of Nazism in Germany led the family to leave their home and by the time Freud was almost 11, they had settled in London, a city he would come



The Lucian Freud exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London

to think of as ‘the place I prefer in every way to anywhere I’ve been’.

The transition could not have been easy though, especially because initially, Freud could not speak or read English. Perhaps this is why he spent much of his time riding horses or studying art while ignoring the social mores of the elite schools he was enrolled into. He was also a remarkable contrarian, whose asocial ways caused his father to introduce his son as ‘this wild animal.’ He finally found his vocation as an artist at the bohemian East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing founded by artist Cedric Morris. ‘Cedric,’ Freud has said, ‘taught me to paint, and more important, to keep at it.’ This was also the school whose first location Freud accidentally burned down because he ‘didn’t know how to smoke a cigar.’

While Freud’s legacy as a superlative artist remains unquestionable, his legacy as a human being is hardly wholesome. Intensely, almost suspiciously secretive, he was also, to use his own word, selfish, and it would seem guiltlessly so. A libertine, he fathered at least 12 children with various women, in addition to the two from his first marriage, never really connecting with most of them. He had problematic gambling habits and was, in his relationships, more a taker than giver. A searing essay by writer Julian Barnes provides trenchant criticism of Freud’s thoughts on women and how they should colour the lens with which we see his portraits. It is essential reading, but know that it might irreversibly change the way you view his female nudes, or even those 18 portraits of his mother.

The way of all flesh

Over the course of a 60-year-long career, Freud has painted gangsters and drag queens, supermodels and fellow artists, paid sitters and Queen Elizabeth II. His earliest paintings were quite different from the instantly recognisable ones of his later years. ‘When they said my work had a Germanic quality, I couldn’t bear it,’ he has said of his early work. A change of brushes, a wish to shock and amaze, and slow, persistent work followed, and the result would eventually make his work strikingly individualistic.

In Freud’s signature nudes, you will be hard-pressed to find ideal forms and flawless bodies on the canvas. It is almost as if he was averse to paragons, or wanted to create drastically different ones. That famous naked portrait of a pregnant Kate Moss is an exception, and generally considered to be one of his weaker works. Instead, consider the four portraits he made of Sue Tilley, a local government worker from London, that have fetched millions of pounds and now belong to private collections of very rich men. ‘Big Sue’, as she was called, glorious in form, has dozed off in a chair in ‘Sleeping by the Lion Carpet’, on a sofa in ‘Benefits Supervisor Resting’ and is lying down, face squashed, belly dangling in ‘Benefits Supervisor Sleeping’. Each fold and dimpling of her skin has been painstakingly rendered on the canvas, and the result is extraordinary. ‘A naked person,’ Freud has said, ‘is a human animal with their clothes off.’ In portraying Tilley the way he did, Freud has indeed been animalistic in every sense of the word: he has painted her without clothes and with unfiltered instinct, and he has worshipped her

DAVID BICKERSTAFF FOR EXHIBITION ON SCREEN / THE LUCIAN FREUD ARCHIVE / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



Here and below: Freud’s painting studio, has been kept exactly as it was on the last working day of the artist’s life



Over the course of a 60-year-long career, Freud has painted gangsters and drag queens, supermodels and fellow artists, paid sitters and Queen Elizabeth II

in his own way, perhaps for being a generous muse. Tilley, on her part, has described sitting for Freud as entertaining. He was, she has said, ‘the most amusing person I’ve ever met.’

Freud’s final work was a massive naked portrait of his long-time assistant, friend and muse, artist David Dawson and his whippet. He had been working on it for four years, and left it unfinished when he passed away, aged 88, in 2011. Dawson, who knew Freud, the man and the artist, better than anyone else, is also the taker of those wonderful photographs that show Freud at work and provide a rare glimpse into a world otherwise closed off.

The mirror never cracked

Freud spent a huge chunk of his life painting himself. Spread over decades, the self-portraits are at once about aging and attitude, self-examination and self-representation. For someone who was so private, these portraits provide an abundant cache of his time as artist and seeker. Whether he is the cropped face

here or standing up there with his hands in his pockets, a reflection here or a shadow there, that gaze, over decades, has remained unchanged.

There he is, young and surprised in black and white in ‘Startled Man’. There he is, in ‘Reflection with Two Children’, standing tall above you, drawing himself from a mirror on the floor. And finally there he is, 70 years old and still at work, naked but for a pair of boots in ‘Painter Working, Reflection’. He once said, ‘Unrealistic as it sounds, I want each picture that I am working on to be the only picture that I am working on, to go a bit further, the only picture that I’ve ever worked on and to go even a bit further, the only picture that anyone has ever done.’ It was a colossal undertaking to begin with, but he may have come dangerously close to achieving it. ■

Lucian Freud: A Self Portrait, a documentary on the exhibition that brought together, for the first time ever, all of the artist’s self-portraits, will be screened on 4th March at the Godrej Dance Theatre.

DAVID BICKERSTAFF FOR EXHIBITION ON SCREEN