

Lucian Freud 1996–2005



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SEBASTIAN SMEE

‘Success in the arts,’ wrote Eugène Delacroix, ‘is not a matter of abridging, but of amplifying, and, if possible, of prolonging the sensation by all possible means.’ Lucian Freud is the great amplifier of twentieth-century figurative art. His pictures are infused with the most extraordinary sense of duration. He articulates the intimacy and sometimes the estrangement of a unique mode of paying attention to people.

All this he converts into paint on canvas, and lines etched into copper. The resulting work has the same captivating resistance to preconception or definitive explanation that a mature person has. It induces corresponding susceptibilities and tensions in the viewer.

The longer you look over the last decade of Freud’s work – the subject of this volume – the more you are struck by the absence of any settled formula. No discernible ‘late style’ – no sense of cutting loose or paring back – has emerged over this period, which may be because Freud, as Frank Auerbach wrote in 2002, ‘has no safety net of manner. Whenever his way of working threatens to become a style, he puts it aside like a blunted pencil and finds a procedure more suited to his needs.’

More noticeable than any late-emerging manner, perhaps, is the quickening variety of

the work: huge paintings have been completed alongside shoe-box-size works; group portraits alongside head portraits and naked body portraits; there are pictures of lovers and grandchildren; dogs, horses and a garden in various guises.

What determines Freud’s choice of subjects? ‘The only reason I ever do anything is impulse,’ he often says. His working methods are similarly unpredictable.

‘The last few years I’ve been so completely caught up with working – for example, today I noticed that in the big picture I’m doing I was using my brush for absolutely anything. I was amused by it because I was doing something rather delicate and I not only had the big brush but it was all silted with paint. It’s like people shouting and using any old word because somehow the way they are shouting will get through. If you know what you want you can use almost anything. An ungrammatical shout is no less clear. It’s to do with the urgency.’*

The urgency may sit surprisingly alongside the famously slow gestation of Freud’s pictures (in most cases they take several months to finish; some take well over a year of regular work). Both, however, are the

Photograph by
David Dawson, 2003

* Quotations marked with an asterisk are taken from an interview with William Feaver, *Observer*, 17 May 1998

inevitable by-product of one simple ingredient: concentration.

‘The harder you concentrate,’ he has said, ‘the more the things that are really in your head start coming out.’

Freud is, in his oddly angled way, intensely sensitive to people’s moods and frailties. One of the first things you notice about him in person are his eyes, which can seem unreal and slightly alarmed. His responsiveness in one-on-one situations is not so much springy and pliant as jumpily alert, like an insect with outsized antennae.

Although he is a compelling and often very funny raconteur, he dislikes talking about his own work. ‘If there is a danger in it for me, it’s physical. If I talk too much, it sickens me.’

In conversation, he is always minding things – ‘I don’t mind this at all, but I really mind that’ – and it’s a linguistic reflex that is rooted in a deep vein of precisely what it denotes: mindfulness. He takes against things – people or ideas – easily. But he is also instinctively generous, in ways that spring directly from his attentiveness towards others.

He has one of the strongest and most distinctive personalities in twentieth-century art. Although there is no doubting the fact that this feeds into his work at every point, he has always been conscious of the remove at which great art operates, its necessary objectivity – and he is anxious to protect it. He once told me how much he liked what Matisse wrote in the text that went with his book, *Jazz*: ‘An artist must never be a prisoner even of himself, a prisoner of style, a prisoner of reputation, a prisoner of good fortune. Did not the Goncourt brothers tell us that Japanese artists of the great period changed their names several times in their

lifetime? This pleases me: they wanted to safeguard their liberties.’

Freud’s art is as provocative as ever. But the provocation is directed neither at public norms nor prevailing taste. Rather, one is invited to find only the most private uses for it. Consider a painting such as *Sleeping by the Lion Carpet*, 1996 [6], which shows the vastly proportioned Sue Tilley asleep in a chair. Her sheer bulk – the way the cascading bonelessness of her flesh causes only tenuously related parts to nestle intimately against each other – may occasion a shock, the frisson of some kind of breach in decorum. But what is masterful about the finished picture is that Freud takes this experience and deepens it, gouging out emotions and corporeal sensations that extend and very often contradict the original ones.

‘Initially, being aware of all kinds of spectacular things to do with her size, like amazing craters and things one’s never seen before, my eye was naturally drawn to the sores and chafes made by weight and heat,’ he said.*

But through the same kind of curious, uninsistent honesty, extended over hours and days and months of attention, he translated Tilley’s remarkable physical presence into a painting of tenderness and intimacy. One notices, in particular, the sweet, pointed lolling of her right leg and toe; the intricate balance of cheek and nose resting on propped arm and open palm; and the stalking of her deep-set somnolence by the alert pair of lions behind. This painting is unlike anything before it in the history of art.

Of course, everything one feels in front of Freud’s paintings has to do with the means by which it is conveyed – the paint. He can pack more energy and specifically anchored

imagination into a few square inches of brushwork than anyone alive. There is no rational formulation behind the congeries of brushstrokes that constitutes the head portrait, for instance, of Robert Fellowes [37]. Blockish tonal shifts that convey modelling vie with surface particularities, and all this exists in tension with the rhythmic relations Freud sets up over the canvas – especially the slightly oblique, downward brushstrokes that convey the pull of gravity on his looser features.

Somehow, it all coheres to produce an intensified reality. The result puts across something of the subject's intelligence and discretion, perhaps even his modesty (Fellowes, a longstanding friend of Freud, is a former private secretary to the Queen). But more than anything, it suggests the sheer effort of being and staying there.

This perhaps, is Freud's great contribution to the 'idea' of portraiture: it is not so much about 'penetrating character' or illustrating personality traits; it is about the strongest possible presentation of a specific human presence. And bound up in that is an understanding of other people's privacy, their essential solitude.

'I paint people not because of what they are like, not exactly in spite of what they are like, but how they happen to be,' he has said.

Although they are notorious for being among the most candid portraits ever painted, Freud's portraits do not presume to know their subjects definitively (how could they, when so many of them are asleep, or have averted, vacant eyes?) Instead, they do something far more subversive and, in the end, moving. Even as he scrutinizes his models with the utmost intensity, Freud powerfully registers their unknowability. In doing so, he grants them a great depth of human

freedom; this in turn provokes an impulse in the viewer to accord them a genuine, a believable reality.

'When you find things very moving the desire to find out more lessens rather,' he once said. 'Rather like when in love with someone you don't want to meet the parents.'

Looking at his full body portraits, you are made to confront the strange quiddity of occupying a body which, merely by breathing, displaces the air around it. A feeling of weight and mass returns. Luxurious, even erotic sensations alternate with degrees of discomfort. It is an emotional, a psychological experience as well as a physical one, but it is very precise – 'perceiving without reverie', as Simone Weil put it. No element of mystification or abstraction is involved.

Indeed, you are more likely to find painted reinforcement, even tautology, in Freud's work than suggestive vagueness. Looking at his 2002 portrait of Frances Costelloe [73], for instance, you notice a spiky, unvisual quality – especially around the eyes, on the bridge of the nose and at the centre of the forehead. It is as though Freud had continued to paint beyond the point at which he had achieved an adequately realistic image. (This is something you notice in Courbet and Constable, too; Freud just takes it further, ratcheting up the risk.)

Paint that is somehow surplus to requirements; representation that goes beyond itself – all this stimulates the eye. It intrigues us because we cannot say exactly why it seems right. And by communicating something extra about the painter's response, it emphasizes the specific presence of the subject – like those unnecessary but telling words that transform an impersonal exchange into an intimate conversation.

‘I think a great portrait has to do with the way it is approached,’ Freud once told me. ‘If you look at Chardin’s animals, they’re *absolute* portraits. It’s to do with the feeling of individuality and the intensity of the regard and the focus on the specific.’

Freud’s own portraits of animals over the past decade include some of his most audaciously individual works. His infatuation with horses goes back to his earliest days in England. As a student at Dartington Hall he would often sleep in the stables with his favourite horses. ‘My life was devoted to them,’ he said. ‘I rode the horses that were frisky so others could ride them later on.’ He did scores of drawings of horses as a teenager, and his first and only known sculpture was a powerfully condensed, three-legged horse carved from sandstone in 1937. He also painted a grey filly resting one of its hind legs in a straw-covered stable in 1970.

A renewed fascination with Théodore Géricault may have helped prompt Freud to return to the subject in the winter of 2003. The two horses, *Grey Gelding*, 2003 [77], and *Skewbald Mare*, 2004 [91], were painted one after the other on cold, morning visits to a

riding school not far from the artist’s studio in Holland Park.

Grey Gelding, with its nose bisected by a bridle and its homely background of straw and stable wall, is a marvellously phlegmatic riposte to the flared nostrils and nervous ears of Géricault’s *Head of a White Horse* in the Louvre.

The freely painted flank of *Skewbald Mare* meanwhile, recalls Freud’s 1970 *A Filly* – but this time we are taken closer in. The entire head and neck are cropped, as is a fraction of the front legs. These, on closer inspection, seem blurred and awkwardly anomalous. Our attention is directed instead at the flank, the rump (Freud insists she was noticeably proud of it – the reason he chose to paint her), and the exquisitely articulated rear leg, with its muscle moulded meltingly into tendon and bone.

It is a remarkable study in sensuous observation. It is also, as Robert Hughes put it, ‘a striking example of how concentration on a motif will conclude it, round its meaning off, even when in another artist’s hands it would be inconclusive.’

For decades, Freud has painted his dogs.

Théodore Géricault,
Head of a White Horse,
Louvre, Paris © Photo RMN –
© Thierry Le Mage



Lucian Freud,
A Filly, 1970

Pluto, the subject of several of his greatest paintings (including the heartstopping *Double Portrait*, 1985–86), died in 2002. She appears here in several works before that date – as a fragile, babyishly vulnerable creature in the etching *Pluto, Aged 12*, 2000 [45]; with Freud’s assistant, the painter David Dawson, in *Sunny Morning – Eight Legs*, 1997 [20]; and in that picture’s tiny, ten-legged companion piece, *David, Pluto and Eli*, 2001 [62]. But she is also the real, if absent, subject of *Pluto’s Grave*, a small, exact study of the stone marking her improvised grave in Freud’s back garden, surrounded by dead leaves and a lush spurt of bamboo [85].

It’s too fresh and oddly particular a work to be sentimental – but the frank expression of feeling here brings to mind something Freud once told me on the subject. When questioned about his objection to sentimentality in art, he said:

‘Sentimental does, I suppose, mean full of feeling. But since the whole thing of painting is a question of forms, I want the forms to affect my feelings rather than the feelings to affect my forms. The idea of a thing being idealized is foreign or hostile to the way I like to make things.’*

Like his depictions of animals, Freud’s portraits of people are soaked in particularity. They are full of human contradictoriness. They do not insist on any one aspect of character, any one physical fact. They include as much as possible.

For something like this reason, his portrait of the Queen is one of the most original and compelling contributions to the long history of royal portraiture. The painting had been proposed many years previously, but was put off indefinitely (largely because of the threat of overweening interest from the press). In



Lucian Freud,
Double Portrait, 1985–86

the intervening period, Freud painted a small portrait of his friend, the Picasso biographer John Richardson. Adapting his technique, he found that the relatively few sittings Richardson could afford and the smaller scale did not have to mean a diminution in power. Nor did it mean the work would court the ‘miniature’ look Freud has so strenuously avoided since switching to hog’s hair brushes and a more dynamic, plastic sense of form in the ’50s.

The success of the Richardson picture brought the portrait of the Queen back into the realm of possibility. ‘Of course, we had only a limited number of sittings,’ Freud told me. ‘At one point I remember saying to her, “You probably think I’m going incredibly slowly, but in fact I’m going at ninety miles an hour, and if I go any faster the car might overturn.”’

Although it fits into a shoe box, the finished work [60] has a surprising monumentality. In its complete eschewal of majestic glamour, it is as slyly sympathetic a painting as Corot’s *Seated Man at Arms*, 1868–70. It is the first portrait of the Queen to present her



Photograph by
David Dawson, 2001

convincingly as the ageing grandmother that she is. Rather than exaggerating this aspect and turning the image toward caricature, however, Freud folds it back into a sense that what we don't know about her we will continue not to know.

'If I'm putting someone in a picture, I like to feel that they've fallen asleep there or they've elbowed their way in,' Freud has said, 'that way, they are there not to make the picture easy on the eye or more pleasant, but they are occupying the space of the picture and I am recording them.'*

Composition, in other words, is never more important to a painting than the subject. 'In my case the sort of odd ease and calm of a composed picture could take some of the life out of it ... One of the things in Stanley Spencer I'm so conscious of is his "composition" ("Shall we put this there?").

I was quite pleased when John Wonnacott said "You are a marvellous painter of flesh but you can't compose," I thought "Oh good", because I felt that the way I put things looked awkward, in the way that life looks awkward.'

Rather than wallowing in morbidity, as some would have it, Freud is forever feeling out the contrast and interplay between so much densely packed life and the threat, the promise, held out by the inanimate. The naked portraits, in particular, convey a powerful sense of what it is like to occupy a body coming to rest. One minute the feeling is all erotic lassitude; the next it is reminiscent of Kafka's Gregor Samsa, transformed overnight into an insect covered in slime, unable to move. Freud's paintings remind you that the luxury of indolence, of physically unraveling, is never far removed from the agonized twitches of torpor.

His painted bodies map the world of objects around them into zones of attraction and repulsion. His patterns, for instance – in the forms of clothes, bedspreads or floorboards – seem to shore up flesh that is otherwise threatening to dissolve.

‘The eye itself, pure vision, grows weary of solids,’ wrote Gaston Bachelard. ‘Its great wish is to dream deformation.’ A similar imaginative movement is at play in many of Freud’s best paintings. ‘When you look at the forms,’ he once said, ‘it is clear that some of them want to be liberated.’

He likes to set the fragility of fraying furniture or the resistance of floorboards and walls against the soft, animated presence of his subjects. He is extremely sensitive to the expressiveness of objects, their opacity and resistance, and to the ways in which they might be animated by different states of consciousness. Time and again, inert objects inexplicably come to dominate, or at least unsettle, the viewer’s perceptions; they

become the hinges over which the imagination folds.

Several of the most remarkable recent portraits have shown models sitting in Freud’s red, leather chair. (‘I love this chair. It may be to do with who sat in it. The life it’s led. Slight feeling of sweat.’*) The tense but self-possessed *Louisa*, of 1998 [40], was followed by a naked portrait of her mother the following year (*Naked Portrait in a Red Chair*, 1999 [41]). In both, the chair seems not only to contain the sitter but to tip her forward, making for a remarkably intimate, unprotected presentation. The chair itself had taken centre stage in 1997 – a sort of self-portrait at one remove, and a homage to Van Gogh.

In truth, very few artists in the history of painting have produced self-portraits (the actual kind) over such an extended period as Freud. But his self-portrait of 2002 was the first time he had painted himself in almost ten years. In this work, Freud seems to be

Camille Corot,
Seated Man at Arms, 1868–70
Musée d’Orsay, Paris © Photo RMN –
© Thierry Le Mage



Vincent van Gogh,
Van Gogh's Chair, 1888
National Gallery, London

pushing paint deliberately into the realm of tautology. The conflicted impasto which configures the artist's nose and forehead and his unkempt spray of grey hair enters into a dizzying, snap-like visual game with the paint scrapings on the wall behind.

'I intend to paint myself to death,' the artist is fond of saying.

Four paintings and two etchings of Freud's back garden in Notting Hill have been completed since 1996. They are pictures that, like all his others, are the outcome of impulse and affinity. But they also feel like very personal tributes to John Constable, an artist increasingly in his thoughts.

Freud selected the works to go in a large Constable exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2001. In the lead-up to the exhibition, he began work on an etching, *After Constable's Elm* [76]. Two years previously, the original Constable had directly inspired *Naked Portrait Standing*, 1999–2000 [51], a painting which, in its vulnerable sturdiness,

recalls a passage in Heinrich Wölfflin:

'Our own bodily organization is the form through which we apprehend everything physical. We have carried loads and experienced pressure and counter-pressure, we have collapsed to the ground when we no longer had the strength to resist the downward pull of our own bodies, and that is why we can appreciate the noble serenity of a column and appreciate the tendency of all matter to spread out formlessly on the ground.'

Discussing *Garden, Notting Hill Gate*, 1997 [17], Freud told William Feaver, 'I thought rather early on that there would be more dark shadowy bits, but I realized later that I could sustain the drama that I wanted in the picture by – as I nearly always do – giving all the information that I can.'*

This inclination to 'put it all in' is exactly the quality Freud admires in Constable. It is an impulse that can result in awkwardness, even clumsiness – but what is lost in classical composure is more than made up for in heartfelt emotion. (Pushkin: 'No, incorrect and careless chatter / words mispronounced, thoughts ill-expressed / evoke emotion's pitter-patter, / now as before, inside my breast.')

'I don't think there's any kind of feeling you have to leave out,' Freud has said. His portrait of Gaz, the Soho club musician with the hopeful leer, is a case in point. Gaz, he says, 'was sort of ludicrous. He was always making difficulties, but they were basically economic, so I didn't mind.'*

The finished portrait is reminiscent of Velázquez's grinning buffoon, *Calabazas*. But it has little of that painting's gentleness. Instead, it possesses an unusually strong element of what, according to Freud, 'every

John Constable, *Study of the trunk of an elm tree*, c.1821
V&A Images / Victoria & Albert Museum





Diego de Velázquez,
The Jester Calabazas, c.1633
© The Cleveland Museum of Art



James Jacques Tissot,
Frederick Gustavus Burnaby, 1870
National Portrait Gallery, London

good picture has to have, which is a little bit of poison.'

'When his mother came to see the picture she was obviously a bit shaken,' Freud told Feaver. 'She was looking at it, and Gaz said, "You see, Mum, I'm at a bus stop and there are some people thinking of having a go at me, and because I'm quite big they don't know whether to start something or not. That's why I'm sort of smiling and snarling." ... The thing is, he was boring and fascinating at the same time.'

The Brigadier [93] is a portrait of Andrew Parker Bowles, a former commanding officer of the Household Cavalry, and an old riding companion of Freud. The idea for the picture, which shows Parker Bowles in dress uniform, took its cue light-heartedly from a portrait by James Tissot of another cavalry officer, Frederick Burnaby. A huge man, Burnaby was said to be the strongest man in the British army, someone who could carry a pony under one arm, and who once travelled three thousand miles on horseback

across the Russian steppe in winter.

Freud's portrait, also of a big man, is a world away. His jacket is undone to reveal a genial gut and his thoughtfully posed right arm cannot disguise the fact that he has been returning to sit in that same chair every week for over a year. Nonetheless, it is a tremendously imposing picture. It looms dramatically over the viewer, animated in its lower half by the kicking, crisscrossing diagonals.

'One of the things about all great art is that it involves you, don't you agree? There's a degree of conviction that involves you in a way that seems almost innate.'

'What do you still want to do?'

'It may sound strange, but I'd like to do very ambitious pictures which I can't do.'

'Ambitious in what sense?'

'Scope. There's such a thing as, through working, having such a knowledge and proficiency that you're free-wheeling. Whereas I want to do things that are really taxing.'

1 SELF PORTRAIT, 1996