

Francis Bacon and Queer Intimacy in Post-War London

Salter, Gregory

DOI:

[10.1080/14714787.2017.1302817](https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2017.1302817)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Salter, G 2017, 'Francis Bacon and Queer Intimacy in Post-War London', *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 84-99 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2017.1302817>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in [insert journal title] following peer review. The version of record [insert complete citation information here] is available online at: xxxxxxx [insert URL and DOI of the article on the OUP website].

Checked 20/12/2016

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

**Francis Bacon and Queer
Intimacy in Post-War London**
Gregory Salter, Birkbeck,
University of London, and CAPA

Gregory Salter

Francis Bacon and Queer Intimacy in Post-War London

Abstract: Francis Bacon's paintings of the immediate post-war period in Britain include several works that take as their subject the spaces and experiences of queer intimacy, prior to the legalisation of homosexuality in 1967. These works inevitably stray across the spheres that queer men occupied at this time, from the domestic interior to public spaces like bars and hotels. Through an analysis of *Two Figures*, 1953, and the *Man In Blue* series, 1954 in their wider social and cultural contexts, this essay argues that Bacon's works present visions of a broad, fluid, anxious sense of queer home in post-war London.

Keywords: Francis Bacon; homosexuality; queer; home; Marcel Proust; James Baldwin; post-war London

In Francis Bacon's 1953 painting *Two Figures* (Figure 1), two men are having sex on a bed in a dark room. They lie on a bed that stretches horizontally across the canvas like a platform or a stage. There is a headboard on the left side of the bed with a mangled, misshapen pillow alongside it. The crumpled pillow and the folds, ripples, and creases of the bed sheets are formed out of thick smears of white paint, and the two men are positioned in the centre of the bed, on its edge. Their bodies are broadly modelled in fluid strokes of white, pink, blue, and lilac, though there are areas where the paint appears to have been rubbed away or dark paint rubbed on to create shadows or definition on their bodies, or where paint has been applied more carefully to begin to pick out their faces. These bodies are in motion in a moment of intimacy, with their faces bearing ambiguous expressions of exertion and submission, lust and tenderness. This ambiguity is heightened by the thin streaks of watery paint that descend from the top of the canvas, passing over the bodies of the two men, distorting and smearing their faces slightly, before curving gently at the base of the canvas, like a translucent curtain hitting the floor. This is a room, although it is a very basic one – windowless and featureless, apart from the bed at its centre. It is delineated with very thin lines of white paint, and we seem to stand just within it or on its threshold, intruding or about to intrude on this moment between the two men. That thin curtain attests to this feeling of being within but also just outside this space and moment at the same time. The bodies of the two men occupy a threshold too: they are seen and exposed – a private moment made public – but they are caught up in this moment of sexual intimacy, seemingly unknowing or uncaring of the audience that watches. This sense of an invasion of privacy is all the more palpable with the knowledge that in 1953 the witnessing of a sexual act like this between two men would have resulted in them being arrested.

Two Figures was first exhibited in a show of Bacon's works at the Hanover Gallery in the early 1950s, where his dealer and gallery owner Erica Brausen

hung the work in the upper part of the gallery, half hidden from visitors who would have had to actively seek out the work in order to see it.¹ With homosexuality illegal – legalisation did not occur in England until 1967 – Brausen was concerned that the graphic nature of Bacon's painting would provoke a police raid. The transgression that *Two Figures* represented – the way it made an illicit, private act public – was risky and potentially controversial, and Brausen's choice of hang restored a little of the boundaries that Bacon had wilfully ignored. Since this first exhibition, *Two Figures* has continued to live a semi-public, semi-private existence. It has not been exhibited publicly for several decades, though it remains widely reproduced in Bacon literature.² Critics have also closely tied the painting to Edward Muybridge: the pose and positions of the two men in the painting clearly derive from his photographs of wrestlers taken in 1887. Bacon's interest in Muybridge's photography and his intensely personal use of these images as sources for his work has not gone without comment. Critic David Sylvester viewed *Two Figures* as "a conflation of autobiography and photography" and saw Bacon and his then partner Peter Lacy's features in the faces of the two men on the bed. Years after the work was produced, Bacon himself admitted, "I manipulate the Muybridge bodies into the forms of bodies I have known".³ There has, however, been a tendency to follow the lead of Bacon and his interviewer Sylvester and focus on Muybridge at the expense of other elements of *Two Figures*. The constant reference to Bacon's use of his sources when discussing works like this in effect gives it a more palatable public face, something Bacon and Sylvester may well have been inclined to do (understandably, given their age and the period in which Bacon was working). But continuing to invoke Muybridge in front of *Two Figures* is akin to Erica Brausen moving the painting half out of sight in 1953.

It is this tension between public and private – the sense that there existed strict boundaries around what could and could not be expressed about queer sexuality in post-war Britain alongside the sense that queer experience meant that these boundaries were inevitably going to be transgressed – that is a key element of Francis Bacon's art in the 1940s and 1950s. It's also a balancing act that Bacon himself performed: his interviews with Sylvester and other public statements on his art avoided explicit references to his sexuality outside of a few biographical details, though he never sought to hide or disguise his homosexuality from friends and sections of the art world. This reticence helped to shape the scholarship and discussion around his art and continues to hold some influence, even today.⁴ It's easy to see how this was the case as the majority of Bacon's experiences occurred prior to legalisation (he would have been approaching 60 in 1967): he was banished by his father from his family home after being caught wearing his mother's underwear, lived and explored in interwar Paris and Berlin, and produced *Two Figures* at a time when to be found to be homosexual, even to exhibit what were interpreted as signs of homosexuality (like wearing make-up, as Bacon did) was to risk arrest. Bacon's forays into homosexual subject matter or references in the early part of his career toe this saying/not-saying line. They are occasionally explicit, as in *Two Figures*, but are couched in other, queer-but-less-explicitly-queer terms (e.g. Muybridge); elsewhere, they are more discreet or coded, as in his *Man In Blue* series from 1954.

The uneasy relationship between public and private seems to have been a distinct aspect of queer male experience in Britain in the post-war period prior to legalisation. This is linked to the way in which queerness was conceived by queer men themselves, as well as by the popular press, the government, and the public at large. Vital, influential studies by historians Matt Houlbrook and Richard Hornsey have highlighted the intense unease surrounding homosexuality by the British establishment after the Second World War, with queer men becoming symbols of the decline of the British empire, the feminising effects of consumerism, and the wartime breakdown of the family unit. The figure that confirmed these fears was usually the effeminate, predatory, and heavily made-up West End quean. Police surveillance and arrests, particularly for people who appeared to conform to this stereotype, were common.⁵ Alongside this unease, however, a counter view emerged that drew on contemporary sexology to argue for homosexuality as an unfortunate medical condition that couldn't be helped.⁶ This kind of feeling led to the formation of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution in 1954 and the publication of their findings in the Wolfenden Report in September 1957. The committee drew on testimonials from police officers, psychiatrists, religious leaders, and discreet, respected gay men, including Peter Wildeblood, who'd been arrested for homosexual offences in 1954, served time in prison, and written a book called *Against The Law* about his experiences. The report recommended that homosexual behaviour in private between consenting adults should no longer be considered a criminal offence. Though it was clearly a first step towards a wider social acceptance of homosexuality, the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report contained some restrictions: it confined homosexuality to the private sphere – the home – and excluded it from public life, and continued to criminalise the queer men who did not have consistent access to private spaces in the same way as wealthier members of society did.⁷

While the recommendations of the Wolfenden Report sought to keep queerness in the private, domestic sphere, to conceive of post-war queer experience as operating solely in that sphere would be inaccurate. Bacon's experience of home in this period is indicative of the broad realms in which queer men could operate, while also underlining the extent to which home, for him at this moment, was in flux. In late 1943, Bacon moved into a flat at 7 Cromwell Place in Kensington along with his childhood nanny Jessie Lightfoot, and was joined a few years later by his then lover Eric Hall. Bacon's biographer Michael Peppiatt frames this arrangement as unusual, makeshift, bohemian, but distinctly happy and stable, with Lightfoot as a mother figure to the artist and Hall as lover but also replacement father. It came to an end by 1950, when Bacon's relationship with Hall had ended. A year later, Lightfoot died of heart failure. This appears to have crushed Bacon: he had known her since his birth, and she had lived with him, in one setting or another, for the previous twelve years. In the aftermath of her death, he quickly gave up his lease on his home. He spent periods abroad in South Africa, visiting family, as well as Tangier and Monte Carlo, while taking numerous temporary residences within and just outside of London over the next ten years, from briefly sharing a home with his violent lover Peter Lacy in Henley-on-Thames to finding more stable but still temporary accommodation in Battersea from 1955 with two friends, Peter Pollock and Paul Danquah. At the

centre of this upheaval at the end of 1954, Bacon wrote to his then dealer Erica Brausen from a hotel room in Rome that he was “going to try and find a place in London where I can really settle for a change and perhaps let when I go away. I am so sick of never having a permanent place”.⁸ There is a sense here that for Bacon, like other contemporary queer figures, queer experience can certainly take in the domestic interior, but a sense of ‘home’ – of belonging, of community, of security – may be far from easy to find just there and may in fact filter into other spaces: temporary accommodation in London and abroad, and even public spaces like the bar, the street, the park.

To begin to think about home in terms of homosexuality in the 1940s and 1950s, then, is to find a space where the overlapping of private and public spheres is heightened, not only in the sense of queer men typically moving between these realms in search of intimacy, but also in the sense of these very private experiences and conceptions coming under scrutiny and occupying a prominent position in public consciousness. You can find echoes of this experience in Bacon’s *Two Figures*. It gives this sense of this moment of male intimacy being wrenched into public view while retaining the basic elements of a private space in a way that doesn’t just jar or even, for contemporary viewers, shock. It also makes visible the very experience of being queer in post-war Britain, of seeking intimacy but also living with the gaze of reconstructive society, of finding a space outside of but also within the boundaries of home. Bacon appears to have registered the difficulties of home – in art and in life – in ways that speak to this kind of reading. In a 1974 interview with Sylvester, he discussed his transition from what he and Sylvester termed the *malerisch* paintings – painterly bodies and forms in dark settings, like *Two Figures* – to the use of similar forms against increasingly stark backgrounds, made up of pinks and oranges. For Bacon, this shift, which occurred initially in the late 1950s and then came to dominate his painting from the 1960s, was connected to a desire to distance his art from the home:

I hate a homely atmosphere, and I always feel that *malerisch* painting has too homely a background. I would like the intimacy of the image against a very stark background. I want to isolate the image and take it away from the interior and the home.⁹

This short statement is, as is usual for Bacon, seemingly riddled with contradictions: he dismisses a “homely atmosphere” while wishing to retain a sense of intimacy in his art, and he claims he wishes to take his images away from the home and the domestic interior while continuing to include those elements – blinds, couches, doors, toilets, and so on – in his more vivid canvases in the 1960s and beyond. It is the slippery relationship between Bacon’s words and his images here – the unheimlich nature of Bacon’s relationship to home, as Freud would have it – that interests me, and speaks to the wider question of how home is addressed in his art. It is present but denied, a clear concern but also something to be subverted.

A similar sense of instability permeates a series of paintings completed by Bacon shortly after *Two Figures*. The *Man In Blue* series of 1954 is made up of seven

paintings of lone men in suits, seated in dark, barely delineated spaces, tinged with blue tones. He based these figures on a man he met and picked up that year, at the Imperial Hotel at Henley-on-Thames. Much about these works hints at anonymity: the generic title of the series and the numbered variations within it (I, II, III, IV, V, VI, and VII), the barely sketched out settings which suggest, minimally, the interior of a hotel bar, and the familiar appearance of the man in each painting, always in a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. There is a sense of repetition here – that each man in blue could be the same man, painted in different positions or poses, but also that each man could be a different man, encountered in a similar setting and potentially picked up, perhaps with similar conversation or actions each time. This man is always positioned at the bar or in a booth: leaning in towards us, clenching his hands as if in conversation as in *Man In Blue IV* (Figure 2), folding his arms nonchalantly and leaning over a table or bar as in *Man In Blue I* (Figure 3), or occupying the space without gesture, isolated and still, as in *Man In Blue III*.

There is a sense, then, that the *Man In Blue* series is concerned with the experience of the homosexual pick-up, in its anonymity, repetition, and public intimacy. It's subject is not necessarily a visibly 'queer' man: he adopts the suited uniform of a heterosexual man in a way that echoes the normative, limited nature of clothing for the majority of men outside of the counter-culture in the post-war period and which casts some doubt on his status and availability.¹⁰ There is little to suggest the men's deviation from these norms, at least in terms of his dress. There are other, less easily readable aspects of these paintings too, however. Their faces are blurred, pushed by Bacon's familiar, soft handling of paint into uncertainty, a lack of recognition. They shift too, between carefully stylised distance, turned from us, arms folded (*Man In Blue I*) to adopting more direct eye contact and open body language (*Man In Blue V*). In *Man In Blue IV*, the figure shifts again, leaning in to us, caught up in conversation or appearing to be about to make a proposition. Our relationship to these figures is unstable, moving from distance to closeness and even the possibility of intimacy and back again, from image to image. The uniform of the suit, in this context, could be read as taking on the quality of a public mask or costume, something that was worn to conceal queerness (at least from those from which queerness needed to be concealed), a veneer of respectability that was distant from the make-up and drag of more effeminate queer men. It is known that these were often the type of men Bacon liked to pick up – seemingly heterosexual men who “could be seduced by money, or by the novelty, or by their own desire for defiance”.¹¹ These are men who operate under the social gaze of a society that policed and prohibited homosexuality, while managing, momentarily, to escape that prohibition.

These paintings are not just possible reflections on the public masks worn by queer men in the public in the post-war period, but they also speak to the direct experience of the pick-up and its wider implications for the conception of queer intimacy and the spaces of home at this historical moment. In order to begin to unpack this, I want to address a particular literary example that it is known Bacon linked to his conception of his own sexuality. It is named in Lord Gowrie's obituary for Bacon, published in *The Guardian* shortly after the artist's death:

He told me that he [Bacon] had come to the view that homosexuality was an affliction, that it had turned him, at one point in his life, into a crook. The crookishness, not the sex, was a source of shame and if he talked at all, it was his nature to tell everything. We both liked Proust and agreed that the beginning of *Cities Of The Plain* said all that needed to be said about being homosexual.¹²

Here, Gowrie records Bacon aligning his experience of homosexuality with “crookishness” and coming up against the law (unsurprising, given the pre-legalisation context in which Bacon lived, but still poignant), as well as with Proust’s introductory section to the fourth volume of *In Search Of Lost Time*. Copies of volumes of Proust’s novel were found in Bacon’s Reece Mews studio after his death, and the short section that Gowrie cites is useful for placing the *Man In Blue* series within the context of Bacon’s apparent conception of queer experience.

This section of *In Search Of Lost Time* focuses on the unnamed narrator’s observations of a chance meeting in public and sexual encounter in private between the Baron de Charlus, one of the novel’s main characters, and Jupien, a tailor. While watching them, the narrator adopts a position of initial ignorance about the nature of their encounter; once they disappear into Jupien’s shop together, he creeps over to the other side of the courtyard and listens to the two men having intercourse through a partition, finally, apparently, understanding what has occurred.¹³ This leads the narrator to reflect more generally on the nature of male “inverts”. Here, queer men are characterised as an effeminate, afflicted race, forced to find comfort in fleeting sexual encounters with other “inverts” because the “real men” they truly need would not return their desires. They operate, in part, like a second society, recognising each other, mixing across classes, and relying on chance meetings – like that the narrator had just witnessed – in order to form bonds. They are also, by necessity, part of normative society, but hidden and duplicitous within it, looking, as the narrator puts it, “no more like the common run of men than those apes with melancholy ringed eyes and prehensile feet who dress up in dinner jackets and black ties”.¹⁴ There is a significant amount of ideas in this short text: on queer experience, on the nature of a public pick-up, and on conceptions of homosexuality that are rooted in values and assumptions that we would consider out-dated and stereotypical, but which were clearly key to the thinking of Bacon, and more than likely other queer men, on identity prior to legalisation. There is a particular sense, as in the *Man In Blue* series, of queer men attempting to adopt a costume in order to pass in everyday life, with Proust’s narrator comparing them to apes dressed unconvincingly in a uniform of respectability. In general, queer men are framed in a way that positions them as being outside of society while operating within it, largely hidden from view (unless you can see through their disguise) and finding intimacy almost randomly, when they meet another queer man.

This is crucial for Bacon and his *Man In Blue*. The images in this series appear to be concerned with the encounter with a suited and potentially queer man in public. They register that experience but they also register the layers of

concealment and revelation that were a fundamental aspect of homosexuality prior to legalisation. That Bacon would think of his sexuality in these terms is perhaps alien to twenty-first century viewers of his works, but an acknowledgement of this doesn't necessarily turn these paintings into images of self-loathing. I want to suggest, however, that recognising these elements in these paintings is an act of recognising a more enduring element of queer experience: the sense of being aware of signs or gestures of queerness, and the moments at which these might be made visible or not. Reading the *Man In Blue* series through Proust's text casts one kind of contextual light onto these otherwise (and necessarily) quiet, unassuming images of suited men at bars. These men are unsettled, tense, isolated at times, but also potentially available for intimacy; they gesture to an existence that rests on glimpses of mutual recognition and moments of connection within long stretches of necessary invisibility. Proust's text – invoked by Bacon via Gowrie years later – speaks where the paintings did not.

There is a sense, then, that the *Man In Blue* series is about intimacy and connection, but also looking – seeing and identifying others for this intimacy and connection, or at least others who share the same queer desires for them. Bacon appears to have posited looking as being central to post-war queer experience:

Whenever I really want to know what someone looks like I always ask a queer – because homosexuals are always more ruthless and more precise about appearance. After all, they spend their whole lives watching themselves and others, then pulling the way they look to pieces.¹⁵

Looking, in Bacon's words here, is partly a symptom of being under surveillance, from other queer men and, I would suggest, wider society too, and partly a result of needing to turn that same gaze on others. That this is framed in terms of cruelty – the ruthlessness of the look, and the way it pulls others apart – is typical of Bacon but also indicative of a sense of being within and a part of these types of looks. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick found this sense of surveillance – through looks and the knowledge they produce – in Bacon's chosen extract from Proust. In her terms, the description of the meeting between Charlus and Jupien and the revelation of their relationship reveals the narrator's complicity in the queer world in which the two men operate. He is able to describe what she calls "the spectacle of the closet" (the closet observed) from "the viewpoint of the closet" (the closet inhabited), gaining, through the advantage of expertise on the subject of another's sexuality, momentary insulation from the suspicions of others about his own sexuality.¹⁶ Knowledge, here, offers the power to cast the heterosexual gaze of society onto other queer figures. Sedgwick acknowledges the possibilities that this offers to queer figures and queer audiences, while highlighting the homophobic undertones of this – the "outing" of others can reveal queerness in a way that allows for identity and the possibility of connection, while also exposing these figures to the gaze of the heterosexual society that they had sought to avoid.¹⁷ Bacon, I think, is aware of this bind, in a less theoretical, more visceral way. The *Man In Blue* – in his many, very similar guises – is painted into the appearances, the settings, the possibilities, and the anxieties of the closet. He wears the costume of respectable

masculinity; he sits alone in public at the hotel bar, available – maybe – for conversation, a drink, sex. But Bacon never makes the big reveal. There is an element of doubt or ambiguity about these men: there is nothing, beyond the knowledge that Bacon based this image on a man he picked up or the wider context of anxiety around the “respectable homosexual” hidden amongst the masses that I have provided, that hints explicitly at homosexuality.

Perhaps a reading of this nature relies on the viewpoint of the closet – a viewpoint Bacon would know well – or at least a knowledge of that viewpoint, most easily achieved by queer viewers, in the 1950s and beyond. In this way, the *Man In Blue* series is made up of paintings of men that can be looked at in a variety of ways. There is a sense in which the *Man In Blue* can be read as being subject to the queer look that Bacon knew well – the look that wonders what the suited costume hides, that pulls the figure to pieces. At the same time, he can be subject to the non-queer look – the look that reads these images as concerned with moments of intense isolation, perhaps rooted in the anxiety, despair, and tension of post-war existentialism.¹⁸ This is a historically appropriate way of dealing with these images, I think: it allows for the look of queer viewers to recognise the way in which they engage with the circumstances of the pick-up, while acknowledging that the look of non-queer viewers may bypass these connotations – a fairly common technique that queer culture utilised in the post-war period.¹⁹ In this way, these paintings also enact the very experience of being queer in Britain prior to legalisation – the uncertainty and possibilities of the pick-up, the sense of looking but also being watched, and the necessity of operating, to some degree, undercover while being aware of the possibility of, both intentionally and unintentionally, revealing yourself. They also reflect the ways in which boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality could blur, as Bacon also knew very well: the way homosexual contact or intimacy did not necessarily equate to homosexual subjectivity as we know it today, the way experiences of queer intimacy could rise suddenly out of the appearances and spaces of heterosexual life before seemingly disappearing again, out of view. This kind of reading seeks to avoid falling into the trap that Sedgwick warned against: reading Bacon’s series as concerning itself with the spectacle and experience of the closet is not intended to expose his own sexuality by association (even though this is, in part, what it does). Instead, my intention is to illuminate the way in which these images very tentatively reflect on revelation and exposure, building into their careful, minimal composition the very circumstances, anxieties, and possibilities of being queer at this historical moment.

The *Man In Blue* series presents queer experience as one built on intimacy and connection as well as doubt, concealment, and anxiety. In a broader sense, it encapsulates the fluid sense of spaces of intimacy for queer men at this historical moment: the paintings are based on the inherently public space of a hotel bar, though they incorporate aspects of private, personal connection that begin to undermine the separation between public and private spheres. This is an intermingling of the homely and unhomely, and is indicative of Bacon’s experience of queer intimacy and a sense of home more generally. Looking back on the period of his life after he was banished from his father’s home at the age of 16 – during which he spent time in interwar London, Berlin, and Paris in the

late 1920s, before settling back in London in the 1930s – Bacon characterised his ambition at this point as “simply to drift and follow my instinct – to drift and see”.²⁰ This sense of drifting – not settling, moving around, meeting and embracing the people, events, and opportunities that come your way – appears to have been how Bacon framed his whole experience of life. In Peppiatt’s biography, Bacon continually returns to this idea of drifting as a way of conceptualising his experience: “life itself is nothing but a series of sensations. We just drift from moment to moment. My whole life has been like that, you know, drifting from bar to bar, person to person, instant to instant”.²¹ Drifting is a useful term here: it is attentive to his experience of and reflections on home and queer intimacy in this period, and can assist in conceptualising a particular kind of queer experience in post-war Britain, prior to legalisation.

Drifting, exile, and the search for home within a lack of home are key themes elsewhere in post-war queer culture, particularly in James Baldwin’s 1956 novel *Giovanni’s Room*. Bacon and Baldwin have seemingly little in common in many respects, but I want to suggest that Baldwin’s novel (like the work of Proust) can give voice to some of the unspoken yet present queer themes in Bacon’s art, particularly surrounding the experience of queer intimacy and home. *Giovanni’s Room* focuses on a young American man called David in Paris and his reflections on his relationships with an Italian man called Giovanni and his American girlfriend Hella. David is drifting in Paris: Hella has taken a trip to Spain to contemplate marrying him, and in the meantime he has fallen in to a relationship with Giovanni and moved into his dark, claustrophobic room. For David, life in Giovanni’s room “seemed to be occurring underwater” at a remove from the outside world, not least because Giovanni has smeared white cleaning polish on the single window to insure privacy. Scattered around the room is the two men’s dirty laundry, Giovanni’s tools and paintbrushes, and other detritus, which Giovanni calls “the garbage of this city” and which David sees as “Giovanni’s regurgitated life”.²² Removed and dark, while also infiltrated by the dirt and detritus of the outside world, Giovanni’s room is an other space, marked with the experience of homosexuality.

It is not much of a jump from the windowless, dirty space of Giovanni’s room to Bacon’s equally airless though less cluttered interior of *Two Figures* – the two spaces share a conflation of queer intimacy with a claustrophobic, separate space, removed from society at large. At the same time, these are spaces where boundaries have been breached. *Two Figures* focuses on a moment of passionate, frantic (even ambiguously violent) sex between two men, and positions the viewer on the threshold as both witness and intruder. In Giovanni’s room, the “garbage” of the city has found its way into the space – boxes of cardboard and leather, empty bottles and spilled wine, old newspapers, a rotting potato – in a manner that explicitly disturbs our sense (and David’s) of what should constitute a domestic space: it is not clean, organised, delineated (it even recalls the chaos of Bacon’s own studio). The *Man In Blue* series demonstrates a similar disregard for boundaries, in its focus on images of men at bars or in booths who shift quietly between isolation, apparent indifference, and eye contact in a way that gestures towards the processes of the homosexual pick up. The boundaries that fall away in Giovanni’s room – the divisions between public and private, between

cleanliness and dirt, the slipped mask of respectable masculinity – seem about to shift, tantalisingly and terrifyingly, in these paintings too.

As the novel continues, David finds himself struggling to extricate himself from Giovanni's room, at least in emotional terms. He is constantly called home to the normative space of heterosexuality - by Hedda, who returns and seeks, disastrously, to continue their relationship, and his father, who writes to him from the US – though finds himself increasingly unable to occupy it comfortably. In a key passage, he watches a sailor walk across a Parisian boulevard, confident and carefree in his heterosexual masculinity, and this confidence, this ease, makes him think of home again and reflect: “perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition”. Home, here is final, determined, and, once left, impossible to recover. The sailor, in David's eyes, represents someone who hasn't strayed, who has clung to the expectations of life that make home possible; David left, he drifted, and can see no way back. Crucially, it is in an imagined look that David finds confirmation of his lack of home. As the sailor approaches, the two men make eye contact and David receives a look “contemptuously lewd and knowing” which he feels certain would, if voiced, be one of “*look, baby. I know you*”.²³ David's recognisable queerness cuts him adrift.

If Baldwin's descriptions of Giovanni's room speak to Bacon's own unstable, increasingly boundary-less representations of a kind of queer domestic world in *Two Figures* and the *Man In Blue* series, then his broader reflections on home for queer figures in the post-war period can speak to Bacon's personally important sense of drift. In Baldwin, queer experience is explicitly linked to a sense of straying from the heterosexual family and its gender roles, which creates a seemingly irreversible state of exile or homelessness. His queer figures are marked by the spaces they occupy – the claustrophobic, dirty room, the street, or the dingy queer bar – but also by the looks of others, which register the difference of queerness, a separateness and apparent lack of place. For Baldwin, these reflections on the difficulties of home are of course shaped not only by his own homosexuality but also his position as a black American who left his birthplace of New York and made a home in France in an attempt to escape the oppressive racial prejudice of post-war America. Bacon was an exile of sorts too, though for different reasons as I've outlined: he was evicted from his family home in Ireland by his father and moved with a certain amount of social and sexual freedom around Europe initially, before settling in London but continuing to seek experience abroad. Both figures would have known the uncertainty of home that Baldwin expresses through David, an uncertainty that seems to paint a melancholic and seemingly doomed sense of queer experience in the post-war urban metropolis.

There is a clear sense of how Bacon's works like *Two Figures* and the *Man In Blue* series can speak to these broader ideas of drift, homelessness, and perpetual emergence. These paintings retain recognisable elements of home – the barely-delineated interior, the bed, sensations of intimacy and connection – while also extending them into public space (implicitly in *Two Figures*, explicitly for the *Man In Blue*). At the same time, they incorporate elements of the unhomely – anxiety, tension, undertones of violence, anonymity, and so on. In their

emergence from the spaces, intimacies, and relationships available to queer men at this moment in history and their rearrangement of them, Bacon's works can be considered expressions of being 'not at home' within an overwhelmingly heterosexual culture, while also seeking a sense of home, some kind of intimacy, that does not necessarily cohere to expectations. To find home in paintings like these is not to tie Bacon to a concept of normative domesticity that he clearly had no interest in nor is it to postulate them as expressions as of the possibility of queer community: it is to allow his work to register the possibilities of intimacy that are not built around home in the conventional sense of the term, that bleed into the public sphere covertly or shockingly. This can consistently feel like an overwhelmingly dark portrait of post-war queer experience as I've noted, though it is worth emphasising, in tandem with this, the potential of being not at home, of allowing yourself to "drift and see" as Bacon would have it. These works speak of connections – bonds, intimacies, even relationships – that are formed in the face of the restrictions and hindrances of criminality and marginalisation. They are present as testaments to moments of queer intimacy while also speaking of the ambiguity and difficulty of defining and living a sense of queer home at this historical moment. Bacon's response is to paint the expansive, seemingly boundary-less sense of queer experience – to represent the experience of the drift, of apparent homelessness – while also registering the inherent and irreconcilable difficulties of knowing and establishing home within it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the organizers of the Masculinity In The Metropolis conference at the University of Kent in April 2016 for the opportunity to present this research.

Note on author

Gregory Salter currently teaches art history at Birkbeck, University of London and CAPA. His research specialism is post-war British art and its intersections with home, gender, sexuality, and identity. He is currently developing a monograph titled Reconstructing Home: Painting and Male Identity in Post-War Britain, based on his PhD completed at the University of East Anglia in 2013 and post-doctoral work at the Geffrye Museum of the Home in London.

Bibliography

Baldwin, James, *Giovanni's Room*, London: Penguin, 2007.

Chare, Nicholas, *After Francis Bacon: Synaesthesia and Sex in Paint*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.

Gale, Matthew and Chris Stephens, eds., *Francis Bacon*, London: Tate, 2008.

Hornsey, Richard, *The Spiv And The Architect: Unruly Life in Post-War London*, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Houlbrook, Matt, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

O'Neill, Alistair, 'Available in an Array of Colours', *Visual Culture In Britain*, 10 (2009): 271-91.

Ofield, Simon, 'Comparative Strangers', in *Francis Bacon*, eds. Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens, pp. 64-73. London: Tate, 2008.

Peppiatt, Michael, *Francis Bacon in the 1950s*, London: Yale University Press and the Sainsbury Centre, UEA, 2006.

Peppiatt, Michael, *Francis Bacon In Your Blood*, London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2015.

Peppiatt, Michael, *Francis Bacon: Studies For A Portrait. Essays and Interviews*, London: Yale University Press: London, 2008.

Proust, Marcel, *In Search Of Lost Time: Part IV, Cities Of The Plain*, trans. S.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, London: Chatto and Windus, 1992.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Epistemology Of The Closet*, Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1990.

Sinfield, Alan, *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*, London: Continuum, 2004.

Sylvester, David, *Interviews With Francis Bacon*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

Sylvester, David, *Looking Back At Francis Bacon*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2000.

Figures and Captions



Figure 1: Francis Bacon, *Two Figures*, 1953, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 116.5cm, private collection © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



Figure 2: Francis Bacon, *Man In Blue IV*, 1954, oil on canvas, 198 x 137cm © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



Figure 3: Francis Bacon, *Man In Blue I*, 1954, oil on canvas, 197 x 135 cm © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS 2016. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

-
- ¹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in the 1950s*, 31.
- ² Gale and Stephens, *Francis Bacon*, 124.
- ³ See Sylvester, *Looking Back At Francis Bacon*, 72. Bacon is quoted in Sylvester, *Interviews With Francis Bacon*, 116.
- ⁴ Some more explicitly queer readings of Bacon have come from Ofield, 'Comparative Strangers', 64-73 and Chare, *After Francis Bacon: Synaesthesia and Sex in Paint*.
- ⁵ On sexual difference, categories of queer men, and anxiety about Britishness, see Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, 221-41.
- ⁶ Hornsey, *The Spiv And The Architect: Unruly Life in Post-War London*, p. 1.
- ⁷ Houlbrook concludes with similar reflections on the implications of the Wolfenden Report, 256-61.
- ⁸ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon in the 1950s*, 146.
- ⁹ Sylvester, *Interviews With Francis Bacon*, 120.
- ¹⁰ See O'Neill, 'Available in an Array of Colours', 271-91.
- ¹¹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Studies For A Portrait. Essays and Interviews*, 97.
- ¹² Lord Gowrie, 'Obituary: Francis Bacon', *The Guardian*, 29 April 1992.
- ¹³ Proust, *In Search Of Lost Time: Part IV, Cities Of The Plain*, 1-16.
- ¹⁴ Proust, 23, and 17-38 in general on "inverts".
- ¹⁵ Bacon is quoted in Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Studies For A Portrait. Essays and Interviews*, 181.
- ¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Epistemology Of The Closet*, 213-30.
- ¹⁷ Sedgwick, *Epistemology Of The Closet*, 240-46.
- ¹⁸ A broader reading like this is gestured to in Gale and Stephens, *Francis Bacon*, 122.
- ¹⁹ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 68-96.
- ²⁰ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon: Studies For A Portrait. Essays and Interviews*, 31.
- ²¹ Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon In Your Blood*, 10-11.
- ²² Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 76-9.
- ²³ Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, 80-2.