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Lisa Sweet 2D Portraiture
Artist Lecture Wk 8

LUCIAN FREUD

This particular artist wants to convey a simple portrait, possibly naked, possibly asleep, and illustrate our human self-consciousness. Without considering emotion or personality or status we naturally portray ourselves. Human instincts are not much different than an animal, yet Freud dedicates his life work to try and breakdown our psychological barriers.

Lucian Freud, grandson of Sigmund Freud, was born in Berlin in 1922. In 1933 to escape the rise of Nazism in Germany, his family immigrated to the UK. Freud's personality is a crude and impulsive one; he prides himself in his vanity and perversion. He began drawing at a young age, submitting bits into cartoon magazines. While studying at the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing he met Peter Watson, a wealthy and generous friend, who gave him the *Geschichte Aegyptens*. This book along with other Egyptian art forms such as the El Amarna plaster masks influenced Freud's early work, which can clearly be seen in the style of *Landscape with Birds* (1940) and *Evacuee Boy* (1942). These early works show Freud's struggle working with oil paints, for example the sky in *Landscape with Birds* is a bit melted looking. (Weaver, 14) Along with his oil paintings, he worked with etching techniques and created many expressive portraits in this medium throughout the years. The two slides of etchings I chose to show are of Bruce Bernard (1985) and Sue Tilly (1996), who were both popular subjects and good friends of his.

Though all artists are inevitably influenced by other's work, Freud resists this notion, "It's the idea of adopting a way of doing things. Or doing things that have been done before. All those would work against me doing something which is disturbing, by which I mean alive." Also he avoided the look of having constructed the composition of his pieces, to Freud awkward was synonymous with extraordinary. "If I'm putting someone in a picture, I like to feel that they've fallen asleep or they've elbowed their way in..." Freud's work is of course open to interpretation, the pieces themselves being far from confessional or illustrative. The backgrounds in his work don't suggest anything about the character of the subjects, and the figures are also presented in a very matter of fact way. "Originality has no virtue of any kind if you think about it very seriously." (Freud, 10, 15)

Freud always works from life, and in his early work it was a bit difficult to acquire sitters, for example with *Evacuee Boy*, he quickly sketched the stray passerby's shoulders and facial construct. Also the fact that he was constantly working on several pieces at once, sometimes plans with sitters fell through and last minute subjects had to be recruited. It is safe to say that all his subjects were either family or close friends (or friends of friends), the subject of some of his first definite portraits that were face to face

representations was with Kitty Garmin (*Girl with Leaves* 1948) who he later married. This phase of portraits was considered to house his first masterpiece. (Weaver, 23)

In 1951 he was commissioned along with 60 other painters for an exhibition during the 1951 Festival of Britain. For this piece titled *Interior at Paddington* (1951) his subject was a friend named Harry Diamond who intrigued Freud with his intense temper. Freud chose to portray his resentful stropiness by shortening his legs, though they were already very short for his stocky body. The scene out the window is the Grand Union Canal in London. Unlike many other submissions, this piece cold-shoulders the cheery festival notion by way of color (or lack thereof) and was one of five awarded \$500. (Weaver, 25)

Beginning in the 60's Freud's style transitioned into a very rough figurative and intense representation of human ugliness. He was attracted to sitters with strange bodily proportions, always making sure to portray them in compromising positions that were everything but flattering. His goal with portraiture was to "astonish, disturb, seduce, and convince..." by just showing us what was physically in front of him. Most of his reviews rang with the tune of "Shocking, violent, cruel, rotten, and affected." (Weaver, 28, 37)

One of his early self-portraits is *Reflection with Two Children* (1965). In this composition, Freud set a mirror at his feet, extremely foreshortening himself. The two children are sort of introduced like latecomers to a cinema, demonstrating what kind of father he was. This sort of downward voyeuristic viewpoint is repeated several times throughout the rest of his work. (Weaver, 30) *Reflection* (1981-2) is another self-portrait Freud composed this time using three different mirrors. There is a sense of conceit in his glance, catching himself 'unaware' almost as if he is trying to outwit the common affliction within self-portraiture such as spiritual grandeur or delusions of stature. (Weaver, 35) In a recent self-portrait titled *Painter Surprised by a Naked Admirer* (2005) Freud shows himself painting, paused by a woman clutching his leg on the floor of his studio. He seemed to paint her with a gracefulness he usually tries to avoid. Though it definitely expresses a certain detachment and invasiveness, also he backs away from the subjects trying to downplay the composition.

Freud's mother attempted suicide after losing her husband, and in 1972 he began doing portraits of her. In *Painter's Mother Resting I* (1976) he portrays her in an infant-like manner with her arms cupped beside her head. Another refinement that came through his work after this period of time was his attention to visible decay of objects and his alertness and attention of detail, as you can tell in the nightdress his mother is wearing. (Weaver, 32)

Like his grandfather Freud was very interested in the idea of people as animals. Sigmund discussed in some of his works "the over-wide gap human arrogance in former times created between man and beast." The former time he is referencing to is the eugenics craze we read about in "Spectacular Bodies." Freud thought animals to be virtuous in their unselfconsciousness and stated, "The appetites so undisguised in a dog-hunger and lust, the desire for comfort, exercise, sleep and reassurance- are those most

exposed when people take their clothes off and shed their facades.” A poem by T.S. Elliot titled ‘Preludes’ inspired Freud’s thoughts on this subject “I am moved by fancies that are curled/ Around these images, and cling:/ The notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing.”(Weaver, 40-41)

Bella (1981) and Woman with Eyes Closed (2002) supports this idea in that the women shown are either asleep or are closing you out with downcast glances. When considering the well accepted thought that the eyes are windows to the soul, Freud was definitely trying to separate the soul and the physical body, to allow the audience to creatively interpret feeling.

Leigh Bowery was one of Freud’s favorite sitters. He was a cross-dressing performer and became a gay icon after he died of AIDS on New Years Eve 1994. He posed a challenge to Freud because he was a performer and was extremely self-conscious, which was the construct Freud wanted to break down with his work. Also he had, in Freud’s eyes, the perfect body and almost a translucent complexion. Through Leigh Freud became close with Nicola Bateman who was his seamstress and sometimes his co-star on stage. Girl Sitting in the Attic Doorway (1995) shows Nicola with a tearful gaze, possibly implying the idea of ‘attic memories.’ (Weaver, 43)

Sunny Morning Eight Legs (1997) is a good example of the many pieces he included his dog Pluto. The inclusion of legs under the bed was a desperate move. A bedpan and slippers just wasn’t his style, he needed to do something unconventional yet natural. To do so he repeated the subject’s legs poking out from underneath the bed, which he has done in other works. (Weaver, 46)

Naked Portrait Standing (1999-2000) shows a vulnerable sturdiness like that of a tree trunk. Her down cast glance shows nothing more than what is physically there. The composition is a bit awkward by cutting off her forehead and ankles, reflecting the artist’s belief about life itself being awkward. (Freud, 10, 12)

Freud contributed to royal portraiture in 2001 with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It was commissioned a few years prior but he put it off because of all the media interest. This piece unlike most of his other work is very small, cutting off the sides of her hair and- god forbid- even the top of her crown. It was the first painting to actually show her as the aging grandmother that she now is. (Freud 9-10)

Perhaps Freud’s greatest contribution to portraiture is that his work isn’t about ‘penetrating character,’ it’s about a strong representation of a specific human presence. Through his ferocious concentration he wants to show the audience only what is physically there, he’s not looking for mystification but intensification. Some say that he is the world’s greatest living figurative artist, others argue his work to be nothing more than nude studies. But there is a strong feeling somehow translated to the audience, or better yet created by the audience, which I believe makes it much more than a figure study. To put it in Freud’s own words “Everything is autobiographical, and everything is a portrait.” (Weaver, 27) (Freud, 7)