Paint Made Flesh

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Titian (Tiziano Vecellio)
The Flaying of Marsyas, 1570–1575
Oil on canvas, 83 ⅜ x 81 ⅜ in.
Archbishop’s Palace, Kromeriz, Czech Republic
Skinning the Paint

Emily Braun

Why flayest thou me so,
Alas, he cries, it irketh me. Alas a sore pipe
Deserveth not so cruelly my skin
from me to stripe.
For all his crying ore his eares
quight pulled was his skin.
Nought else he was than one whole
wounde. The grisly bloud did spin
From every part, the sinewes lay
discovered to the eye,
The quivering veyness without a
skin lay beating nakedly.
The panting bowels in his bulke ye
might have numbered well,
And in his brest the shere small strings
a man might easily tell.
The Countrie Faunes, the Gods of
Woods, the Satyrs of his kin,
The Mount Olympus whose renowne
did ere that time begin,
And all the Nymphes, and all that in
those mountains kept their sheepe,
Or grazed cattell thereabouts, did
for this Satyr weep.
—Ovid, Metamorphoses

In the history of art, Titian was the first to have made
the stroke of the brush palpably akin to the substance
of flesh. Translucent yet dense, the consistency of oil
paint appeared to breathe with the opaque luminosity
of human skin. Titian modeled the masses and swells
of the body with touches of broken color that retained
their independent vitality as gestural marks on the
picture plane. By the end of his life, his expansive
brushwork tested the boundaries of perception, at
once defining and dissolving corporeal form. Titian’s
late paintings, Giorgio Vasari observed, “carried
out in bold strokes, broadly applied in great patches
. . . cannot be looked at closely but from a distance
appear perfect.”¹ In certain moments of looking, flesh
threatened to slide off the bone.

Among Titian’s last works, the Flaying of Marsyas
(1570–1575) depicts Ovid’s account of the satyr who,
having found a flute discarded by the goddess Athena,
foolishly challenged the god Apollo to contest him
with his lyre. Titian chose, unusually, to represent the
moment of punishment, when Apollo had Marsyas
hung upside down from a tree and skinned alive.
Here Apollo plays the viola da braccio, his eyes
looking heavenward as he engages in transcendental
music making, oblivious to Marsyas’s mortal pain.²
Titian placed the figures uncomfortably close to the
front of the picture space, creating a confrontation
between flesh and viewer not unlike that of Picasso’s
Leon Kossoff

_Marsyas (A Memory)_ No. 2, 1985
Oil on board, 20 ¼ x 18 ¼ in.
Courtesy of LA Louver, Venice, Calif.
Demoiselles d’Avignon. Yet the violence done to the eyes is greater in the late-sixteenth-century allegory of skin and paint. Like an artist holding a brush, the young man who flays the satyr draws blood in red strokes that drip and coagulate into a soft mass of painterly adhesions. Strands of color shed themselves of the image. The quivering substance of the figure and the ground are indistinguishable up close—should the viewer choose to look. One finds compelling beauty in a picture of death so vivified by the visible process of its making.

Titian’s touch and Marsyas’s howl have distinct echoes in the work of British painters after World War II spanning three generations, from Francis Bacon to Jenny Saville. No other national school has been so obsessed with skinning the paint, with merging the depiction of carnality with the inherent properties of the pictorial medium. The painters discussed in this essay—Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Saville, and Cecily Brown—approach the canvas as a vital body of strokes that temporarily coalesce into the illusion of flesh, only to reveal the naked handling of colored pigments across the picture plane. The analogy is extended when we consider that one skinning apparatus is none other than the knife, a tool that artists use to render scabrous and sentient the taut membrane of the canvas. Not by chance, Kossoff, who has paid homage to the old masters with a series of drawings, chose to render two versions of Titian’s Playing of Marsyas in oils as well. Kossoff repeatedly applied the paint and scraped it off again, a skinning process that mimics the excoration and regeneration of the epidermal layer. Despite the dense materiality of pigments and a surface almost sculptural in its relief, the flesh of the figures hangs as loose as hides.

The subject matter of flaying is only a pretense for the actual physical assault on our perceptions. The eye grapples with skeins and blobs of brown, white, and red, and flounders between illegibility and uneasy recognition, between the loss and reassertion of the viewing self. In representing flesh, and with it the human face or naked body, these painters free themselves of conventional narrative and force the viewer to peruse the sequence of the artists’ own deep looking and their physical responses with the brush, rag, sponge, paper, and even hands. Making the paint work as flesh, not like it, as Freud would have it, the canvas becomes a tactile, cutaneous surface, formed by layers of pigment subjected to peeling and surgical cuts and bearing all the organic traces of its making. “Evidence accrues,” Auerbach admits; the eye gloms on every decision made and trauma inflicted during the image’s formation. The physical cohesion of strokes and dabs, sometimes millimeters thick, results in an actual supple sheath or crust, not merely a metaphoric transubstantiation of skin. As Saville insists, “When you see the inside of a body, the half-inch thickness of flesh, there’s a realization that it’s a tangible substance, so paint mixed a flesh color suddenly became a kind of human paste.”

By skinning the paint with connotations of rawness and violence, these British painters also find their modernity of content. As with the flaying of Marsyas, poignancy resounds: the vulnerability of the flesh is sensed, not merely seen, through the emphatic identification of touch with sight. Their approach is neither humanistic in the traditional sense of treating the body whole and perfect (impossible after the carnage of the twentieth century) nor inhumane in casting a clinical eye. Instead their works are filled with a piercing lyricism, the result of looking at and feeling the body from new (that is, “other”) perspectives. Bacon’s homosexuality, the émigré and Jewish identities of several of the painters in question (who came of age during the Holocaust), and the female assessment of corpulence and sensuality by the youngest artists in the group force us to reconsider the “anachronism” of painting the figure—as orthodox histories of modernism would have it.

The desire to render the body, warts and all, and to remain within the figurative tradition in what many believe to be the century of abstraction proved to be another example of British eccentricity. In the postwar years, artists on the European continent developed the all-out gesturalism of the Art informel: the act of painting became a performance of
creative risk-taking that obliterated the image in an expression of existential angst. Bacon, Freud, Kossoff, and Auerbach responded by taking up Alberto Giacometti's example of the lone figure engulfed by space and heaving matter but still integral in its form. They also ignored the transcendent urges of American Abstract Expressionism in favor of more pragmatic attempts to depict the human condition in the here-and-now terra firma of the body. And the British school continued to paint, even as painting was declared dead after 1960 by Neo-Dada movements and by the rise of the popular consumer culture hailed by England's own Independent Group. Ironically, it was only in the late 1990s, with the rise of the Young British Artists promoted by collector Charles Saatchi and shows like Sensation at the Royal Academy, that the earlier generations of figural painters began to receive their critical due. Yet the taint of "conservatism" still clings to their work, even though the younger painters have always openly admitted their debt.  

"I grew up looking at Freud, Bacon, and Auerbach," Saville has stated, while Brown was inspired to be a painter after "being blown away" by Bacon's 1985 Tate retrospective.

Today the term sensation has been confounded with sensationalism and spectacle, as opposed to its original meaning of a sensory perception intensely felt. Modernist realism, as this painting of the flesh has been dubbed, situates its gaze deeply in the field of perception, in the space between discrete marks of the brush and referential image making. At times, the brush is directed to seize upon a plane, highlight, or motif, and at others, it arrives fortuitously at resemblance. Modernist by dint of distortion, fragmentation, and moments of pure painting, its realism derives more from sensory effects than from the verisimilitude of its subject matter. Its aim is the shock of recognition, the disturbance of the cognitive flow. Painting the flesh is not a purely optical investigation into the mechanics of representation—how we see what we see—in the manner of the Cubists' play with types of referential signs. It neither abstracts fully from nature in the manner of art concrete nor plunges the viewer into the undifferentiated morass of material as does Art informel. Instead, it dissects the physiology of perception by foregrounding and intensifying the experience of form coming into being, seemingly out of the most random correlations. "What made the sockets of the eyes, the nose, the mouth were, when you analyzed them, just forms which had nothing to do with eyes, nose, or mouth," observed Bacon, "but the paint moving from one contour into another made a likeness of this person I was trying to paint."  

The visual aggressiveness of the British painters is postphotographic, acknowledging the invasive scrutiny of the camera into the private recesses of the body. But these artists also challenge, with the oil paint medium, the primacy of the mechanical lens in capturing the modern condition of the human animal. Sensitized paper is not the same as a series of sensations transmitted over time, accumulating in a palimpsest of handmade, materially dense marks. Photography has dulled our perceptual acuity, according to Kossoff, and proffers mere appearances or clichés of representation instead of interrogating the multifold texture of vision and sequential judgments involved in the apprehension of things. Scale also comes into play in the paragon between painting and photography, since photographs, for the most part, can be handheld or glanced at in the pages of a book. By contrast, these paintings are mostly life size, be they of a full figure or a portrait head, demanding a body-to-body appraisal that intensifies the phenomenological impact. Contemporary large-scale photography consciously competes with the traditional grand dimensions, display, and viewing conditions of painting, but it cannot overcome the sensory limitations of its optically disembodied medium. Even those who use camera images as a compositional tool, sketch, or source of knowledge about the body, such as Bacon and Saville, know that "painting a figure gives you something that photographs of it just can't give you." The greasy effect of the oil medium trumps the chemical sheen, the insubstantiality of photographic reproduction:
“This is the thing that can probably only happen in oil paint,” Bacon stressed, “because it is so subtle that one tone, one piece of paint, that moves one thing into another completely changes the implication of the image.”

Mostly the camera is rejected for its ways of seeing a fellow human being: the camera tellingly “takes” a picture, a verb that betrays the immediacy of the image’s formation, no matter how long the shot was posed or prepared. It implies a furtive scan of the viewfinder or a knowing sitter who performs for the camera—a self-consciousness imposed upon the model that Freud deems “fraudulent.” A photograph replicates the roving eye and is inherently voyeuristic, whereas Freud, Kossoff, and Auerbach work exclusively with live models whom they know or come to know exceedingly well, whose personalities and physiognomies they have scrutinized for weeks, months, and sometimes years on end. For them, the ease of prurient looking is soon replaced by the arduous task of empathy, a sustained projection of the self into the flesh of others—and into the manner of its making—that a photograph, no matter how shocking or anesthetizing, cannot replicate, because it fails on the level of material substance and reciprocity between painter and model. No fleeting encounters or rapid seizing of characteristic traits here: the essential stubbornly refuses to yield to the painter’s brush. Relentless and reciprocated observation of the same live person over time entails a constant reshuffling of perceptual coordinates, according to shifts of light and posture or the vagaries of fatigue or emotional moods. Bacon, too, only rendered portraits of people he knew intimately—such as Henrietta Moraes (pl. 17)—but, exceptionally, he used photographs so as not to be inhibited by the “injury I do to them” as he sloughed off their effigies.

The carnality of a painting by Freud or Saville could not be at further remove from the licked and delectable surfaces of Victorian nudes from the end of the nineteenth century. Within Britain, the assault against the decorum and boundaries of figure painting began with Walter Sickert, another émigré artist, who
rejected Neoclassical pastiches for the lumpen flesh and rumpled sheets of ordinary Londoners. Influenced by the French realists and post-Impressionists, Sickert laid down broken tones of sickly green next to curdled yellow, taking pleasure in the sensuality of rippling highlights or rough impasto. Sickert’s series of paintings on the Camden Town Murder of 1907—the unsolved crime of a prostitute found in her spare, back-room lodging with her throat slashed—arguably introduced the subject matter of strange flesh into European modernism. In L’Affaire de Camden Town (1909), Sickert deployed an unsightly view of the body with the genitals front and center and the head obscured. While the male figure in each of the pictures stares obliquely, the viewer experiences the uncomfortable frisson of examining a body violently done in but still tremulous to the eye. The Camden Town Murder pictures made explicit the biological drives of sexuality and death seething within the flesh. Sickert’s ability to capture brutal sensory fact was exploited by Bacon; the edginess of painterly sheen emanating from murky backdrops, another Sickert specialty, was transmitted via his pupil David Bomberg, who taught Auerbach and Kossoff in the years after World War II. Even his story lines live on in the titles of works by Cecily Brown, whose Single Room Furnished (2000), like Sickert’s Camden Town Murder title What Shall We Do for the Rent? refers to the down-at-the-heel locations reserved for clandestine sex and the sometimes desperate needs of the human animal.

If Sickert evoked the working-class connotations of vulgar flesh, Bacon’s treatment of the figure, splayed and deliquescent, reduces it to the bloody consistency of meat. Bacon’s statement that “we are all potential carcases” was a realistic assessment of the unprecedented brutality of our time. He lived through the civil uprising of the Sinn Fein movement in Ireland, where he was born; the carnage of the two World Wars; and the implicit threat of societal violence directed toward homosexuals like himself. Bacon depicted the body in pain, not only the existential pain of humanity articulated by philosophers in the aftermath of World War II but also the somatic experience of hurt that is, in turn, powerfully evoked in the individual viewer. With representations of flesh in extremis, Bacon established the premise for a modernist aesthetic of empathy that the subsequent painters under discussion here took up with varying degrees of intensity. What he called the “tightrope” between figurative painting and abstraction gives rise to the heightened perception of our own bodies as peripertent and susceptible to harm. “With oil painting being so fluid,” he stated, “the image is changing all the time while you’re working. One thing either builds on another or destroys the other.” That he enacted the struggle between creation and obliteration on the human form redoubles the startling effect of aliveness in the viewer (see Head in Grey [1955; pl. 15]).

Bacon renders his figures “arising out of their own flesh”; he subjects them to the fate of Marsyas as he imagined it, their skin peeled back to reveal the layer of translucent pellicle. The membrane is so raw as to be colored predominantly blue-red, so thin that the viscera are in the process of spilling out. Fluid strokes of white affirm the consistency of oozing tissue. The emanating light and dissolving contours owe in large part to Bacon’s strategic use of film and photographic sources, including forensic and medical images, yet the actions of his own hand with malleable oil paint—aggressively pressed, scrubbed, flung, and whiplashed—are the instrumental means of grasping our attention. The creative process and its effects are famously described by the artist in terms of injury done to the body: “Painting is like one continuous accident mounting on top of another,” whence the battered image emerges from a “coagulation of non-representational marks.” Although Bacon claims to avoid a story line in favor of painterly techniques that “come onto the nervous system much more strongly,” he also enacts a narrative of pain inflicted from without—tortois that have been lashed, faces bruised or squished into submission, bandaged limbs, and muscles twisted and gripped. As with beauty, the perception of abjectness lies in the eye of the beholder.
Bacon’s work blurs the distinction between horror and aesthetic rapture.

Elaine Scarry has argued that the internal trauma of pain resists language, as one is reduced to cries or whimper—an observation borne out by Bacon’s famous images of the black cavern of the scream. He reserves his most extreme deformations for the head and hands, the primary portals of the senses, as if to emphasize the language-destroying capacity and paradoxical sensory deprivation of acute distress. Bacon’s bodies are tortured bodies, caged, poked, scrutinized by impersonal bulbs of blinding light and, in the foundational image of inflicted suffering, crucified. He refers to his audience as the “onlooker,” with analogies to the figures on the side of his compositions, seemingly detached from the excoriations at center stage, but actual viewers can hardly distance themselves from what is presented before them. Like Midas in the tale of Marsyas, they may choose to hide their eyes from the unsettling sight, or, like the weeping satyrs, they may project themselves into the body of another and imagine “real” suffering. The essential humanity and ethical dimension of Bacon’s art comes to the fore in his intention to “unlock the values of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently.” The viewer reacts by “seeing the pain and wishing it gone,” in what Scarry describes as a reciprocal, sentient event that fosters an aversion to bodily harm and increases our sensitivity to others. “One’s basic nature is totally without hope,” said Bacon, “and yet one’s nervous system is made out of optimistic stuff.”

Bacon’s ability to “trap the fact” of sensation was taken up by Freud and modulated by the daily encounter with unclothed people in the studio. Freud does not focus on the body in trauma but lingers
instead on a different type of unease, generated by the abrupt and overly intimate acquaintance with persons we do not know. Initially embarrassed by the public exposure of private parts, one soon settles into reassuring familiarity (although in a museum or gallery this viewer is acutely self-conscious of others looking at her looking). What the artist calls his “naked portraits” are portraits of nakedness, documenting with unrelenting scrutiny the unguainly attributes of an individual’s anatomy and the psychological ramifications of baring all. Naked not because the subjects are without clothes, but because they display the human species in all its vulnerability and imperfection. Though the painter’s grandfather is Sigmund Freud, it is Charles Darwin who dominates the proceedings here. After the impact of Darwin’s evolutionary science, the body in painting cannot rise to the allegorical occasion of the nude but instead stands humbly for itself: a specimen bound by the same biological laws, the same inevitability of breath and expiration, as all other living creatures, including the painter’s whippets, who lie and stretch alongside the warm folds of the human animal. His unsentimental, unerotic representation of carnality embodies the narrative of its own past, present, and future decay, or what Cecily Brown likewise considers “the only subjects worth painting: birth, copulation, and death, of course.”

In *Standing by the Rags* (1988–1989; pl. 18), Freud skins the paint with bountiful results, releasing the flesh from its function as mere integument to an independent fabric of varying texture and density, weight, and transparency. From viewpoints skewed and striking, a living topography unfolds across the canvas with tracks of blue pulsing underneath pastes of rose and tan in a prodigious variety of tones. Freud’s “intrusive truthfulness” takes months to render as he observes his sitters alert and resting: “It’s rather like wild-life photography—by one of the animals.” The mutual comfort that ensues is a result of the painter’s aim to be “sensitive and pliant” to the temperament of the model. It disinclines the viewer from judging the enormous bulk of *Benefits Supervisor Resting* (1994), for example, as aberrant or grotesque; instead the eye tentatively, then respectfully, embraces the sags and protrusions, reforming its gaze from scurrilous to benevolent.

As has been well noted since it is hard to miss, Freud’s merciless appraisal of the procreative body extends to the males of the species, their limp sex and lethargic bearing refusing to conform to conventional depictions of masculinity. Leigh Bowery, the uninhibited model in *Naked Man, Back View* (1991–1992; pl. 19), noted that straight women and gay men are the subjects of Freud’s carnal naturalism. “I’m drawn to women by nature and to queers because of their courage,” the painter affirmed. The presence of black skin, however, is notably minimal in the images of Freud and his fellow British painters. The artistic idols they consistently name—Titian, Rubens, Velázquez, even de Kooning—rarely treated the black body as an aesthetic object, or an empathetic one, in a sustained way. The color imbalance can be attributed, on the one hand, to the racism inherent in the Western European tradition of painting and, on the other, to the development of oil painting as part and parcel of that same tradition, oil being a medium that arguably favors the transparency and coloristic effects of porcelain skin and zinc white. Even the Black Paintings of Brown plumb the qualities of blackness in the background and in the bed linens rather than in the figures. “Skinning” the black flesh would also have its problematic history of associations, as it does with the Jewish painters under consideration here, since it would involve exaggerations and distortions easily taken as demeaning. While representations of the black male and female abound, especially with the colonizing eye of the Orientalist tradition, the technical challenge of opening up the pictorial sheath to a range of exclusively dark hues, engaging our senses in another surge of estrangement and reciprocity, has seemingly yet to be met by artists of any stripe.

The optical and tactile qualities that vivify flesh in the works of Bacon, Freud, and their peers depend foremost on yet another form of reciprocity: the
alignment of the eye with the hand. Our fingers feel the slip and blubber of the belly, the hard protrusion of a bone, the volume of a muscle, the interstices of wrinkles, a scabrous patch of skin. In this haptic vision—the vision of touch or a third eye—the perception of three dimensions on a two-dimensional plane are realized through inherently pictorial means: contrasts of color and tone, directional strokes and lines, and actual crests of pigment. Touch defers to sight in the perception of light and color, but the hand guides the eye as it pulls and pinches the mass of a thigh or treads the angle and bend of a plane. The domain of the tactile is augmented by the impacted dabs and ridges of actual three-dimensional relief, and by the sight of touches—our perceptual re-enacting of the indexical mark of the artist, the laying down of his or her individual stroke. Freud also initiates sensory perception mimetically described, a narrative of touch among the sitters, as they cup the volume of a breast, lean a heavy head on a hand, or clutch a companion. In Freud’s work, the hands are paramount to the sensory apprehension of the flesh. Similarly, Saville squishes and piles body onto body precisely to “add to that sense of touch” and accentuate the “feeling of embodiment.”

“Painting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs (the painting breathes . . . ),” writes Gilles Deleuze. The spectator realizes the experience of aliveness “by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the seeing and the sensed.” The British painters specifically address the embodied eye, bound to the sensory organs of the viewer, unlike the purely optical order of nonobjective art that aspires to the transcendent. They also avoid the chaotic field of Art informel or action painting, where the purely manual gesture, as Deleuze describes it, decomposes matter to “lineaments and granulations” void of tactile referents for the eye to rest upon. The latter style
risks “catastrophe,” the inability of the eye—first the painter’s, then the viewer’s—to work its prehensile grasp and formulate the image out of amorphous nothingness. Deleuze continues, “There is no painter who has not had this experience of the chaos germ, where he or she no longer sees anything and risks foundering: the collapse of visual coordinates. This is not a psychological experience, but a properly pictorial experience, although it can have an immense influence on the psychic life of the painter.”  

Though he is writing about Bacon’s art, Deleuze’s analysis applies even more to the canvases of Auerbach and Kossoff, where painterly risk—taking to the brink of catastrophe becomes very much the subject of the work. As a result, their dense conglomerations of paint prove the most difficult for viewers to discern; within the digressions, conundrums, and reiterations, the flesh is alive, but weary and melancholic, exuding the interminable labor of its making (as in Kossoff’s Cathy No. 1, Summer [1994; pl. 20]). The distinct relationship between the figure and the ground is not articulated by spatial planes as with Freud, or by rupture with flat fields of color as with Bacon. Instead, in Auerbach’s Head of David Landau (1987; pl. 21), for example, we are faced with a pictorial field undifferentiated by density, texture, or atmosphere. One must have faith in the oblong lines that form an edge or shadow, or in the gestural rise and fall, crook and turn of a stroke. Yet these same marks simultaneously relinquish their identities as they succumb to the puddles, rivulets, and furrows of the painterly mass. Grasping is a perilous adventure: the eye skids or hits an impasse. A downturned lip or furrowed brow finds its way through the churning magma, but facial expressions are beside the point; the emotional realism of this work stems from the profound feeling of “breakdown and inadequacy” in the being of the painter.  

Doubt expresses itself in the inability to see and see through; the overloading of paint and brush betrays the desire to hold onto something—anything.

Auerbach and Kossoff both literally skin the paint, scraping away a day’s work and reconstituting their perceptions the next morning, over and over again with the same sitter and canvas, the same mix of anxiety and resolve. The weight of years fills Kossoff’s images of his elderly parents, but the endless cycle of time reverberates in the bearing of every sitter, no matter the age. Their physiognomies sink down into the mass of accrued pigment, while long skins and dried fissures in the surface (the result of working the paint wet in wet) add to the perception of consumed and wrinkled flesh. Freud’s work emphasizes the biological destiny, the fragile and limited life of a carnal being; Kossoff’s Cathy, Summer No. 1 brings to mind the incommensurate span of geological time, the slow accretions of matter, once newly formed, then buried under, then erupting anew. Kossoff describes his painterly domain as one “where time seems to collapse.” In the closed-in space of his studio shut off from the world outside, he immerses himself in the interminable duration of looking through a long, uninterrupted engagement with his sitters. Kossoff, who was born in the Jewish quarter of London’s East End to Russian Jewish émigrés in 1926, evokes human clay miraculously coming into being and the throng of the shtetl, densely packed and resigned to fate.

Flesh clearly has other connotations for a generation of Jewish painters whose parents had to flee to save their own skins. Freud, Auerbach, and Kossoff grew up during the Holocaust; the first two landed in England because of it. The mark of difference and the vicissitudes of their personal histories bring new and loaded perceptions to their work: the poignant fragility of the carnal being and the need to impress dignity upon the body no matter how misshapen; the obsessive starting up again after the previous day’s work has been wiped away; the combination of painterly instinct and rationale that allows them to make their way through catastrophe and come out the other end. Auerbach’s searing, at times desperate, attempt to hold on to form: (Julia [1987]) has a whole other meaning when we learn that he was orphaned at the age of seven: “I felt that there was an area of experience—the haptic, the tangible, what you feel when you touch somebody next to you in the dark—that hadn’t perhaps been recorded in
painting before.” Sent off on a boat from Hamburg by parents who wanted him to survive and whom he never saw again, Auerbach was deprived of the primal, reassuring embrace, in the dark or the light. The visages that never quite come into focus accurately record the woeful inadequacy of long-term memory; without a photograph, the specifics of a loved one’s face, especially one lost in time, are frustratingly difficult to recall.

The dialogue between pure painting and referential mark imparts another level of empathy, for the viewer is obliged to recreate the steps of the artist’s own creative process. This demand for visual acuity, in turn, has inspired a particularly literate body of art criticism. Find the adjectives (and enumerate how many) to describe the colors and feel of the sitter’s kneecaps in Freud’s *Benefits Supervisor Resting*, for example. The interlocutor between image and reader has a dual task: to evoke the sheer bravura of the pictorial technique while simultaneously decoding each stroke into the respective part of the figure apperceived. In the same way that the artist earlier engaged in complex making and matching, the writer must articulate a “vast anthology of particular and minute differences,” in the words of Robert Hughes, whose own passages on Auerbach achieve a linguistic vigor akin to the artist’s own handiwork with flesh. The peregrinations of the eye become, in the text, an analogous working through of the artist’s seemingly intractable piles of paint: “Its texture moves from deep parallel grooves to seemingly arbitrary channelling, from bosses or knots of pigment standing proud on the surface to the most delicate little tufts and hairs of drawn-out, toffee-like colour left overhanging the deeper strokes below.” Hughes asserts that Auerbach’s impacted strokes defy visual summary, but his own prose finds traction in the structural logic of the image, as one ascertains “the relation of the nose to the cheekbones, the way the gaze streams from the recess of the eye’s orbit, the lay and crinkle of hair, the shadow that hooks under the cheekbone, the surfaces that seem flat and frontal, the others that recede and carry the eye round the back of the head.” Skinning
the paint can trigger perceptions of bodily deprivation, but it compensates with cognitive plentitude.

Freud's carnal candor and the bloody implications of Bacon come together in the troubling beauty of canvases by Jenny Saville, who pointedly addresses the gendered discourse in traditional painting of the flesh. For centuries the leaky, erupting body has been limited by the conventions of the nude, the confines of the picture frame, and a tidy view from outside the epidermal sheath. Saville "goes beyond the boundaries of what's socially acceptable," depicting excess and the normally unseen. She wants the consistency of her images "to be kind of obese," to have "an overabundance of paint on the surface."36 Her oversize canvases are filled with swaths of fat and fatty paint, forced up into and spread wide across

the foreground plane so that the greasy strokes and stretched masses press in aggressively on the viewer's eye. The play between abstraction and realism reaches a new scale of mark making, a "curtain of flesh," as she describes it, which evokes the sweat of an armpit or pillowy pulp of a lip. In Hyphen (1999; pl. 38), the red-speckled quadrant of a cheek isolated from the field of rose-petal grafts evokes both the dots of broken capillaries and the signature style of Jackson Pollock. Saville's work, in the grand scale of history painting with the human figure at its center, effectively merges the traditional division of genres: faithful portraits of individuals, topographical landscapes of the body, and still lifes of ripe and putrid matter.

Saville's project to depict "the unruly mass of fat" is a feminist (or humanist) one that tries to undo perceptions of the "normal" body. Freud broke the barrier with his frank depiction of girth in Benefits Supervisor Resting, but Saville accentuates the physical and psychological power of a large female body and forces us to consider someone "who is acutely aware that our contemporary culture encourages her to disguise her bulk and look as small as possible."37 Much has been made of Saville's dialogue between the inside and outside of the body; openings and orifices—wounds, mouths, vaginas, and nostrils—become apertures onto new and often disturbing perceptions. She models the pictorial membrane with astonishing mobility, having watched a surgeon's hand operate "inside a body, moving flesh around," and seen "damage and adjustment to the boundary" of the human form.

Yet she also probes discrepancies of feeling between inside and outside: individuals whose perceptions of themselves do not correspond to how they are seen or want to be seen by others. To this end, she paints specimens that have actually been skinned—overweight women who have undergone liposuction or transsexuals with newly constructed body parts. Plastic surgeons have reversed the Pygmalion myth by sculpturing existing "ugly" bodies into "beautiful" works of art. In her choice of subject matter, Saville makes us aware of how flesh today is
a realist canvas marked by bruises, tattoos, surgical lines, cuts, and scars, as in Plan (1993). Following upon Bacon’s legacy, she depicts the body harmed, its flesh maimed and scorched by accidents and burns, further shocking the senses with unexpected slashes and ruptures of pigment: “Your eye tries to piece together the wholeness you are comfortable with—there’s an attempt by the eye to repair, it’s an instinctive action born out of fear of breakdown or formlessness.”

Saville engages the history of art by questioning the permissible aesthetics of viewing, often reversing the gaze and painting her own body nude. Freud did naked appraisals of his own withering flesh, but only a woman could create a riff on Gustave Courbet’s Origin of the World by rendering her own sexual organ, resulting in the painter’s eye and touch becoming one. In addition to offering a revisionist look back at Courbet, Reflective Flesh (2002–2003) puns on the mirrors necessary for self-portraits, not to mention the self-viewing of this particular female body part. Bacon painted the idea of a body pouring out of itself and the resulting sensation of disgust; Saville matter-of-factly acknowledges the intricacies of the labia that make the flowing from inside to outside a natural occurrence of the female form. Lastly, through the use of mirrored imagery, her own head is reflected below like another self issuing forth from her own vagina, an act of creative reproduction that sensitizes us to the biological, rather than the erotic, origins of life.

Cecily Brown, by contrast, considers the gendered aesthetics of touch, with strokes that dally, lick, splatter, and pursue in a prolonged flirtation with the eye. In Brown’s buoyant pictorial fields, “brushed” means brushed up against, as one feels the tactile in a series of fleeting and partial encounters. “I’ve always wanted that feeling of having a hand pressing,” says Brown. “There will often be hands—whether they’re grabbing or entering or poking.” She skins the paint with areas of flesh tone, coherent and smooth, stretched out like taut membranes from the visual flotsam and jetsam. Glimpses of copulating figures, with views from over and under in a nod to Bacon’s contorted if sexualized poses, have goaded many critics to assess Brown’s images as pornographic. Indeed, she draws from pornographic sources—photographic and cinematic—as well as from scenes of rape and voyeurism deep within the history of high art (Figures in a Landscape 1 [2001; pl. 22]), but only to demonstrate the oxymoron of painterly pornography. In her more recent work, buttocks and breasts displayed with rococo finesse are a mere come-on to the prolonged act of “looking really hard” at the process of painting things “warping and collapsing,” which moving pictures, especially skin flicks, cannot offer. As Linda Nochlin writes, Brown aims at the pictorial equivalent of “that haptic ardor consuming partners in the throes of sexual pleasure: touching, squeezing, rubbing, stroking, rolling the thick gobs

Jenny Saville
Reflective Flesh, 2002–2003
Oil on canvas, 120 x 96 in.
Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery
of paint onto the canvas.”

In Titian’s time, the fate of Marsyas was a Neoplatonic allegory of spiritual transcendence, of the need to relinquish the desires of the body in order to give rise to a purified soul. Only the god Apollo’s more abstract art, the divine music of spheres, not the satyr’s sounds of field and forest, guaranteed immortality. With the paintings of the British corps, the myth of Marsyas is turned upside down, and the body returned to its dignified position—upright, but admittedly stripped of all pretense to eternity, let alone longevity. There is no possibility of surmounting carnality: meaning resides in visceral matters and the matter of paint. “Art is an obsession with life,” said Bacon, “and after all we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves.”

The vulnerability of the flesh becomes the unashamed, if pitiable, condition of humanity, yet the acceptance of this fact has also led, over half a century, to the shedding of preconceptions and inhibitions about the body. Nakedness has released the figure from the dual bondage of idealism and sublimated eroticism into an honest and dignified realism of the flesh. Freud’s copulent models, indifferent to societal approval, feel comfortable in their own skin, while Saville’s shed theirs voluntarily. The body brutal has become a work of art, smashing the mirror that sees inner harmony reflected only in corporeal perfection. In the works of these British artists painting is sentient, even hideously alive, and the social function of image making revivified. As Saville puts it, “When it’s really good, it makes your eyes widen, your breath deeper. You know you’re standing in front of something incredibly important about your existence.”

Notes


4. For an example of how painting the figure was written out of the history of British modernist painting, see Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, 2 vols. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004). There, Bacon gets one paragraph and one reproduction, Freud’s name is mentioned in passing (though his grandfather, Sigmund Freud, is omnipresent), and Auerbach and Kossoff do not appear at all.

5. Most recently, Peter Schjeldahl opined in the pages of the New Yorker (January 7, 2008), “‘The mannerly ‘Lucian Freud: The Painter’s Etchings,’ at MOMA, marks an epochal surrender, of modernism’s shrine, to insurgent conservative tast[e]” (available at www.newyorker.com).

6. Saville in Schama, “Interview with Jenny Saville,” 124; Brown in Dodie Kazanjian, “Fleshing It Out,” Vogue, February 1999, 252. Brown, born in 1969, was taken to the Bacon exhibition by David Sylvester, the famed critic of the School of London painters and Bacon’s initial champion. (His published interviews with Bacon are still the fundamental source on the artist.) Raised by a stepfather, Brown did not know that Sylvester was her biological father until the age of twenty-two.


15. Bacon in Sylvester, Francis Bacon, 46.

16. Ibid., 12, 121.

17. Ibid., 83.

18. On Bacon’s extensive use of photography and the cinematic image, see Martin Harrison, In Camera: Francis Bacon, Photography, Film, and the Practice of Painting (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), esp. 199.


20. Midas was not in Ovid’s version of the myth of Marsyas, but as Falomir notes in “The Playing of Marsyas” (13), the story was later confused with the musical contest between Pan and Apollo where Midas was the judge. In Giulio Romano’s fresco version of the playing of Marsyas (Palazzo del Te, Mantua, 1527), Midas covers his eyes as the satyr is skinned. In Titian’s version, Midas—also a self-portrait—looks on contemplatively.


26. The lack of a painting tradition of the black nude in contemporary art is emphasized by the art and critical discourse found in Richard J. Powell, David A. Bailey, and Petrine Archer-Straw, Back to Black: Art, Cinema, and the Racial Imaginary (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2005); and in Thelma Golden, Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994). The same cannot be said for photography, which has used the black male and female nude as an object of aestheticism (the work of Robert Mapplethorpe is one notable example), but as argued in this essay, photographing the body is not the same as painting it. Photography contains an implicitly domineering and exploitative gaze; reciprocity and deep sensory engagement are lacking. Jan Marsh, ed., Black Victorians: Black People in British Art, 1800–1900 (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2005), documents the Eurocentric ethnographic classifications used to depict peoples of African origins in nineteenth-century painting, prints, and sculpture. In Renaissance and Baroque art, where blacks typically appear as servants, their flesh explicitly contrasts with the fairer disposition and status of their mistresses. Certain representations of the black magus figure, or Velázquez’s portrait of Juan de Pareja, are among the exceptions to these ideological and aesthetic standards. I thank my colleague Lisa Vergara for her learned observations on this issue. See also Paul Kaplan, The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985).


30. Ibid., 72.


32. Moorhouse, Leon Kossoff, 14.


34. The influence of the Holocaust on Auerbach’s work is also discussed by Robert Hughes, Frank Auerbach (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 17–19. Hughes convincingly argues that Auerbach’s drawings in the charcoal medium “carry an inescapable freight of pain: these images conjured out of the dust of burnt wood might come from inside the chimney, from within the final and unappeasable loss of her body” (18).

35. Ibid., 158, 196.


38. Ibid., 125.


42. Bacon in Sylvester, Francis Bacon, 63.