

FRANCIS BACON

Teaching and Learning Resource

‘Deepening the Game’

Session One - ‘A Deeply Ordered Chaos’

'Deepening the Game':

A Learning Resource developed by artist Dom Heffer

SESSION ONE – 'A DEEPLY ORDERED CHAOS'

'I want a very ordered image, but I want it to come about by chance'¹ Francis Bacon

OUTLINE:

This session will encourage participants to utilise chance and accident, to gain a greater awareness of the process of making a painting. Participants will be encouraged to make imaginative leaps in order to create images that surprise them, while also expanding their vocabulary of mark making. What is important here is not to attempt copies of Bacon, but to make interesting images that are informed by Bacon's unique approach to painting by embracing chance and accident.

TIMESCALE:

The full session with introduction, research, preparation studies and final paintings will require around three hours of teaching at KS3/4, FE/HE or adult groups, although there are elements that can be shortened or completed as extra-curricular research.

KEY OUTCOMES:

This session works towards KS 3/4 curricular objectives to:

- produce creative work, exploring ideas and recording experiences
- know about great artists, craft makers and designers, and understand the historical and cultural development of their art forms.

In addition to this – the session will:

- cultivate students' sense of variety of processes when approaching painting
- build aesthetic vocabulary by introducing students to innovative mark making
- encourage experimentation, imagination and cultivation of chance and accident.

¹Interview with David Sylvester

SHORT BACKGROUND

ABOUT FRANCIS BACON (1909 - 1992)

Francis Bacon was one of the most important British artists of the 20th century. Famous for his dark and powerful images, often associated with violence and brutality, his paintings are instantly recognisable and are shown in galleries all over the world.

Bacon was born to English parents in Dublin, but left home at 16. Bacon was homosexual and had a difficult relationship with his father. He travelled to Berlin and then Paris where he first encountered the work of Pablo Picasso. This exhibition had a huge impact upon him, later he would say:

"Picasso is the reason why I paint. He is the father figure, who gave me the wish to paint."²

After this, Bacon embarked upon a long period of experimentation. Returning to London, Bacon taught himself to paint, often dissatisfied and destroying his work on the way. He worked as an interior designer before beginning to establish himself as an artist in the 1930s. By the 1950s he had started to gain success and was supported by a gallery in London. His success grew during his lifetime, and he was given the rare honour of major museum exhibitions.

Bacon's work was strongly influenced by his travels (for example to Tangiers, South Africa and Monaco) and his relationships, which were often tempestuous and sometimes had tragic outcomes. As well as this, Bacon would draw his imagery from numerous sources, such as early Russian cinema, medical diagrams, photography, and ancient Egyptian art.

For the majority of his career, he worked in a small, seemingly chaotic, studio space with attached living quarters in London. The apparent chaos of this space, with layers of collected images on the floor and paint all over the walls, helped Bacon to create his comparatively ordered images.

Bacon died in Madrid in 1992.

For a full chronology see: <http://www.francis-bacon.com/chronology>

²Interview with Francis Giacobetti

PREPARATION:

For the first session you will need to research and collect images associated with Bacon's work. This can be done as part of the session or as an activity in preparation for the session. You may choose images of wild animals, early photographs of moving animals (by Eadweard Muybridge), medical diagrams, film stills from Sergei Eisenstein, newspapers and magazines, images from sport – boxing or cricket or wrestling. These will be used for the first activity. Each participant will need around five of these images. Participants will also need to gather a small selection of images of personal interest to them, to help them with their experimental paintings.

For the full effect of the Bacon painting experience, you will need to source some raw canvas. Bacon famously used the 'wrong' side of the canvas because he felt that it had 'more teeth' and it 'raised the stakes' of painting, because once a mark was made it was difficult to erase. It is important that you use this rather than normal 'primed' canvas.

You can find unprimed canvas easily, online or from a specialist art shop. It is often sold in rolls by the metre. For a class/group of 30 you will need no more than 5 metres of 120 cm wide unprimed canvas. This then needs to be cut into roughly A3 sized sections.

While most unprimed canvas is suitable, (10oz) Unprimed Cotton Duck, medium grain (Fig. 1) would be a good choice – a medium grain linen canvas (Fig. 2) would also work well but tends to be more expensive. It is not necessary to stretch these canvases on a wooden frame.

You will find painting directly on these surfaces a very different experience to using primed canvas.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

SESSION IN DETAIL

Total time for the activities is around three hours. However, the session has numerous points where you can pause, so that the project fits into your schedule. The following timings are meant as a guideline:

PART ONE:

Introduction - 20 minutes:

You need: Internet access / access to Francis Bacon website

Using the short background in this resource and the chronology on the Francis Bacon website, participants are given a brief introduction, by session leader, to Bacon's life and some key works.

Analysis of a single work – 20 minutes:

You need: Large sheets of paper / coloured pens / access to Francis Bacon website

Choose one Bacon image and display it at the front of the room. Divide group into twos or threes. Each group needs a sheet of A2 or A3 paper and some coloured pens. Ask each group to write the headings 'See', 'Think' and 'Feel' on the paper in different colours. Encourage participants to discuss and respond to the image by referring to these headings.

- 'See' – be obvious, what colours, forms do you see? Answers may be single words, for example: 'orange, blood, bull' etc.
- 'Think' – What do you think is happening? Is there a 'logic' to the image? Answers may be short attempts at explanations, for example: 'I think the form is almost human but not quite, it looks as if the form is suffering, it is in a brightly coloured room, a bedroom perhaps – I think this is a murder scene'
- 'Feel' – How does the image make you feel? What are your instinctive feelings, and what are your more considered feelings? Does your instinct persist? Answers may be single words and then more developed sentences. For example: confused, anxious, intrigued, horrified – 'Initially I feel horrified by the distorted form, however, the bright colours of the room suggest a happy scene, which is a strange contrast'.

Ask a couple of groups to volunteer their findings and follow with a short group discussion.

Image Sourcing / Research - 20 minutes:

You need: Internet / Laptops / printing facilities

This can be done as preparation for the session or as part of the session. Remaining in groups, participants will gather imagery, firstly from sources pertinent to Bacon's work. Appropriate search terms could be:

Eadweard Muybridge Photos (these may contain nudity) – animal movement
Wild animals – Hunting

Russian cinema – Sergei Eisenstein – Battleship Potemkin
Sport – wrestling – cricket – boxing – Religious images - Pope

These images should be printed and put to one side. There should be enough for five for each participant. Next, ask students to find four or five images that are inspirational to them, this could be a still from a film or a photograph of a performer or sports person in action.

Once these images are collected and printed move on to the next activity.

Experimental Collages – 30 minutes:

You need: Images from research / card or paper A4 / glue sticks / scissors / oil pastels or coloured pencils

Participants are now asked to think about constructing an image. Bacon would rarely create detailed preparatory work. He would more often make brief written notes, very small sketches, or marks on photographs or rip up photographs to suggest a peculiar combination or form before and while he was working on a canvas. This is what we are trying to do with these collages (See Fig. 3,4 and 5).

Using the Bacon-inspired research images, rip or cut or draw into the imagery and stick it on a small piece of paper or card to create a composition. Use oil pastels, coloured pencils or felt tips to make marks on the images that alter them, suggest movement or provoke new ideas about the image.



Fig. 3 Collage by Grace – Malet
Lambert School



Fig. 4 Collage by Lucy – Malet Lambert



Fig. 5 Experimental collages underway

PART TWO:**Experimental Paintings – 70 minutes:**

You need: A3 pieces of canvas (un-primed is preferable) / acrylic paint / brushes of various sizes / personal research images / sponges for mark making / small pieces of scrap card for mark making / water / palettes / masking tape

Forget everything that you know about painting! We are now ready to embark on our experiments...

Using masking tape, stick your piece of canvas to a board or table – this will avoid it buckling or moving around and will create a border about a centimetre wide around the image. You may wish to cover your tables because the paint can seep through the canvas.

Remember, the objective is to create interesting images and marks, not perfect painted portraits. By the end of the process, your painting should be a surprise to you. The research images are to help you along, if you get stuck, try adding an element of one of these images. Bacon's paintings would often change during the process, so do not be afraid of this, and perhaps even consider leaving traces of the previous image.

Start by adding one image from your research. Work on it for about ten minutes, then introduce another – think about the setting – the context for the images – remember it does not have to be logical – try adding areas of blocked in colour to see if a particular setting is then suggested.

During the process, key things to remember are:

- **Change** – you are not just making illustrations from your research images – be happy to change your image in the process.
- **Surprise** – place your images in peculiar places on the canvas, does this suggest other images or a change in direction of your idea? If so, go with it, embrace accident, explore...
- **Texture** – try to make different varieties of marks using the edge of card, taping off sections, stippling brush marks, use thick paint and thin paint, try adding layers by using these techniques over your existing painting.
- **Distortion** – Bacon's images are rarely anatomically precise, and yet they are still wonderfully evocative of the figure. Try distorting your image, smudge areas or run a dry brush over a wet patch of paint, work into the paint with oil pastels etc...
- **Space** – do not be afraid to leave some sections of your image untouched, so that the canvas shows through.
- **Time** – if you feel your image has reached a satisfactory point, don't be afraid to leave it there.

At the end of painting, peel off your masking tape – this should have created an appealing straight border around your painting.



Fig. 6 – Taking a chance



Fig. 7 – Experimenting with mark making

Group discussion:

End with a group discussion with constructive critique of the paintings. Some ways by which to judge the 'success' of the works are: to see how much the ideas have changed along the way, how clearly the image has been depicted, to what extent the image has embraced risk-taking, different mark-making techniques and textures. (See Figs. 8 and 9) – Remember to post your results on our Facebook or Twitter feeds!



Fig. 8 – Grace has used the rim of a large cup to create the overlapping circular forms in her painting. She has also added the ghostly outline of a bull's head in response to bull fights that occur in certain paintings by Bacon.



Fig. 9 – Lucy used masking tape to create sharp edges and leave some of the canvas untouched in her painting. She also printed the image of the horse after first painting it on card, she has then used the edge of a piece of card to dab white lines over the image.

MATERIALS CHECKLIST:

- Large sheets of paper (preferably A2)
- Coloured pens
- Images from research
- A4 Card or paper – for collages
- Glue sticks
- Scissors
- Oil pastels or coloured pencils
- Masking tape
- A3 pieces of canvas (un-primed is preferable)
- Acrylic paint
- Brushes of various sizes
- Personal research images
- Sponges for mark-making
- Small pieces of scrap card for mark-making
- Palettes

If you have the opportunity, why not ask students to bring in an unusual tool to make interesting marks? (For example, a potato masher!) Bacon used grit, sand and dust to give paint more texture – he also used his cashmere sweaters to smudge paint.

USEFUL LINKS:

- <http://www.francis-bacon.com/> – The Estate of Francis Bacon official website with links to social media
- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/francis-bacon-682> – Tate Gallery page about the artist
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoFMH_D6xLk – Francis Bacon 'Fragments of a Portrait' – 1966 BBC interview by David Sylvester
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxiv3OW6wkg> – The South Bank Show, 1985, documentary with Francis Bacon interviewed by Melvyn Bragg – part 1 of 6.

Session plan created by Dom Heffer for The Estate of Francis Bacon, 2018.

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