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Ambivalent Homecomings: National Identity, Canon-formation and Routes to Success

In 2001 two significant homecomings were celebrated in the Irish art world. The first surrounded the public opening of Francis Bacon's studio in Dublin, the city of the artist's birth. Following a donation by Bacon's sole heir John Edwards, the entire studio was dismantled at its location at Reece Mews in London, transported and painstakingly reconstructed at the Dublin Municipal Gallery, the Hugh Lane. The second homecoming was the donation of Louis le Brocquy's *A Family* (1951), a painting that had been central to historic debates on Modernism in the Irish context, to the National Gallery of Ireland. When Le Brocquy represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1954, the painting had been awarded the prestigious Nestlé-endowed *Premio Aquisitato* prize and had hung in the company's Milan offices until 2001, when it was acquired by an Irish business man for donation to the National Gallery. Medb Ruane described the homecoming of Le Brocquy's *Family* as "an honouring of the prophet in his own land" (2002: 23). In contrast, the relocation of Bacon's studio to the city of his birth might aptly be dubbed the return of the prodigal son, given that Bacon was sent out of the country in disgrace at the age of sixteen when his father had the first inklings of his homosexuality.

The coincidence of the homecomings was a fortuitous tribute to a lifelong friendship that was forged between these two Irish-born artists in London in 1951 at a time when they were considered two of the most significant up-and-coming "British" painters. Their friendship was not surprising, given that the two artists came from similar socio-cultural backgrounds, were both self-taught painters and shared a love for the Spanish masters including Picasso. While their contemporary framing and reputations hardly allows them to be discussed in a shared framework, Le Brocquy and Bacon were then counted among a relatively small group of artists in London who worked figuratively in a period dominated by abstraction.⁷³ Art historian Dorothy Walker recalled that:

⁷³ Other artists included Keith Vaughan, Jankel Adler, Robert MacBryde, Robert Colquhoun, Josef Herman, Graham Sutherland and Lucian Freud. See Mellor (1993) and Garlake (1998) for an overview of British art in the post-war period and Harrison (2002) for a specific analysis of figurative artists. See also

The period of the fifties, not only in London but all over the Western world, was a period of abstract painting, of saturation *tachisme* or abstract expressionism when figurative painting was totally out of fashion. (1997: 45)

Hence, Walker suggests, Le Brocquy and Bacon could share their “continued isolation as figurative painters in an abstract world.” From the time they met, Bacon is said to have seldom missed one of Le Brocquy’s regular exhibitions at Gimpel Fils gallery. Bacon later expressed this interest in personal correspondence and through his writing of a catalogue essay for Le Brocquy in 1976, an uncharacteristic gesture for the artist.⁷⁴ Le Brocquy showed his admiration for Bacon through an extensive series of portraits painted in 1979 as part of his *Portrait Heads* series.⁷⁵

I might well have put the two artists’ homecomings in inverted commas, however, because “home” here implies their assimilation in national canons. Both artists’ interrelationships with British and Irish canons are complex and, I will suggest, very much mediated by curators. Bacon has been canonized as one of the most significant British painters of the 20th century. His Britishness would appear to stem from his English parentage. Yet, as we have seen with Orpen, the nationality of an artist’s parents does not necessarily determine national framing in the practice of curating. Given that Bacon was born and raised in Ireland, there are reasonable grounds to suggest that Bacon was Irish. Usually the term “Anglo-Irish” is used to describe the identity of someone born in Ireland to English parents, with Anglo-Irishness taken as a form of Irish nationality on occasions when further specification is necessary. The relocation of Bacon’s London studio to Dublin, the city of his birth, thus raises the question of Bacon’s eventual re-canonisation as an Irish artist.

The second homecoming involved the apparent “return” of a major painting by Le Brocquy, who is now celebrated as “Ireland’s greatest living artist,” to its rightful home in the National Gallery of Ireland. Le Brocquy was based in London when he painted *A Family*, having been recruited by two London gallerists as an emerging artist

Taylor (1999: 167-202) for an analysis of changing institutional structures in the British art world at that time.

⁷⁴ Some of Bacon’s comments from letters and exhibitions are recorded in Madden and Le Brocquy (1994: 164, 200). At a retrospective held at Gimpel Fils, Madden recalls for example Bacon’s comments on Le Brocquy’s *Image of Lorca* (1978), finding the sunken darkened eye “extraordinary” because it was a very difficult thing to make an undefined eye socket “work” (287).

⁷⁵ See *Louis le Brocquy: Portrait Heads, A Celebration of the Artist’s Ninetieth Birthday* (2006) for reproductions of a number of the Bacon portraits.

in Ireland. During the immediate post-war period, an active promotion of British art was underway in London, supported by the government drive to celebrate Britishness, as part of an attempt to boost the morale of the depleted post-war nation. Bringing artists from Ireland was one of the few ways to broaden the scope of British art at a time when travel to mainland Europe was out of the question. It was at this time that Cecil Philips of the Leicester Galleries and Charles Gimpel of the newly established Gimpel Fils gallery made a trip to Dublin looking for new artists to supplement their gallery programmes. They visited the Irish Exhibition of Living Art and singled out Le Brocquy's work, inviting him to move to London to be represented by their galleries; an offer which Le Brocquy gladly accepted. In the ten years following his departure, Le Brocquy went from being an Irish artist to being a British artist and then back to being an Irish artist again, thanks to an active process of curatorial framing and reframing.

In this chapter I will undertake a comparative analysis of Bacon and Le Brocquy's relationships with their national identities in relation to the ways in which curators and institutions intervene in the negotiation of those identities for canonical purposes. I will de-naturalize canonical identities by tracing the pivotal moments that determined the two artists' canonical positions. I wish to emphasize the agency of the curator as a "custodian of the canon," a role is traditionally associated with the art historian (Gombrich 1975: 54).⁷⁶ It is usually assumed that art history and canons are created after the event. Unlike the curator, the art historian is seen to be able to take objective distance from the messy and compromised practice of everyday art world transactions in order to evaluate for posterity. However, as Anna Brzyski highlights, in real terms the discourse of art history co-exists with the production of art, and hence with its exhibition and reception. Rather than being an after-effect, art history operates as a meta-discourse vis-à-vis art practice, especially if art practice is considered as a complex discursive system operating across visual and verbal fields as it increasingly is today (Brzyski 2007: 249).

Rather than seeing canons as something separate from contemporary art production, I will highlight the fact that to make a living as a professional, curators have to prognostically demonstrate that the work in question has the potential for long-term (i.e. historic, canonical) significance. I want to examine two aspects of curatorial

⁷⁶ For a discussion of the symbolic conflict between curating and art history, see Haxthausen (2002: i-xxv).

relationships to artists' canonisation. The first relationship is with the politics of canonisation as such. Thanks to their establishment in the 19th century in the context of nascent nationalisms in Europe, canons have a fundamentally national nature. Although the national basis of art history is increasingly challenged, even globalization has done little to undermine the cultural hierarchies reinforced by their taxonomic method of knowledge production (Elkins 2007: 73). I want to question the unequal distribution of cultural and symbolic power within existing canons and examine how the norms of curation serve to maintain this inequality.

I will do so by reading against the grain of the obviousness of Le Brocquy's Irishness and Bacon's Englishness. I will demonstrate that these national framings were secured for canonical purposes at various moments in history. I will suggest that they partly stay in place because they underpin the two artists' current critical and market value. We have seen that Le Brocquy's nationality was framed and reframed as Irish, English and British in his early career. I will highlight how differently Le Brocquy's career and work may have developed, had the demands of circumstances determined otherwise. My framing of Bacon as Irish is a strategic challenge to the automatic foreclosure of Bacon as an Irish artist. This seems to me to be based on the market criteria of securing the maintaining the high symbolic capital of Englishness in art history as much as any biographical or artistic factors. The framing and reframing of Le Brocquy or Bacon as Irish, Anglo-Irish, English or British can not be reduced to the issue that an appropriate set of terms has yet to be developed to describe the range of identities which long-term colonisation and high-density migration have forged. If we consider this to be simply a case of "mixed nationality," we ignore the effects of the uneven levels of symbolic capital, whose exchange rate is determined by the postcolonial relation between these two particular countries. This matters because success is partly achieved through the accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital.

The case studies I look at here relate to, for example, claims from French and Dutch art worlds as to the canon to which Van Gogh belongs (Esner and Schavemaker 2010). Yet, even if Van Gogh is seen to "belong to" the French canon, he remains a Dutch artist in the French canon, which shows the security of Dutch national identity vis-à-vis French identity. We will see that, in the case of the postcolonial country in particular, national identity is more vulnerable to subsumption, being so narrowly

differentiated from the culture of its former coloniser. Moreover, the formerly colonised nation lacks the authority to make competing claims on an equal symbolic level. Chintao Wu's research has shown that contemporary artists' migrations continue to follow the pattern of artists from (postcolonial) nations with lower cultural capital moving to nations with higher cultural capital (often former colonial capitals).⁷⁷ My analysis extends the question of who has the cultural authority to decide on these artists' assimilation in national canons to address the issue of how postcolonial cultural conditions and changing economic and political developments affect such claims to authority.

The second aspect of canonisation that interests me is its effects on the aesthetic reception of the work. Disinterestedness in national identity and canon formations appears valid in the day-to-day workings of the art world, because the question of nationality or canons seems so exterior to the work in question. However, the opposite is true. Writing about the "pure gaze" of art viewing, Bourdieu observes:

Adequate reception of works – which, like Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* or Klein's monochrome paintings, owe their formal properties and their value only to the structure of the field and thus to its history – is a differential and diacritical perception: in other words, *it is attentive to deviations from other works, both contemporary and past*. The result is that, like production, the consumption of works which are a product of a long history of breaks of history, with tradition, tends to become historical through and through, and yet more and more dehistoricized. In fact, the history that deciphering and appreciation put into play is gradually reduced to a pure history of forms, completely eclipsing the social history of the struggles for forms which is the life and movement of the artistic field. (2008: 266, emphasis added)

The necessity for attentiveness to deviations from contemporary and historical works in particular demands locatedness within a given (national) art discourse or canon, although the cultural specificity of that discourse may no longer be acknowledged as such.

⁷⁷ (Wu 2009). Comparing the migration figures and directions for artists who participated in Documenta between 1968 and 2007, Wu concludes: "For artists born in North America and Europe A [largely Western Europe], nearly 93 per cent of movements are within that region—between London and New York, for example, where the conditions for artistic production and reception may be considered more or less equal. Secondly, for artists born in Europe B [largely Eastern Europe], nearly 89 per cent of movements are towards North America and Europe A, presumably in search of better support systems and infrastructures. Thirdly, for artists born in Latin America, Asia or Africa, the overwhelming majority of movements—over 92 per cent—are to North America and Europe A" (2009).

Moreover, rather than being passive recipients of this process, artists play an active part in their own critical framing. This can take place through silent complicity with curatorial choices or active critical self-positioning of the work. Yet it also takes place in the form of making work that anticipates and adapts to the artist's own desired critical reception. This process is rarely made visible, given the centrality of the myth of pure self-expression within the art market and public appreciation of art. I want to shed more light on it here and in chapters five, because I see it as central to the re-entrenchment of the kind of centralized policing of art terms I have discussed in the introduction.

The visibility of an art work “depends on a historically constituted regime of perception and intelligibility” as Jacques Rancière has highlighted (2009a: 50). In order to create space to see the work, it is relevant to pay attention to the conditions of its initial critical emergence; an emergence that, as we will see in relation to Le Brocquy and Bacon, tends to have a lasting effect, not only on the subsequent reception of an artist's work, but even on his or her artistic production. This is not limited to, but includes, canonical claims, and early endeavors towards pointing to the possibility of such claims, that are important in ensuring success. These are of the national variety, yet this close relationship between the limits of the visible and intelligible and the wider relationship between the field and field of power means that such claims have more extensive repercussions for aesthetic readings than it might first appear.

Let me take an initial example of Le Brocquy's *A Family* (1951) (Fig. 2.1), the painting at the centre of the homecoming. *A Family* is a monumental oil painting, almost two metres long, depicting a mother, father and child, all nude, inhabiting a grey window-less space lit by a single overhead lamp. The mother reclines on a sparse table-like bed, propped up on one elbow to face the viewer with a stare that both asserts her matriarchal power and suggests her troubled thoughts. A white cat stares out from under the creased white sheets that half-cover the mother's nakedness. The mother's legs are spread and a child stands at the end of the bed, echoing a post-partum scenario. The father sits depressed at the end of the other side of the bed, his back stooped and his head hung low. The figures are all painted in a post-cubist style, their bodies sculpted and almost architectonic, and their flesh tones dulled down to echo the greyness of a bunker-like interior.

The painting envisages the stripping back of life to the bare essentials needed to start again, which was interpreted in Britain as reflecting the psychological intensity of the post-war period. The existential despair evident in the man's stooped posture and the woman's facial expression were taken to relate to the atomic threat and the hopeless predicament it posed for humanity. In contrast, in Ireland the work was seen as a commentary on the recent rejection of the Mother and Child Scheme. This welfare scheme for mothers in need was set aside amidst much controversy because it was seen to take over from tasks properly belonging to the church. In his previous work *Le Brocquy* had directly engaged with the poverty and high mortality rate in Dublin's slums. The closure of his mother's soup kitchen in Dublin following similar complaints by an Archbishop, making it likely that Le Brocquy would have been deeply disturbed by the recent controversy (Ruane 2002).



Fig. 2.1 Louis le Brocquy, *A Family*, 1951,
The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

It is not unusual for an artist to work with a range of sources for one work. In fact, although different, the two readings are not entirely incompatible, both providing a different socio-cultural interpretation of the psychological intensity palpable in the familial image at hand. Yet each reading is rooted in a different national history and, when we consider that one definition of a canonical artist is that the history of a period

cannot be read without their work, it is almost inevitable that the reading associated with the national canon in question will be highlighted, obscuring other significant aspects of the work in question. This means that a reframing of national belonging is likely to bring about changes in paradigmatic approaches to the work. Aesthetic perception is linked to wider social and political understandings; an interrelationship I address in this study in terms of the *habitus*, field and field of power.

Although it is only one of a number of relevant factors, national identity has, moreover, distinct consequences for the artist's relative success because different (national) perceptions carry different weight in terms of cultural and symbolic capital. We have seen some of the posthumous effects of this in relation to Orpen in the last chapter. I am concerned here with the relative success of artists' early career trajectories, based on these strategies of nationalization and de-nationalisation. I will highlight the agency of canons in conferring prestige to individual artists and aiding their path towards success in their own lifetime, whether by direct or indirect association. We will see how these framings are in turn affected by the achievement of career success in their lifetimes. Subsequently I will explore the significance of national framing on curatorial readings of their work, past and present.

I want to examine first how the artist's *habitus* affects personal choices that relate to identity issues, which are often not as individual as they first appear. With this in mind, I will now map out Bacon and Le Brocquy's childhoods and early youth to give a sense of the Anglo-Irish milieu in which they were reared, before considering how this *habitus* might affect the artists' articulation of their identities and artistic preferences. I will then look at their respective career trajectories and finally consider how their national framing affects the reading of their work.

Habitus, Upbringing and Expressions of Identity

Bacon and Le Brocquy were both born and raised in Ireland in upper middle-class families, not unlike Orpen's. Bacon was born at 63, Lower Baggott Street, Dublin in 1909. His father had been a major in the British army and it was following his retirement that he moved to Ireland to become a horse-trainer. Bacon's parents' marriage appears to have brought cultural capital and economic capital together – his father being of aristocratic British lineage and his mother the daughter of an industrialist.

During Bacon's youth in Ireland, the War of Independence (1919-21) broke out, quickly followed by the Civil War (1922-3). Many of the homes of Anglo-Irish families in Bacon's social circle were burned down by Republican forces. The Bacons would have felt under particular threat as they lived in a large country home belonging to Francis's maternal grandmother, who was married to the District Inspector of the Royal Irish Constabulary for County Kildare.

It was in another such house, Straffan Lodge, where Francis Bacon's grandmother lived, that Bacon's father found the sixteen-year-old Francis wearing his mother's clothes. He was promptly banished from home and sent to Berlin, where his uncle lived. Within two years of his abrupt exit from Ireland, the young Bacon had moved on to Paris and then to London, where he established himself as a furniture and interior designer and slowly began to develop his painting practice.⁷⁸ This forced early exit from his home, brought about by his sexual orientation, was another reason why Bacon sooner identified himself as a desiring body than a subject of any given state. Thanks to the illegality of homosexuality in Britain and Europe, Bacon's gayness was to remain a kind of interior identity professionally well into his adult life. It clearly informed his work, but it was disavowed in the public reception of his work and Bacon entrenched this disavowal by insisting on the irrelevance of biography to readings of his work.

Le Brocquy was born in Dublin in 1916, the year of the Easter Rising, but as far as he recalls, the War of Independence or the Civil War had little direct impact on his childhood. His great-grandfather had been a Belgian military man, who, like Bacon's father, had retired in Ireland. Le Brocquy's childhood memory of playing croquet with the poet W. B. Yeats evokes a privileged Anglo-Irish milieu. As with Bacon, there seems to have been a struggle of ethos within his family, however. His father, an industrialist, had Le Brocquy work for the family oil company. His mother, who was culturally engaged, supported her son's wish to be a painter. When Le Brocquy's girlfriend fell pregnant out of wedlock, his mother saw it as an opportunity for the artist to escape his predicament in Ireland. She sent the young couple abroad with a small allowance, which enabled Le Brocquy to tour the European art museums and develop his painting. On his return two years later, his recent work was rejected by the Royal

⁷⁸ A Picasso exhibition in Paris is said to have inspired him to start drawing and painting. For an insight into this early work, see especially Shone (1996).

Hibernian Academy, now driven by a culturally nationalist agenda that promoted explicitly nationally-engaged work. This new-found conservatism shocked Le Brocquy, whose earlier work had always been prized by the institution. Le Brocquy responded to the increasingly militant spirit of cultural nationalism by co-founding the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (I.E.L.A.) with likeminded artists, who were mostly of similarly privileged Anglo-Irish backgrounds and trained in Europe.

If we look firstly to Le Brocquy we can see that the Anglo-Irish habitus of his youth, his foreign-sounding name and his critical position vis-à-vis the cultural nationalist developments in the field affected his subsequent articulation of his national identity. In fact, despite his later celebration as an explicitly Irish artist, Le Brocquy has consistently avoided discussions of nationality. Only once, in an interview that took place in 1981, did he breach this silence and it became apparent that his disinterest was not (only) a typical artist's disinterest in national identity but also related to his sense of his "inauthentic" Irishness in his native country.

As the son of an upper middle class Irish family, Le Brocquy had frequently been dubbed a "West-Brit" in his youth – a derogatory term describing a native Irishman or Irishwoman whose sympathies lie with England. He recounts:

Although I was born in Dublin in the year of the 1916 rebellion and brought up entirely in Ireland, I do not remember feeling particularly Irish. When I was a young man (with the derisory term *West-British* in mind) I occasionally referred to myself ironically as a "West-Belgian." No one seemed to me less manifestly Irish than that small family whose name I bore.

It was not until the age of 22, when he could reflect on Irish culture from mainland Europe that Le Brocquy was able to identify with his Irishness:

[O]ne day in my twenty-second year, I precipitously sailed from Dublin into a new life as a painter studying in the museums of London, Paris, Venice and Geneva ... Alone among the great artists of the past, in these strange related cities I became vividly aware for the first time of my Irish identity, to which I have remained attached all my life. (2000: 1119)

The belatedness of Le Brocquy's discovery that, having been born and raised in Ireland, he could identify himself as Irish is noteworthy. That he had to leave Ireland to

make this discovery is further proof of the extent to which the sense of being alienated from Irish culture was still ingrained in the *habitus* of the upper echelons of Irish society in which Le Brocquy and Bacon were reared. The interview took place almost two decades after Irish Independence, yet we can sense the negative repercussions of the Treaty of Independence in 1922, which perpetuated forms of nationalist ideology as dominant and hypothetically unifying forces. Its effect was to institutionalize certain racial and sectarian divisions and suppressing the role of class in the construction of Irish identity (Lloyd 1993: 18). The resulting narrow Irish definition of Irishness entrenched the status of Anglo-Irish people as “inauthentically” Irish, yet Irish.⁷⁹

When we think of Bacon’s identity we run into similar and different problematics – on the one hand, the artist’s sheer disinterest in any kind of national identity or representative role and on the other, the question of whether to define national identity by parentage or birthplace. Bacon avoided making statements regarding national identity as far as possible. As with Le Brocquy, this does not seem to have been artistic disinterestedness in such matters alone, however. Bacon’s self-identifications were complex. Like Le Brocquy, he grew up with little sense of the possibility that he might justifiably call himself Irish, despite having being born and reared in the country. This may have had much to do with the polarised climate of Civil War as his parents’ English identities. When questioned much later in life about being Irish, Bacon expressed his admiration for Irish people and for Irish literature, but added “I am not Irish, unfortunately.” This is one of a few passing statements that seem to confirm that Bacon did not feel he had the right to identify himself as Irish. This statement also reflects a certain ambivalence about his default identity, Britishness, an ambivalence made manifest on the few occasions when Bacon was explicitly asked to be representative of the British nation.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Lloyd identifies the historical juncture at which Irishness became defined in ethnocultural terms – namely by a bourgeois proto-Republican group, Young Ireland, which operated in the 19th century. They forged a sense of Irish identity “that would transcend historically determined cultural and political differences and form the reconciliatory centre of national unity” (1993: 45). This specific project of bourgeois nationalism in Ireland became the theoretical underpinnings of subsequent nationalist movements, which led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921.

⁸⁰ Although he readily accepted the chance to represent Britain in the Venice Biennale in 1954, Bacon refused to be personally representative. He did not even attend the exhibition, despite being in Italy at the time. He later turned down both of the national honours bestowed on him by the British nation; in 1960 the title of Commander of the British Empire (CBE) and in 1977 the title of Honourable Companion of

The complexities of individual self-identifications tend to have little purchase in public life, however. As Étienne Balibar observes, whether identities, “or, rather, identifications,” are active or passive, voluntary or imposed, individual or collective, their unstable nature does not make them any less concrete for practical purposes:

Their multiplicity, their hypothetical or fictive nature, do not make them any less real. But it is obvious that those identities are not well defined. And consequently, from a logical – or juridical or national – point of view, they are not defined at all – or, rather, they would not be if, despite the fundamental impossibility inherent in them, they were not subject to a forced definition. In other words, their practical definition requires a “reduction of complexity”, the application of a simplifying force or of what we might, paradoxically, term a supplement of simplicity. And this, naturally, also complicates many things. (Balibar 2002: 76)

Curators and art historians are also faced with the unenviable task that artists’ identities have to be defined for art-historical and canon-forming purposes. Criteria are indefinite, encompassing citizenship, place of birth, nationality of parents, among other things. Like the nation state itself however, the national underpinnings of curating (as proto-canon formation) is “a formidable reducer of complexity, though its very existence is a permanent cause of complexity” as I will demonstrate below (Balibar 2002: 76).

When considering an artist’s personal comments on “the burden of representation” it is necessary to ask whether taking up this burden will increase or decrease the symbolic capital of the work or artist’s specific identity in this particular situation, which will be potentially different in every instance (Mercer 1990). Cultural capital is partly embodied in the artist’s intuitive sense of the art world’s immanent logic. Having a “sense of the game”, success partly lies in knowing how to draw on one’s hybrid referents in a lucrative manner vis-à-vis the logic of the field. I will suggest here that in the case of artists from formerly colonized countries and/or from countries with low cultural capital in art-historical terms, artists’ typical ambivalence towards national identity should not only be taken at face value. Rather, we contend with a situation in which this disinterestedness may mask not only careerism, but a whole series of other cultural and psychological motivations that are often not conscious.

the British Empire (CH), traditionally awarded to those who have “rendered conspicuous service of national importance” (Holiday 1977).

These include inner alienation from one's culture, a sense of being inauthentic and a sense of shame that, as Werner Hamacher puts it, "one's culture is not culture enough" (1997: 284).

Canons vary from field to field and the solutions curators take depend on the cultural and symbolic capital associated with the available identifications. In the case of Irish literature, Anglo-Irish "inauthenticity" was quickly overlooked, with writers like Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats forming the backbone of the canon. The international validity of this claim largely rested on the accumulated cultural capital from a history of Irish literature, which lent it authority over claims over such writers for the British canon, if (like most of them) they lived for periods in Britain. This validity also lay more specifically with the role of Anglo-Irish writers in founding the Irish Revival at the end of the 19th century. In contrast, the revival movement attracted very few members of the art world – Hugh Lane and Orpen being notable exceptions whose role we have seen in chapter one. The later "national school" of painting, which was led by Orpen's former student Seán Keating in the 1930s and 40s, was a downright failure. The artists in question did not produce work of any great artistic merit and the national school failed to stimulate Irish people's identification with art as a home-grown cultural phenomenon. When art institutions which had been run by these culturally nationalist artists were later taken over by Le Brocquy's Modernist peers, they partly defined their artistic merit on the basis of a disassociation with the national, a bias which remains largely in place today.⁸¹

Even having "discovered" his Irish identity, Le Brocquy remained highly insecure about the possibility of being both an Irish and a "universal" artist. Coupled with his Anglo-Irish ambivalence, this meant Le Brocquy would sustain largely negative associations with the notion of being an Irish artist, even decades after the culturally nationalist 1930s and '40s. In the same interview, which took place in 1981, Le Brocquy went on to elaborate his understandings of being an Irish artist in a manner

⁸¹ Cyril Barrett later commented that "even if at first the Irish modernists did not appeal to the masses, they at least earned international recognition" (2002). Barrett's view reflects a subsequent shift in critical focus from the lost opportunity of Irish art engaging Irish culture with Modernism, to the production of individual artists like Le Brocquy, who remained unable to resolve the task of acknowledging readings of their works specific to the Irish context and having relevance for international discourse.

that shows the legacy of this period, despite his interim success as “Ireland’s greatest living artist”:

Yet within this vital inner discovery [of my Irish identity] lay the peril of insularity. Art begets art, however, and my imagination was full of the paintings of Rembrandt, of Manet, of the great Spaniards – each simultaneously himself, his race and *universal*. From the very beginning, their transcendent universality helped to protect this incipient painter from self-conscious nationalism, inducing picturesque images, perhaps, of Irish country folk dressed in the clothes of a preceding generation, or of thatched cottages arranged like dominoes under convenient hills; images no more respectable in themselves than the sterile Nazi *Kultur*, or the ordained Stalinist aesthetic of “social reality” with its invariably happy peasants. (Le Brocquy 2000: 119)

The deep-rooted nature of this feeling can partly be explained by the centrality of *A Family* to debates between those who rejected the display of Modernist works in Irish institutions on nationalist grounds and those who embraced them, following the controversial refusal of its donation for the permanent collection of the Dublin Municipal Gallery.⁸² One commentator’s description of *A Family* as “an unwholesome and satanic distortion of natural beauty” reflects the extent to which a Modernist style was seen to oppose Catholic decency, perceived as central to the newly-founded Irish nation (Verdad qtd. in Bhreathnach Lynch 2007). Yet, given Le Brocquy’s interim thirty years of success in Ireland, there are surely other factors at play here. In the first chapter we have seen how, even following a successful peace process, Irish art workers are wary to confront the hegemonic framing of Irish artists as British, for fear of being

⁸² *A Family* became the centrepiece of a solo exhibition at the Waddington Galleries, Dublin in December 1951, following its exhibition at the Gimpel Fils gallery in June of that year. A group of art enthusiasts proposed to purchase the work as an anonymous donation for the permanent collection of the Dublin Municipal Gallery. The corporation officials approved the offer, but the artists on the Art Advisory Committee voted against acceptance. No reasons for the rejection were recorded. The rejection of the work created a scandal, which turned into a national debate about art values in the national press. Divided opinions reflected two poles of opinion in the Irish art world at that time – those representing a group of independent artists, associated with the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, who embraced European Modernism, and the National School artists that looked to Irish art as a medium of expression for the new nation (mainly in the form of academic realist works depicting overtly Irish personages and scenes). This School was the legacy of the young painters of the immediate post-Independence period (many, like Seán Keating, former students of Orpen), who saw themselves as “restoring, rather than creating for the first time, a suppressed Gaelic culture” (Benson 1992: 19). Aside from its stylistic aspects, the visible plight of the family and lack of spiritual relief in *A Family* seemed to embody a protest against the victory of the Catholic Church in the recent scandal that had arisen over the Minister of Health’s proposal of free medical care for pregnant women and their children, which the church had felt to encroach upon their role as caretakers of the nation’s wellbeing.

perceived as nationalist, as well as due to the challenge of cultural authority implied in such an encounter. It appears to me that Le Brocquy's long-term association of the national referent with explicit nationalism is a symptom of the same problematic. Let me look now at how this attitude affected Le Brocquy's early career trajectory, before comparing it to Bacon's.

Bacon and Le Brocquy: Career Trajectories

In an essay focusing on the critical reception of *A Family*, Irish art historian Róisín Kennedy recounts that in the initial two years of Le Brocquy's time in London, his Irishness was considered an important aspect of his painting. In his first Gimpel Fils exhibition catalogue in 1947, Denys Sutton stated that Le Brocquy "has been stirred by the passion and the originality of his native Ireland" and that "his reward is to keep alive the legends, the myths and the mysteries that tend to grow cold and become forgotten when their explanation is too constantly sought" (qtd. in Kennedy 2005: 477). Le Brocquy was seen as an inheritor of the legacy of Yeats' revitalisation of Irish myth and legend. His *Tinker* series, portraying indigenous Irish gypsies, was likened to J.M. Synge's literary engagement with travellers in *The Tinkers Wedding* (1904). Contemporary British critics thus tended to refer not to contemporary Ireland's social and cultural predicament, the subject matter of the work, but rather invoked literary referents (Yeats, Synge), drawing on the high cultural capital associated with Irish literature and emphasizing Le Brocquy's relative exoticness at a time of narrow scope in the British art world.⁸³

Le Brocquy's representation of Irish identity was conflated with his artistic representation, with the result that there were no further analyses of his engagement with art-historical or contemporary artistic developments. No stylistic references to Picasso were made, despite his visible influence on Le Brocquy's oeuvre. This oversight is made more spurious by the centrality to art discourse in London that same year of an exhibition of Picasso and Matisse at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Le Brocquy's work was stylistically close to that of British peers like John Minton, who had created a

⁸³ Irish critics of the time made no such literary allusions. Writing in *The Horizon* in 1946, Earnán O' Malley discusses Le Brocquy's work in mostly formal stylistic terms, combined with some contextual explanations about works like the *Tinker* series and comments on the artist's non-sentimental attachment to the Irish landscape. He writes of the early influence of Manet, Velasquez, Goya, Degas, Whistler and the "Oriental line," and the mature Le Brocquy's "learned economy of means" (1946: 32).

kind of “bleak urban Romanticism” by drawing on Picasso, as well as to Jankel Adler, a London-based Polish artist, and to Robert Colquhoun, with whom he shared a contemporary engagement with cubism (Harrison 2002: 31).⁸⁴ Le Brocquy was to make friends with Adler shortly after his arrival in London and to be influenced by him in a similar manner to Colquhoun, Mac Bride and Vaughan. Yet Le Brocquy’s Irish identity was exoticised at the cost of relationship with these artistic peers, which detracted from his being part of a particular artistic generation. Moreover, it undermined his relationship to the grand narratives of art history as such, which he actively drew on in his paintings.

This kind of isolation almost inevitably limits the success of the artist in question because his or her long-term place in history is partly assured in relation to art historical developments, rather than the quality of the work alone. We can recall Bourdieu’s observation that adequate reception of art works is based on differential and diacritical perception owing its formal properties and its value to the structure of the field and thus to its history (2008: 266). If Le Brocquy’s artistic quality was not framed in terms of deviations from other works, whether contemporary (his peers) or past (the great artists whose work actively informed paintings like *A Family*), he was unlikely to be able to further expand his success.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Katherine Giuffe points out that in fact the chain of events that occurs within any individual career is more appropriately viewed as a web of effects that is continuously being reordered through time, with art histories been drawn on to legitimate the contemporary and current successes (1999). Cultural capital is thus retroactively produced for nations through the citational practices of contemporary artists. Yet, as Bourdieu forewarns, this art history is written in formal terms only, with reference to individual artists and artistic movements and little or no space for acknowledgement of their associated social and cultural histories. Lacking a canon of recognized great Irish art, this canon is initially supplanted in Le Brocquy’s case by Irish literature. His relative exoticism during the early post-war period permits such an

⁸⁴ Le Brocquy did not fall neatly under the most identifiable critical categories of the period – Neo-Romanticism and Social Realism – but, from my perspective, he seemed to have been engaged with the basic artistic concerns of both. At a later period in which Le Brocquy was framed as Irish, the critic Robert Melville refers to this work of this period as “a Celtic version of cubism” (1961: unpag.). By this time Colquhoun, who was Scottish, had already lost favour in London circles and justification for this included reference to a latent “neo-Celticism” (Harrison 2002: 33).

exception. Yet, it is clear that if Le Brocquy was to increase his success, it had to be demonstrated that his work had the potential for art-historical significance. This necessitated a turn to the British canon and in turn the changing of Le Brocquy's identity to British.

Within two years of Le Brocquy's move to London, critics were talking about his "meteoric" rise of reputation there, culminating in the lauding reception of his so-called Grey paintings in a solo exhibition at Gimpel Fils in 1951 (Kennedy 2005: 477). Le Brocquy was now referred to almost exclusively as an English or British artist by leading critics of the day such as John Berger.⁸⁵ Moreover, this had an immediate effect on what would be seen within the work. Critical reception also focused almost entirely on readings of the work that reflected the British post-war situation, which were taken to have a more universal significance than former Irish referents. That which is named as "universal" is in fact "the parochial property of the dominant culture" (Butler 2000: 15). As Judith Butler argues, this territorial claim is inseparable from the ideology of imperial expansion (15). The curators and critics in question are of course only following the demands of their profession; underplaying less widely appealing aspects of an artist's work or identity and emphasizing aspects that add prestige. Career success followed for Le Brocquy in the form of inclusion in *40 Years of Modern Art* at the I.C.A., in *Twelve British Painters*, an internationally touring exhibition by the British Council as well as in group exhibitions at the Arts Council, the Leicester Galleries and the Tate.

In terms of visual content, the sudden silence regarding Le Brocquy's Irish nationality might be said to have come about because his "grey" paintings marked a transition from recognisably Irish subject matter, seen in the *Tinker* series, to more "universal" subject matter in images such as *A Family*. Yet Le Brocquy's paintings with Irish subject matter had always been "universal" in their significance. His tinker series was an engagement with an Irish counterpoint to the dispossessed people of Europe and by extension, a reflection on the conditions of human life on the fringes of any

⁸⁵ Kennedy refers to how, in a 1951 article entitled "Two British Painters", John Berger described Le Brocquy as "one of the most interesting British painters of his generation" (2005: 477). Elsewhere Berger writes: "[Le Brocquy's] decorative tapestry of a goat is the best I have seen produced by an English artist." www.anne-madden.com. Accessed January 2007.

society.⁸⁶ When Charles Gimpel first saw *Condemned Man* (1945) (Fig. 2.2), a painting dealing with the situation in Irish prisons, the painting's value as a comment on suffering in a more global sense was evident to him. John Russell likewise saw "an echo of the existential interior" in the work, "the bare cell in which the patterns of the future of the world were decided during World War II and its aftermath" (qtd. in Madden and Le Brocquy 1994: 115). Yet, once "universal" British readings had been made, Irish referents were inevitably set aside, as if the two could not coexist.



Fig. 2.2 Louis Le Brocquy, *Condemned Man*, 1945, Private Collection

Herbert Read's later reflection on Le Brocquy's artistic development in *A Letter to a Young Painter* (1962) also implied that his Irishness had to be eliminated if his work was to "become" universal:

This painter from Joyce's Dublin did seem when I first met him in 1944 to have some qualities of Celtic origin. His images might have been found in a

⁸⁶ The artist had painted a painting of refugees in Belfast in 1941 just before embarking on the series, which suggests that he made this link. In fact the tinkers are historically dispossessed people of Ireland, said to have taken to a nomadic life after Oliver Cromwell cleared the lands in the 17th century through military force as part of a campaign to bring Ireland under English Rule.

crock of gold, and both Yeats the poet and his brother the painter might have been among his ancestors. But since then le Brocquy's art has become emancipated from provincial myth and is now both independent and universal ... (qtd. in Madden and Le Brocquy 1994: 80)

Le Brocquy does not appear to have protested against the aforementioned reframings of his national identity as British or English, and with it, the reframing of important aspects of his work. His silence is conceivably a strategy of advancement, but one which is informed by his already ambivalent relationship to his national identity. Yet, far from being a personal response alone, Mary J. Hickman's research on Irish emigrants in Britain suggests that the overall assimilation of Irish in Britain has been overtly based on strategies of denationalisation as much as an inevitable process of integration (1995).⁸⁷

Had Bacon not felt the choice to be Irish in Ireland, he clearly would not have felt it in London. Bacon was forced to start his life from scratch with little or no financial support, making the most of his social charms and good breeding, as well as some shop-lifting and whatever else it took to get by. He was fortunate in meeting and forming a romantic relationship with Eric Hall, who launched Bacon socially and supported him financially. This enabled Bacon to maintain a studio and exhibit his work there for the first time, alongside his furniture and interior designs (Shone 1996). The near-collapse of the London art market in the early 1930s would have exacerbated Bacon's initial search for critical favour, as it brought a conservative backlash against British Modernist painting (Stephenson 1991). Some works were accepted for two group exhibitions at the Mayor Gallery, London in 1933, thanks to Hall. Bacon self-organised his first solo exhibition in a space he temporarily turned into a gallery, but the exhibition failed to attract critical response.⁸⁸ Bacon's struggle for recognition remained unbroken through the rest of the decade. Even his inclusion in a group show entitled "Young British painters" at the Thomas Agnew and Sons gallery in 1937 met with "almost uniformly hostile" reviews (Kingzett 1992). The 1940s were kinder to Bacon. He was included in a group exhibition at Agnews, the Redfern Gallery and the Lefevre

⁸⁷ The Fifties marked a period of especially intense anti-Irish sentiment in Britain because Irish emigration was so widespread. The stigma of being Irish was everywhere visible in the signs that hung in the windows of available accommodation. They read: "NO CATS, NO DOGS, NO CHILDREN, NO IRISH, NO BLACKS" (Dunne 2003: 11).

⁸⁸ It took place at Sunderland House, which he renamed Transition Gallery for the occasion. See Kingzett (1992) for an analysis of the exhibition and its reception.

gallery and had his first one-man show at the Hanover gallery in 1949. Most importantly, Alfred H. Barr had purchased one of his works for the Museum of Modern Art in 1948.

Despite this difficult and slow start, Le Brocquy and Bacon would also have had a comparable standing in the British art world by the time they met in 1951. When it came to selecting the representatives of Britain for the 1954 Venice Biennale, they would have been two of a relatively small pool of “British” artists likely to have been considered. In the end Bacon was singled out, along with another figurative painter, Lucian Freud, and the more senior Ben Nicholson. Bacon’s co-representation of Britain in the Venice Biennale of 1954 was the first opportunity for a truly international audience to see his work and the opening of doors to his subsequent international fame (Peppiatt 2008: 183). This framing of Bacon as British in the eyes of the international art world closed down any question that might have remained regarding his national identity and Bacon’s reputation in the British canon was secured.⁸⁹

In his selection for the subsequent Venice Biennale of 1956, the Irish commissioner and critic James White noted that “the English ... have already presented [F.E.] Mc William and Francis Bacon, two Irish artists ...” (Kennedy 2005: 482).⁹⁰ He suggested that it would be wise to establish Le Brocquy as Irish as “the English are eager to claim Le Brocquy for themselves.” Following this observation, Louis le Brocquy was asked to represent Ireland in 1956 along with Hilary Heron, a prominent Irish sculptor. Through this curatorial framing, Le Brocquy thus “became Irish again.” The Biennale was an important opportunity for Le Brocquy, who was established in the English and Irish art worlds, but lacked a wider international reputation. The international attention brought by his subsequent receipt of a *Premio Aquisitato* award further ensured that Le Brocquy would be recognised internationally as Irish regardless of the prior framing as English in the London art world.

In his analysis of the complex relationship between artists’ professional careers and the market value of their work, Olav Velthuis highlights how dependent the

⁸⁹ The only exception to Bacon’s British framing came when he temporarily lost his cultural capital through being put up for a drugs charge in 1971. The headlines of the tabloid newspapers read “Irish Artist Up for Drugs Charge” (recounted in conversation with the author by John Minihan, photographer and friend of Bacon).

⁹⁰ F.E. McWilliam had represented Britain at the Saõ Paolo Biennial in 1952.

subsequent value of an artist's work is on this initial moment of widespread critical attention:

Whereas at the beginning of an artist's career, chance and luck are crucial in the establishment of cultural value, succeeding acts of valuation will depend on the previous ones. Thus, institutional recognition emerges in gradual, social, and path-dependent process. (Velthuis 2005: 160)

This means that, following a prestigious showing such as the Venice Biennale, it is difficult to reframe the artist's work or identity at a more fundamental level, given that their value (in artistic and market terms) has been built upon this foundation. The close relationship between the market and the art world means that any unlikely subsequent reframing will always take place in the direction of accumulation of higher cultural capital and prestige. Hence, we have seen in the last chapter that Orpen's identity may be reconfigured posthumously as British if this significantly increases his standing in art historical and market terms.

Being framed as an English artist afforded Bacon a higher level of prestige in Britain than being framed as Irish. An example of the relative exchange rate of the cultural and symbolic capital of Bacon's Irishness and Englishness can be brought home through the reading of a single paragraph in Christophe Domino's *Francis Bacon: Taking Reality by Surprise* (1997):

[Bacon] spent the first sixteen years of his life [in Ireland], but while he emphasised its impact on him he was never precise, nor particularly forthcoming. He may have identified with a certain "Irish mentality", manifested in a taste for drinking and merry-making, to the point of excess, in combination with a fundamentally ironic and melancholy turn of mind. But Irish culture was not the culture of Francis Bacon, the son of a horse trainer and a major in the British army. (14)

The low cultural capital of Irishness emerges as Domino inadvertently outlines the less favourable aspects of Bacon's character – alcoholism and depressive tendencies – characteristic of stereotypes of Irishness in British culture. Domino's implicit justification of Bacon's Britishness stems not from the nationality of his parents, but from the status of their activities – high military rank and horse breeding – and hence from their class fraction. Britishness is associated with prestige and has high cultural and symbolic capital. On a less immediate level, the juxtaposition of Irishness and

Britishness here is inseparable from the perceived superiority of the British colonial class over the Irish colonised. This reminds us of the establishment of the rate of exchange of national cultural capitals in the period of colonial expansion.

Most importantly, the centrality of the British art world in the production of the hegemonic Story of Art meant that national success in Britain would almost seamlessly translate into international success.⁹¹ When the Tate Gallery hosted Bacon's second retrospective in 1985, the museum's director, Alan Bowness, described Bacon as "Surely the greatest living painter." Lord Gowrie, England's Minister for the Arts, called Bacon "The greatest painter in the world and the best this country has produced since Turner" (qtd. in Hughes 1985). What is apparent in these passing comments is the British art world's assumed authority, not only in relation to British art, but to art in the whole world. Being the greatest British artist means being able to transcend national boundaries. Britain assumes the authority to set the criteria for international evaluation.

Canons first arose in the 19th century in the context of nascent nationalisms in Europe and they continue to reinforce historic Eurocentric cultural hierarchies to this day. Writing about literary canons, which arose in the same period, Rey Chow refers to how powerful cultural producing countries such as Britain and France were able to refer to their novels as *the* novel, whereas "it is simply inconceivable for students of say, modern Japanese, Chinese, Cuban or Algerian fiction to call their novels *the* novel without the national or ethnic label" (2004: 295). In a comparable manner to the British novel being *the* novel (a standard against which novels by less dominant countries can and will be judged), Bacon can simply be a "Great Artist" (a standard against which artists by less dominant countries can and will be judged). In contrast, being "Ireland's greatest living artist" does not give Le Brocquy any claim to international status. He must always be given the national or ethnic label. Le Brocquy can only ever be a "great Irish artist" – with the implication of the qualitative narrowness of that national framing.

Revisiting the Canon: Le Brocquy

To date it has typically been the case that Irish artists are present in the British canon as British and in the Irish canon as Irish. We have seen this problematic in chapter one in

⁹¹ To this day Great Britain remains central to world art history production. It contains over one third of European university art history departments and over 10% of those in the world, a position only rivalled by the United States (Elkins 2007: 58-9).

relation to Orpen. Because Le Brocquy was so overtly framed as Irish, through the Venice Biennale and through his later reputation as “Ireland’s greatest living artist”, this made such contradictory framing untenable. This had significant repercussions for the British reception of his work. Within a decade of his Venice Biennale representation, Le Brocquy fell out of favour in the British art world. His only exhibitions in London in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s were at Gimpel Fils or in Irish-themed group exhibitions at Pym’s gallery, which specialises in Irish art, with the exception of inclusion in one group exhibition at the Tate entitled *Portrait of the Artist* (1989).

Two factors might have contributed to this fall from favour. Firstly, from 1965 Le Brocquy engaged in a new series of work, which differed somewhat stylistically from the work for which he was best known in the 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, the more dramatic stylistic shifts within his work from the Tinker period (c. 1945-48) and the Grey period (c. 1951-1954) to the white “Presences” of the mid 1950s-’60s had posed no problem in this respect. Secondly, Le Brocquy moved to France in 1958. Yet he continued to be represented in London by Gimpel Fils, which facilitated easy mediation for curatorial purposes. Furthermore, place of residence seemed to have had no effect on his international career. During these thirty years of relative invisibility in Britain, Le Brocquy’s work was shown in museums, galleries, biennials and triennials throughout Western Europe as well as in Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Croatia, South Africa, India, China, Korea, Japan and the U.S.

Even overlooking his curatorial disfavour in Britain following the mid 1960s, Le Brocquy’s near-invisibility in contemporary art-historical and curatorial representations of the British art world from the post-war to the late 1950s is more difficult to explain.⁹² This becomes dramatic when we consider the peers with whom he had shared equal success – including Bacon, Lucien Freud and Graham Sutherland – or when we put him in the company of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Lynn Chadwick, his fellow artists represented by Gimpel Fils, then one of the most important galleries in London. This absence would be understandable in the case of a less successful artist, whose presence was less visible or largely undocumented. Yet anybody researching the period could have not failed to come across Le Brocquy’s inclusion in exhibitions at prestigious London venues like Leicester Gallery, the Whitechapel, the Tate Gallery or

⁹² While there have been occasional inclusions of Le Brocquy’s work in relation to this period in survey exhibitions and publications they are few and far between (Nahum and Redford: 1989; Windsor: 1998).

in major survey publications of modern British and international art from the 1950s. Herbert Read alone presented illustrated accounts of Le Brocquy's work in *Contemporary British Art* (1951), *Art since 1945* (1958) and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (1959).⁹³

In terms of curating, perhaps the most noteworthy exclusion was from an exhibition that focused specifically on figurative painters working in London in the 1950s. Entitled *Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties*, this show was curated by Martin Harrison with Tomoko Sato and held at the Barbican Centre in 2002. A survey show presenting precisely Le Brocquy's generation of artists which came to prominence after 1945, it included all of the peers with whom he exhibited in London. It even had a special section focusing on *Sixty Paintings for 1961*, an exhibition held at the 1951 Festival of Britain visited by over eight million, in which he was included. Yet Le Brocquy's work was nowhere to be seen. Having taught at the Royal College of Art, Le Brocquy's is mentioned once in the catalogue among artists teaching in a post-war initiative to raise the standards of industrial design (2002: 102). Yet he apparently provoked no further interest for the curators.

In contrast, Le Brocquy has enjoyed almost a cult status in Ireland. His being championed as the "greatest Irish artist" was secured in 1975 when he started to produce a series of head images, which were mostly based on Irish writers. Rather than being portraits in the sense of one representative image of the sitter, the series involved painting up to a few hundred images of any one individual, based on memory and with the aid of photos and media images. This obsessive repetition dealt with the question of representation as such – the ability or inability to capture that which lies beyond appearance.⁹⁴ The subject matter of the *Portrait Heads* series was mostly Irish writers,

⁹³ There were illustrated discussions of his work in John Russell's definitive *From Sickert to 1948* (1948), E.M. Languy's *Cinquante Ans d'Art Moderne* (1958), published in French, German and English, and Werner Haftmann's *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (1965). Furthermore, Le Brocquy taught a course on drawing for textile design at the Royal College of Art. He was a member of the London Group from 1955. He was included in the aforementioned *Sixty Paintings for 1951* held at the 1951 Festival of Britain at the South Bank Centre. His exhibitions were reviewed in major newspapers like *The Observer* and *The Times*. His borderline celebrity status is perhaps most visible in extras like the *House and Garden's* feature on his studio in their July 1953 edition and *Vogue* magazine's presentation of Le Brocquy in their "People are talking about..." section in March 1957, reserved for the most avant-garde and famous.

⁹⁴ In many ways this series extended the interests of an earlier series entitled *Presences*, which attempted to capture that which lay beyond the outer appearance or the body, which contemporary critics had associated with existentialism, *art autre* and, in the case of Herbert Read, to Kleinian psychology (Coulter: 2008). Now, however, Le Brocquy's focus lay on the head as a container of consciousness. An interim series entitled *Ancestral Heads* had focused more literally on this notion, following Le Brocquy seeing a

who Le Brocquy considered fascinating subjects for the study of human consciousness visible in the face. Significantly, this subject matter brought about a return of the tendency to framing Le Brocquy's work in terms of Irish literature, now supported by the artist himself (Le Brocquy 2006). Anna Brzyski highlights artists' own active engagement in the production of their own significance, which goes beyond creating "great" works (2007: 256-7). I wonder how we might perceive this return to literary sources of validation in relation to the artist's reference to the limitations of Irish art in the aforementioned interview. Was Le Brocquy cashing in on his Irishness consciously or subconsciously by drawing on the Irish public's identification with literature rather than art? Was he cashing in on the high cultural capital of Irish literature abroad, which had helped to launch his early career in London? For whatever reason, Le Brocquy was to continue this series for thirty years.

The usual relationship between value, nations and the (art) market is only likely to be significantly adjusted at moments of crisis. Le Brocquy's invitation to London in the postwar period and his initial embrace there as an Irish artist took place at one such moment. In the early 2000s, another shift in the established power balance arose in the form of the massive growth of the Irish art market at a time when the British art market was relatively weak. This was directly connected to the Irish Celtic Tiger economy with a GNP increase of up to 10% per annum in the five years leading up to the millennium. By 2000 prices of canonical 20th-century Irish works were now fetching up to ten times what they had been before the "Economic Miracle" (McBride 2007). In an Irish Sale held at Sotheby's in May 2000, Le Brocquy's *Tinker Woman with Newspaper* (1947-48) set a world auction record for an Irish living artist with a price tag of £1.15 million sterling.

In his study on the symbolic meaning of the process of art, Olav Velthuis observes that, rather than being only an economic act, pricing tends to also be a signifying act, which establishes status hierarchies among artists (2007: 158, 168). The increase in market value had thus potentially significant repercussions for the wider critical reception of Le Brocquy's work, and by extension, Irish art in general. One year after his London auction success, Le Brocquy was included in an exhibition at the Tate Modern entitled *Nude/Body/Action* (2001) – his first Tate appearance in over forty

Polynesian decorated skull at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and his later research on Celtic notions of the head. See *Louis le Brocquy and the Celtic Head Image* (1981).

years, with only one exception. This despite having been included in seven group exhibitions there in the 1950s and 1960s and the Tate holding significant works by Le Brocquy in its collection.⁹⁵

Through the sale of *Tinker Woman with Newspaper* Le Brocquy became the first living Irish artist to break the £1 million barrier. The record-breaking sale was not to be an isolated event. Two years later, Mark Adams of the London art dealership Agnew's brokered Irish business man Lochlann Quinn's purchase of Le Brocquy's *A Family* for £1.7 million, setting a further record for his work. In the subsequent years preparations were underway for a widespread celebration of Le Brocquy's 90th birthday with ten solo exhibitions in Ireland, France and Britain.⁹⁶ Tate Britain agreed to co-celebrate with a presentation of a selection of his paintings.

Le Brocquy's own artistic response to the pending opportunity for an international reassessment of his work was to return to a direct visual engagement with master works by the Dutch, French and Spanish painters he once described as being "simultaneously himself, his race and *universal*." The exhibition *Homage to My Masters* which was held at Gimpel Fils parallel to a display at Tate Britain marked this turning point. It included painterly negotiations with masterpieces by Rembrandt, Velazquez, Goya, Manet and Cézanne. Looking at works like *Odalisque I. Looking at Manet. Olympia* (2005) (Fig. 2.3), I wonder if, at this moment of beckoning global fame, Le Brocquy still felt the need to borrow a Modernist European discourse rather than embrace the Irish cultural references that have been central to his work in recent decades.⁹⁷ Is this subconsciously a solution to the artist's sense of an unresolved relationship between Irish and universal art?

⁹⁵ Tate Modern purchased *Tinkers Resting* in 1958, *Woman* in 1959 and *Study towards an Image of James Joyce* in 1978. Le Brocquy had previously been included in *The Private Collector* (1950), *Figures in their Setting* (1954), *The Seasons: An Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by the Contemporary Art Society* (1956), *The Religious Theme* (1958), *Recent Acquisitions* (1959), *British Painting in the Sixties* (1963), *Portrait of the Artist* (1960) and *Portrait of the Artist* (1989).

⁹⁶ The Le Brocquy presentation took place at Tate Britain from 6-22 November 2006. The exhibition was organised with the assistance of the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In the same year, ten one-person exhibitions and numerous other events celebrating Le Brocquy's 90th birthday were organized in France, England and Ireland. Venues included Gimpel Fils, London; Tate, London; National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; Galerie Jeanne-Bucher, Paris; Hunt Museum, Limerick; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin; Crawford City Gallery, Cork and Taylor Galleries, Dublin.

⁹⁷ This included the *Ancestral Heads* series (c. 1964-1975), the *Portrait Heads* series (c. 1964-1975), the *Procession* series (1984-1992) and the *Irish Landscape* series (1987-1994), as well as his illustrations for Thomas Kinsella's book revisiting the ancient Irish tale *The Táin*, which is widely held to be among his most beautiful series of graphic works.



Fig. 2.3 Louis le Brocquy, *Odalisque I. Looking at Manet. Olympia*, 2005

If so, this would not be an individual peculiarity on Le Brocquy's part or a mere symptom of his generation. Kennedy, an art historian in her thirties, proposes in the last line of her article on the reception of *A Family* that her aim has been to expose how "the framing of a work of art within national boundaries imposes considerable limitations on the ways in which it is read both art historically and critically" (2005: 486). Yet, her critique is not a general one. Her lack of comment on the British framing of Le Brocquy gives an implicit consent. It is a better alternative to Irish framing, given that "this positioning of Irish art within a peculiar native context meant that universal rules of criticism were not applied to the work of Irish artists" (486). Kennedy rightly perceives the damaging effects of Irish national framing on Le Brocquy's artistic reception and reputation. Yet she responds to the symptoms rather than the causes. Kennedy's aversion to the Irish national referent stops a necessary interrogation of its position. The possibility of renegotiating Irish art's position within international art canons is not even on the horizon.

I would propose that the success of an individual artist could never fully replace such an interrogation, which must take place on the symbolic level if it is to matter in a sustained way. Looked at in economic terms alone, the relative standing of the nation is embroiled in the construction of value. Velthuis explains:

Meanings of prices are always contextual; because they are interpreted differently in different circuits, these meanings are invariably equivocal ... [P]rice signals do not just concern the level of individual artists, but also entire artistic movements or the position of countries in the international art world. (2005: 165-168)

The Sotheby's press release celebrating Le Brocquy's auction achievement had announced:

In these days the £1 million barrier is increasingly seen as the surest test of an artist's international importance and it is a very rare event for a living painter to break it. Le Brocquy's achievement marks him out as one of the painters, like Freud and Hockney, who will come to symbolise this age.⁹⁸

In keeping with Velthuis's observations, the relationship between prices and reputation is more complex than Sotheby's would have us believe, however. The press release reflects market-driven enthusiasm rather than the gate keeping ethos of the art world. This becomes evident if we look at the subsequent critical reception of Le Brocquy's work.

Sue Hubbard's review of *Homage to his Masters* for *The Independent* forewarned that neither Le Brocquy's temporary appearance in the Tate or his market success would necessarily translate into the privilege to overcome national boundaries. While Hubbard offers a generous response to Le Brocquy's latest work, her opening and closing lines bracket her predominantly positive view within the stigma of national limitations:

Louis le Brocquy, Ireland's most celebrated living artist, is 90. Born in 1916, he became a dominant force in the evolution of 20th century Irish art, which, compared to what was happening in the rest of Europe and the US – and the importance of Irish writing at the time – was something of a backwater. Le Brocquy now fetches high prices, but his work has never been critically acclaimed. In his early career, he produced fine paintings in a loosely Cubist vein, yet there has always been a parochialism to his work. (2006)

Hubbard's description of Le Brocquy as "a dominant force in the evolution of 20th century Irish art" is cancelled out by her reference to Ireland as a relative backwater. In

⁹⁸ Sotheby's auction press release, *Modern Times*, April 2000. Republished on www.anne-madden.com. Accessed December 2006.

the final lines, Hubbard proceeds to identify a certain parochialism in Le Brocquy's work, yet she finds it unnecessary to provide evidence or explanation.

In fact, even if Le Brocquy was added to the British canon as an Irish artist, this would not necessarily affect the cultural hierarchies established between Irishness and Englishness that are inscribed in the canonical grid. Le Brocquy's name could be added to those of Ben Nicholson, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth as an "and" – a figure whose relative outsider status authorises the inner circle status of the others and shows the cultural influence of Britain over Ireland's greatest artist. Rey Chow has argued in the literary context that, in the comparative process that accompanies the canon, "the rationale for comparing hinges on the conjunction *and*; the *and* moreover ... signals a form of supplementation *that authorizes the first term*" (2004: 294). "Whether or not it is literally visible, the grid remains stable; transformations are a matter of addition and accumulation" (294). Canons thus remain "relatively fossilized" (Cutting 2007: 90).

I wonder whether the (temporary) reclamation of Le Brocquy in the narrative of British modern art was partly a reaction to the potential framing of Bacon as Irish, given the recent donation of his studio to the Dublin Municipal Gallery and the museum's aim to become a centre of international research on Bacon. Had Le Brocquy not been reclaimed in Britain, his overt Irishness might lend weight to the notion of the Irishness of his peer, Francis Bacon. Despite the scale of acquisitions the two "homecomings" that took place in 2001 afforded, the receiving institutions and the Irish art world at large were remarkably silent in the face of the far-reaching questions to which the acquisitions gave rise.⁹⁹ Irish critic and curator Mick Wilson questioned the logic of the studio relocation (2000). Was it to be a shrine to the fetish of the artist figure? What was the value of such an unnatural relocation of property from one country to another? Questions arose in the British press about the relative value of the studio's contents. It seemed that the Tate had been offered the studio but declined the donation due to its

⁹⁹ Kennedy's essay was an isolated critical reflection on the so-called return of Le Brocquy's *A Family* to Ireland. In the catalogue accompanying *Francis Bacon in Dublin* (2000), an exhibition of Bacon's works to celebrate the studio opening, the issue of national identity was also passed over with a few passing references. The director of Hugh Lane Gallery, Barbara Dawson, stated that "The issue of Francis Bacon's Irishness is the subject of much discussion and controversy," but went no further than to comment that "[u]ndoubtedly, the artist's childhood in Ireland was a crucial factor in forming his sensibility" and henceforth described that childhood. I raised the question briefly in an essay on this wider problematic within Irish art (Cotter 2005).

lack of particular aesthetic interest, or due to budgetary considerations, depending on the critic's interpretation of the occasion. Yet no-one publicly addressed the question of national identity. It seemed to be a taboo subject for market and political reasons alike.

At the launch of *Francis Bacon's Studio* (2005), a book celebrating the studio acquisition, writer Conor Cruise O'Brien introduced Bacon as "one of the horsing people, a people divided by the Irish sea," a covert Anglo-Irish referent designed to foreclose issues regarding national identity. Subsequently, the speaker representing Merrell publishers opened his speech with the observation that "Bacon was, above all, an *international* artist." Both statements act as a reminder that, although nothing would be said, Bacon's national identity was the elephant in the room. Yet, I would suggest that also in Bacon's case, the question of nationality is not merely a (political) detail but a subject which might potentially warrant rereadings of his oeuvre.

Revisiting the Canon: Bacon

We have seen that one of the reasons why artists become canonical is that it is recognized that their work resonates with the collective experience or zeitgeist of a particular era. The analogies drawn between the angst in Bacon's early work and the wider mood of post-war despair in Britain were central to considering Bacon as representative of a wider human experience, a representativeness that secured his early career and upon which his subsequent career was built. The association with World War II made Bacon a "national" painter in a similar way that Picasso became revered as Spanish through his painting of *Guernica* (1937). This was especially important with Bacon because his work was not seen to draw on any British artists of the past or even to have had a visible influence on subsequent artistic generations. As John Russell put it, "We don't feel, as we do with other English painters, that an English forebear is lurking somewhere behind his shoulder; we feel rather, that he is completely alone ..." (1964: 190). Being an autodidact, he also lacked association with a particular educational institution, which might have more securely placed him in the British school.

Yet, the link to the war was tenuous. Firstly, because the crucifixion series on which the association was based had been started in the 1930s, long before World War Two started. Secondly, as Bacon critic and contemporary John Russell

recalls, neither the general public nor members of the British art world could in fact identify with *Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) when it was shown in 1945, with the exception of the very few individuals who later secured Bacon's fame:

The mysterious forms were regarded as freaks; monsters irrelevant to the concerns of the day, and the product of an imagination so eccentric as not to count in any permanent way. (1964: 9)

This anecdote points to the ways in which Bacon's work has always teetered on the edge of acceptance. It points to the fragility of value and suggests the central role played by curators and critics in the maintenance of that value.

As we might expect, Bacon's Britishness had not been of any concern before he became internationally famous. Herbert Read's biographical entry on Bacon in *Contemporary British Art* (1951) read simply "Francis Bacon. Born in Dublin (1910)" (40). After his widespread success however, Bacon was emphatically represented as a British artist. His birth and childhood in Ireland became widely unknown, at least to the general public, securing his "obvious" Britishness. Over the years, it is often through passing references to Irish literature that critics have implied the relevance of his "Irish side," a tendency that frustrated Bacon, despite his outspoken interest in the writers in question, not least Yeats. Bacon was particularly adamant that his work bore no relation to Beckett, whose existentialism he claimed not to identify with, in keeping with his other statements on the movement, although he is known to have read and been fascinated by the philosopher and writer Albert Camus in his early career.

When we consider the significance of an artist's national identity it is tempting to look for an illustration of that identity within the work. Without such visible referents national framings seem irrelevant to critical readings of the work. Yet, in similar ways in which aspects of Le Brocqy's work were overshadowed by British and Irish framing alike, I want to suggest here that the basis upon which Bacon was taken up in the British canon has overshadowed important aspects of his work. Bacon himself was central to the making of Bacon myths. When he was initially questioned about his origins by Tate Director Sir John Rothenstein in the lead up to his first retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1962, Bacon answered, "I had no upbringing at all ... I used to simply work on my father's farm near Dublin," a description that bears little resemblance to the privileged

circumstances of his upbringing (qtd. in Peppiatt 2008: 19). To a much closer acquaintance, Lord Grey Gowrie, he confided that the memory of Ireland was both an important and traumatic memory for him and that it did affect the paintings (Sinclair 1993: 27).

On the long-term, Bacon insisted on privileging certain readings of his own works, largely banning any autobiographical interpretations and underplaying all but a few chosen artistic influences. Michael Peppiatt comments:

In retrospect the extent to which Bacon managed to impose his own view of his art on the rest of the world is phenomenal. He not only painted his images but – and this testifies to his powers of persuasion – also told critics, collectors and the public what to think of them. This “official” line, brilliant and revealing as it often turned out to be, also tended to obfuscate, especially as regards his early work. (2008: 118)

Alongside Peppiatt’s myth-dispelling biography, the work undertaken by the Hugh Lane museum in Dublin is providing leeway in rethinking Bacon. First up was the discovery of numerous preparatory sketches in the studio, despite Bacon’s insistence that he never made sketches for his work. This was followed by the thorough examination of painting techniques and materials and source material based on archiving over 7,000 items found in the studio with forensic precision.¹⁰⁰ To mark the studio acquisition, the Irish Museum of Modern Art exhibited Bacon drawings whose authenticity had been doubted by the British art world. This further suggests that the relocation lends agency to the Irish art world in determining how Bacon’s work might be perceived in the future.¹⁰¹

In 2009-10 the Hugh Lane held their third Bacon-focused exhibition since the acquisition, *Francis Bacon: A Terrible Beauty*, an exhibition which was singular in the canon of Bacon exhibitions in providing insight into the motives and methods behind Bacon’s paintings.¹⁰² This meant inclusion of unfinished paintings, x-ray images of under-painted images of major works and – unusual given Bacon’s adamant resistance – biographical material. Entering the exhibition, the viewer was met, rather surprisingly, with a room entitled “Childhood.”

¹⁰⁰ This is documented in Cappock (2005). Some of the archive is accessible in the permanent exhibition on the studio at the Hugh Lane, Dublin.

¹⁰¹ The exhibition, “The Barry Joule Archive. Works on paper attributed to Francis Bacon,” was held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin from March 30 – August 27 2000. An accompanying book with the same name was published by the museum (2000). See also Guerini (2009).

¹⁰² The exhibition was held from October 28 2009 – 7 March 2010.

Suggestively painted the deep orange colour of Bacon's *Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, the room housed a series of photographs of Bacon's childhood and youth, many found in the studio. They included images of the Irish houses Bacon referred to in his interviews – Farmleigh, Staffan Lodge and Cannycourt. There were furthermore photographs of the artist's parents, of Bacon as a child with his brothers and sisters, of Bacon as a youth, and two of his father leading a horse from the racetrack in Kildare.

Over the entrance to the subsequent room, housing video footage of an interview with the artist, the following statement by the artist was written on the wall:

I think artists stay much closer to their childhood than other people. They remain far more constant to their early sensations. Other people change completely, but artists tend to stay the way they have been from the very beginning.

The quotation is from an interview with David Sylvester. Highlighted in this way, however, it becomes provocative, and, although there were no further speculations on the significance of Bacon's childhood within the exhibition, it prompts further consideration. Here I want to further explore the relationship between childhood and the corporeal, drawing on a number of Bacon's paintings and on theoretical analyses of Bacon's work. Rather than being a psychological or autobiographical reading of the work for the sake of it, I propose that Bacon's childhood experience was the driving force behind new kinds of representation forged by the artist and is a key to understanding the impact of the works in question on the viewer.

Writing in a review of a Bacon exhibition held in 1989, art critic Richard Dornment asked what the relationship might be between Bacon's own sense of corporeal existence and his representation of figures in his oeuvre, pointing out that we gain this sense of reality in childhood within our own bodies:

The task of maturation in childhood is to distinguish between our bodies and those of others, to work out that our bodies not only have weight and mass, but also boundaries, limits, perimeters. Crucial to this lifelong struggle to achieve a separate and secure identity is a sense of our corporeal existence. ... But look at the figures in most of Bacon's paintings. There is

no solidity in the wobbly outlines, no corporeality in the way the bodies and faces are partially erased by smears of dragged paint.

Dorment contends that Bacon's representation of the figure relates to the psychology of a person whose body feels unreal:

In their lack of substance, and in the uncertainty of their perimeters, Bacon found in these figures a poignant way to suggest the plight of a person whose body does not feel real. In their contorted poses and blurred outlines, he suggests the exhausting – and ultimately unsuccessful – struggle of a person to create a sense of identity.

Although Dorment draws other conclusions, I want to bring his observations on the relationship between corporeality and childhood to bear directly on Bacon's work. I will do so by looking at a small number of paintings in which Bacon addresses the child as subject within the work.¹⁰³

Let me first consider *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours (from Muybridge)* (Fig. 2.4), painted in 1961. As its title suggests, the painting is directly informed by Muybridge's photographs of a child's paralyzed body. The posture of the child, drawn directly from one of the original series of photos, produces an uncanny effect in the painting, as if the limbs of an adult had been put on the body of a child. This effect is heightened by the erasure of the child's hair, the bald head becoming almost embryonic in its form and vulnerability, its identity largely erased. From behind the whorl of paint that almost covers the head, the viewer can still catch a glimpse of the child's gaze, an unexpected confrontation that intensifies both the intimacy and the horror of the image (Darley and Janssen 2001: 92). The overall effect is one of a disturbing voyeuristic tension, exacerbated by the solitude of the figure in an exposed environment. The presence of a domestic window with a blind which has not been, but hypothetically can be, pulled down, steers the image into highly ambivalent territory. *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours* is an image of total exposure. The house – traditionally a place of

¹⁰³ Dorment concludes that Bacon had difficulty in maintaining contact with reality because he lacked a secure sense of the masculine self due to his sexual orientation. Dorment's conclusions bring us to a second cul-de-sac in reading of Bacon's work; namely the largely unwritten about, and curatorially untouched, subject of homoerotic sexuality within the paintings themselves. That Dorment considers homosexuality to equate with a lack of a secure sense of masculinity already hints at the existence of a body of (erroneous) assumptions that silently inform readings of sexuality within Bacon's work.

shelter – has been reduced to a space in which there is no inside, no safe place. It is only a site for being looked at.



Fig. 2.4 Francis Bacon, *Paralytic Child Walking on All Fours (from Muybridge)*, 1961, Gemeente Museum, The Hague

The child starts to become animal, but not only because it is walking on all fours. More importantly, *Paralytic Child* evokes the defenselessness of animal young in danger of attack by a predator – the child as meat – and the animal-like qualities of the human attacker. As Deleuze remarks about Bacon’s work more generally, “it is not the animal as form, but rather the animal as a *trait*” (2008: 16). Yet this is not only an image of impending violence in a general sense. Muybridge’s multiple images of the subject from 1887 offered a variety of subject positions and facial expressions. Bacon chose to work from an image in which the male child’s rectum is exposed by a forward leg movement, emphasizing his sexual vulnerability. I would suggest that the representation of the naked faceless child against a scene of looming darkness hints more specifically at sexual violence.

In the final version of the painting, Bacon includes a dark shadowing in the foreground, as if to implicate the viewer in the position of voyeur/perpetrator, like an off-screen presence in a film still. In viewing, we subconsciously anticipate our own immanent act of violence. Yet, we also inhabit the position of the child. As viewers, we are somehow both inside the head and outside the body of the child subject. This is the kind of hysteric autoscopia which Deleuze identified in Bacon's oeuvre at large, in which we watch ourselves live the event rather than feel it within the body (2008: 35).¹⁰⁴ The child's body is no longer his own body but rather he feels himself inside a body, inside a head. He sees, and sees himself inside a body, inside a head. He does not feel himself inside the body that he sees. In viewing, we feel what it means to be looked at as object – an objectification that anticipates (sexual) violence. As Ernst van Alphen observes more generally in relation to Bacon's work:

The paintings [themselves] constitute ... a gaze. But, rather than benignly bestowing form upon the viewer's self, rather than providing a sense of wholeness, for which the self is dependent on the gaze of the other, the paintings *are* the gaze while also exposing its mortifying power of withholding the wholeness one needs so badly ... Bacon makes the viewer aware of the pain of "objectification." (1998: 15)

In an earlier version of *Paralytic Child*, captured in a passing photograph of the studio, a face hovered in the foreground, large and looming, like a memory of the force of the gaze imprinted onto the artist's vision. Freud observed this placing of an unwanted quality at a visual and/or auditory remove – "making it the object of scopic and invocatory drives" – as a defense mechanism (Silverman 1988: 17).

One year later, the bald child figure reappears huddled on a bed in the central panel of a crucifixion triptych. The bed is contained in a room with the same kind of windows featured in *Paralytic Child*, the blind now overtly pulled. The interior space recalls the curved walls of Cannycourt, Bacon's grandmother's house in Ireland, which the artist attributed as the source of this architectural horizon within his paintings at

¹⁰⁴ Commenting on the scene of hysteria that he sees taking place in Bacon's oeuvre more generally, Deleuze writes that the hysteric body "is felt *under* the body ... these transitory organs are themselves seen, in phenomena known as internal or external 'autoscopia': it is no longer *my* head, but I feel myself inside *a* head, I see and I see myself inside a head; or else I do not see myself in the mirror, but I feel myself in the body that I see, and I see myself in this naked body when I am dressed ... and so forth. Is there a psychosis in the world that might include this hysterical condition?" (2008: 35).

large.¹⁰⁵ The desperate solitude of the figure, combined with the confinement of the space, which is closed to the outside world, arouses anxiousness in the viewer.¹⁰⁶ The figure huddled on a bed appears to be frozen with fear, perhaps at the thought of a reoccurrence of an event we are not allowed to witness. The body is abject in the extreme, a kind of a living but mortified body of a human that might have preferred not to have survived.¹⁰⁷ The visceral spattered paint does not allow the distance of an objectifying glance. The horizon line is cut so that the mutilated figure and I, the viewer, seem to share the same space.



Fig. 2.5 Francis Bacon, Central panel from *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, March 1962 (left) and detail (right), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

¹⁰⁵ Art historian Fiona Barber has identified a spectral return to the succession of aristocratic country houses the Bacons occupied during the War of Independence and Civil War in the construction of the uncanny spaces of a number of Bacon's other major works. She reads Bacon's spaces in relation to the recurrent trope of the Anglo-Irish Big House in Irish Gothic literature, which differentiates itself from the British tradition through its focus on the domestic, the terror within, rather than a projection outwards (2009).

¹⁰⁶ In the context of Bacon's figures in general Deleuze aptly describes how "It is the extreme solitude of the Figures, the extreme confinement of their bodies, which excludes every spectator" (1981: 10).

¹⁰⁷ Van Alphen comments on the recurrent depiction of corporeal experience as bordering on deadly: "His representations of the human body, mainly the male body, are unnerving because they depict bodily experiences as violent and deadly. Being absorbed by the intensity of bodily experiences, Bacon ends up in the situation of death: this is, his paintings suggest that in moments of pain and ecstasy a loss of self is inflicted on the body as a prefiguration of death" (2008: 96).

The figure on the bed in *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962) seems rather to suggest a direct act of sexual as well as physical violence. Ernst van Alphen points to the loss of self through pain or ecstasy in many of Bacon's paintings. Here we seem to be faced with a loss of self through sheer trauma. Van Alphen's description of the functioning of the sense organs in Bacon's painting is uncannily close to medical descriptions of the psychosomatic experience of trauma:

The depiction of sense experiences as body deformation is a radical undermining of the traditional idea of how the sense organs work. They are usually seen as reflecting the stimulus, or as representing the stimulus proportionately. The sense response is automatic, controlled, and singular. Bacon's body organ, on the contrary, works as a kind of chain reaction. The response of one sense works as a stimulus for the other senses. The unity of the senses in one body, in one sense organ, causes the senses to go off the rails. (2008: 41)

This derailing of the senses calls to mind the well-documented effects of trauma on the body, including hyper arousal in the autonomic nervous system together with a chain reaction of psychophysical responses (Rothschild 2000: 46-9, 70-71).

As we know, Bacon was generally insistent that his paintings were not autobiographical, despite the often direct relationship between the artist's life events and their subject matter. Yet the artist once suggested that his crucifixion paintings were "almost nearer to a self-portrait" (Sylvester 2008: 46). Michael Peppiatt has commented on the significance of this remark:

The implications of this unusually unguarded admission are far-reaching. At its most extreme, the remark could suggest that Bacon identified with Christ on the Cross. At the very least, it indicates that he himself had experienced suffering so intense that the Crucifixion, with its complex symbolism of betrayal, abandonment and atonement for the sins of others, was the most appropriate image through which to express it. (2008: 119)

From what we know of Bacon's childhood, the potential source of such suffering is most likely to lie in the artist's troubled relationship with his father, as well as in the physical acts of cruelty by the family grooms, undertaken at his father's request and under his watchful eye. As Peppiatt suggests, the situation becomes more complex

when the erotic content of the work is taken into consideration.¹⁰⁸ Andrew Sinclair was more direct in suggesting that Bacon's sexual encounters with the grooms took place when he was still a minor (Sinclair 1993: 36). This situation has been reread by at least one reviewer as child sexual abuse (Zervigón 1995: 90). It is certain that some kind of absence or loss informs the "ambiguous, obstructed narrativity" in Bacon's work and perhaps also his resistance to autobiographical readings of his paintings (Van Alphen 1998: 117). I contend that it is this loss of self, this *unspeakable* loss of self that is fundamental to Bacon's works more generally.¹⁰⁹

Let us pause to consider whether there might even be space for such a reading in curatorial discourse on Bacon's work. It appears to me that it is not only Bacon's potential Irishness, but all aspects of Bacon's character that go against prestige and widespread appeal have been underplayed in exhibitions of Bacon's work to date. This was partly Bacon's own doing during his lifetime, as we know, but it seems to have been maintained after his death by critical gatekeepers like David Sylvester. My reading here is speculative, but if we can (even momentarily) consider it as valid, we can ask how curators could realistically address such a reading? Is there space within the norms of curating to go against the accumulation of capital and prestige? Is there space for alterity, for otherness?¹¹⁰

Significantly, the coincidence of child imagery with crucifixion imagery was not an isolated incident. Four years after *Paralytic Child*, Bacon produced a crucifixion and a painting including a comparable child figure in the same year. In *After Muybridge-Study of the Human Figure in Motion-Woman Emptying a Bowl of Water and Paralytic Child on all Fours* (1965) (Fig. 2.6), the curved lines reminiscent of Cannycourt now form the backdrop of a frame that forms an inverted house-like structure. The child

¹⁰⁸ Peppiatt asks: "Was Francis Bacon's relationship with his father so traumatic that the artist sought expression for it through the Crucifixion? Was being surprised by his father, to whom Francis felt an erotic attraction, while he was putting on his mother's underwear the real humiliation? Or was it his father's disgust and the subsequent banishment from home? Or were these simply details of a tortured childhood (which ... apparently included being horsewhipped by the grooms at his father's behest)? ... The situation becomes more complex once its erotic content is taken into account. Did the tyranny of the father excite the son? Did the beatings – if they took place – arouse Francis sexually?" (2008: 120).

¹⁰⁹ I draw here on Judith Butler's writings on melancholia: "The loss of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely" (1997: 186). Yet, "What cannot be declared by the melancholic is nevertheless what governs melancholic speech – an unspeakability that organizes the field of the speakable" and produces "spatialized landscape[s] of the mind" (170-171). See also Hagan (2001) for an insightful account of the psychology of child abuse.

¹¹⁰ I link the two here with Derrida's philosophical journey to and from the notions of stranger and otherness in *Of Hospitality* (2000) in mind.

passes outside the space unnoticed by the female figure, emptying a bowl of water. Again the danger is immanent rather than seen. The child is perched precariously on a high circular ring like a trapeze artist without a safety net. The child figure maintains the protruding rump of the former image, its flesh now more aggressively marked like the flesh of a bone of meat.

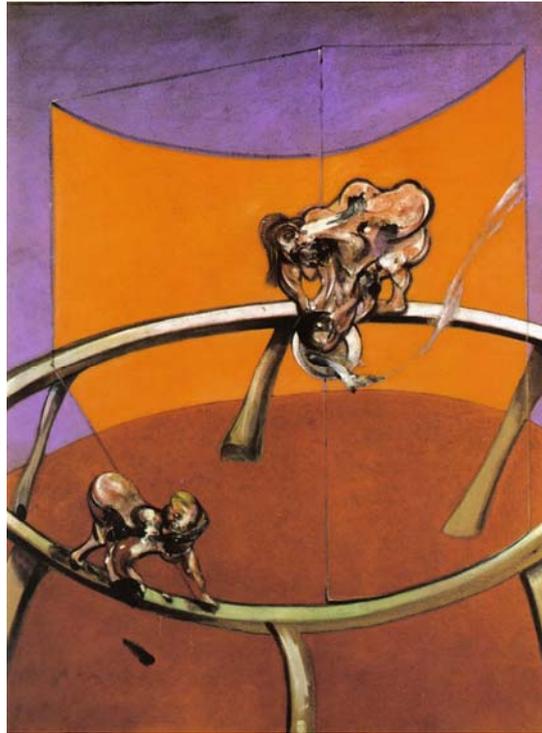


Fig. 2.6 Francis Bacon, *After Muybridge-Study of the Human Figure in Motion-Woman Emptying a Bowl of Water and Paralytic Child on all Fours*, 1965, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

In the same year, Bacon returns to the crucifixion subject. In *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1965) (Fig. 2.7), the embryo-child-animal reappears on a bed in a state of more excessive mutilation. In this image the female (mother?) figure walking past is apparently untouched by the suffering. Up close we see bruise-red passages of paint surrounding her heart that relate to those of the figure on the bed. The shattered figure on the bed now wears a badge with a swastika-like mark, which can be related in turn to a male figure in the right hand panel, who displays his male flesh in a manner that is potentially homoerotic, but, coupled with his swastika armband, promises violence. Far

from being an isolated image, this is one of a number of works which draw on Nazi imagery. Once again, the potential uncoupling of Bacon's painting from an expression of a general Second World War experience of suffering makes the language of canonical curating tremble.

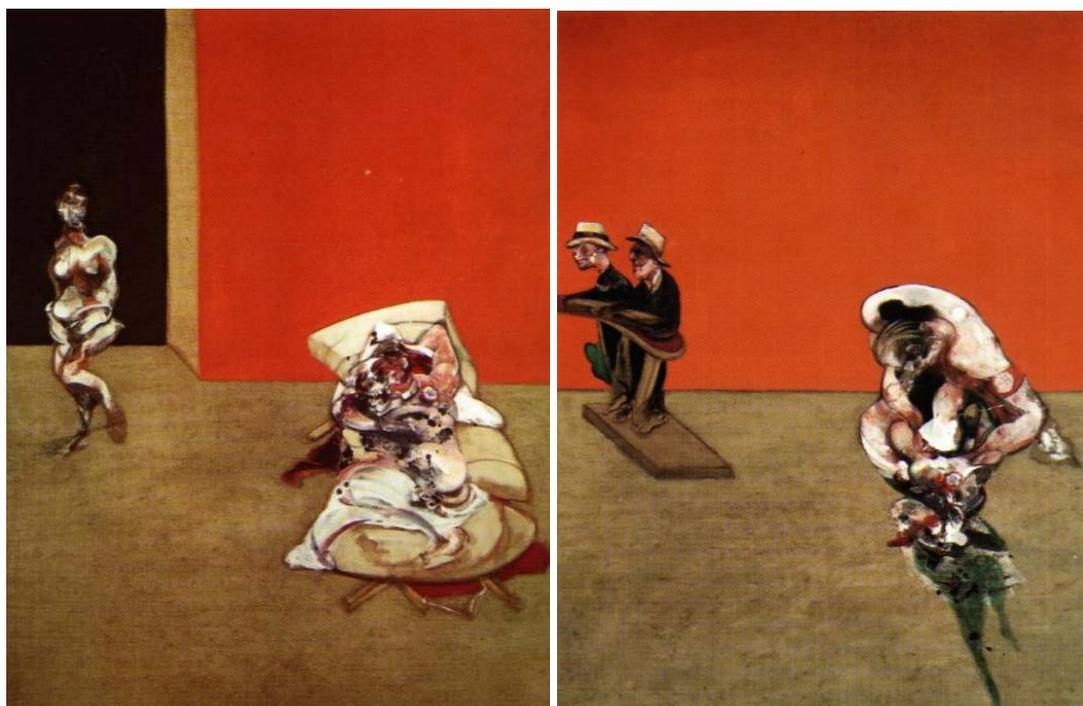


Fig. 2.7 Francis Bacon, Central panel, *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*, 1965 (left) and right-hand panel (right), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

One of the difficulties of Bacon's images is that we are presented with a sexual continuum in which the sexual is undifferentiated from a range of (other) violences and bodily functions. Peppiatt asks whether the Crucifixions and "the whole flayed population of Bacon's pictures" were in fact "the voluptuous production of a strong masochistic fantasy" (2008: 120-121).¹¹¹ This reading can not be easily set aside, given that Bacon was known to engage in sado-masochism in his romantic relationships and was said to have a fetish for the Nazi uniforms. Yet, despite its validity, it does little to explain the psychological impact of the work on the viewer, which seems to go much deeper than sexual fantasy alone. It seems to me that the indeterminacy between the

¹¹¹ Other critics have drawn similar conclusions. As early as 1962 Nigel Gosling was writing about the "sado-masochistic vein" running through Bacon's paintings in a review for *The Observer*. More recently John Richardson, who made comparable observations, went so far as to suggest that Bacon's work lost its edge in later years when his sado-masochistic relationships ended (2009).

sexual and the violent in Bacon's work goes further than an adult sexual preference. It acts more like a disturbance of the symbolic order.

In another context, Judith Butler asks what it might mean "to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go" and "to learn to live in the anxiety of that challenge" (1997: 27). It seems to me that Bacon's work offers us an experience of a new ontology in which our differentiations and taboos and categorizations do not exist; a place in which we are not shielded from the immanence of unethical desire and violence. Van Alphen has pointed to the effects of the works on the viewer; how they render speechless and seem to carry out an act of violence on the viewer (1998: 10-11).

I am not suggesting that Bacon's painting is merely engaged with trauma, however. Rather, Bacon develops new forms of representation that enable his paintings to operate at this level of the nervous system. For example, I consider Bacon's obsessive return to this imagery to relate to flashbacks and memory triggers associated with the after-effects of trauma. Yet his use of repetition is not restorative. It seems closer to Lacan's understanding of repetition serving to screen what Hal Foster has called "the traumatic real":

Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also points to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject – between the perception and the consciousness of a subject touched by an image.¹¹²

Over time, trauma became less a source of subject matter for Bacon than a problem of representation – how "to give the sensation without the boredom of its conveyance" as he put it (Sylvester 2008: 65). Bacon found ways to make the rupture take place in the subject "between the perception and the consciousness of a subject touched by an image." This means that the viewer's own boundaries start to break down in the act of viewing.¹¹³ He or she passes through the subject matter via the paint which touches him

¹¹² (1996: 132). Hal Foster is writing in the context of Andy Warhol's work. Although the works are aesthetically very different, I see the two artists using similar representational strategies. Bacon in fact expressed his interest in Warhol's *The Electric Chair* and *The Car Accidents*, which possibly relates to the artist's use of repetition in both. More generally, Bacon dismissed Warhol's work as "simple realism" (Archimbaud 1993: 47).

¹¹³ Deleuze also observes that there is a visible degeneration within Bacon's paintings from the isolated body to the deformed body and eventually, the dissipated body; the body unable to maintain its boundaries. This dissipation into material structures lends the figures a kind of hysteric relationship to their surroundings, in the sense that "things and beings are present, *too* present" (2008: 36).

or her at a different level. The paint itself becomes a *punctum* through which the real is experienced as traumatic.¹¹⁴

This is the course of events that I propose Bacon refers to when, in his interviews with Sylvester, he speaks of “orders of sensation,” “levels of feeling,” “areas of sensation,” or “shifting sequences” (qtd. in Deleuze 2008: 26). In fact Bacon explicitly commented in one interview with Sylvester that:

We nearly always live through screens – a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of these veils or screens.¹¹⁵

The success of this endeavour, I would argue, is the source of the pain of viewing Bacon’s paintings which, as Van Alphen proposed, is both physical and psychic.

The childhood paintings are in the first instance an example of the internal diversity of Bacon’s work, which is typically obscured by the tendency for curatorial presentations to omit works that are recalcitrant to the dominant narratives surrounding an artist’s oeuvre. More specifically, their content does not appeal to normative universal identification in the way that some of Bacon’s other paintings of sexuality or suffering do; an appeal that greatly informs Bacon’s fame. The childhood paintings furthermore touch on the taboo subjects of paedophile desire and child abuse. For all of these reasons they work against the market value of Bacon’s paintings. As long as curatorial norms drive towards seamless representation and towards increasing the prestige and value of artists’ works, understandings of the internal diversity and complexity of artists’ oeuvres are bound to be limited.

Curatorial Reception

¹¹⁴ I use the term *punctum* here in Roland Barthes’ sense of the word. In *Camera Lucida* he explains that the *punctum* is an element within a photograph “which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me ... the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometime even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points* ... A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (2000: 26-7).

¹¹⁵ (2008: 82). A self-conscious engagement with the screen itself is visible in later works like *Tryptych* (1974 -77).

To unhinge Bacon's central works from standard narratives relating to post-war Britain is to be confronted directly with this complex of sexuality and violence that curators to date have done little to unpack. Of the fifty-two (major) solo exhibitions of his work that have been held worldwide since 1955, only one has focused on Bacon's figuration; namely, *The Human Form*, curated by David Sylvester at the Hayward Gallery in 1998. With a few notable exceptions, Bacon's solo exhibitions are predominantly framed and entitled in an entirely formal way. This tendency goes back to David Sylvester's early emphasis on paint handling in Bacon's work, which served to detract from the largely negative criticism which greeted the first ten years of his output – a criticism that typically revolved around (sexual) violence (Zervigón 1995: 88). While written accounts have been relatively diverse in their treatment of Bacon – Deleuze's and Van Alphen's being two obvious examples – this has not translated into curatorial innovation.¹¹⁶ The 2009 retrospective at Tate Britain added and detracted little from the Tate retrospective of the 1980s, for example. The only notably new element was the display of source material from Bacon's studio in one room of the exhibition.

Amidst the general instability of the art market, easily affected by critical commentary and shifts in taste, this continuity has allowed for stability in prices and potential for steady growth. The Bacon market has had record prices of up to £35 million in 2007, partly thanks to this situation. Don Thompson, who devotes an entire chapter of *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economic of Contemporary Art* to the closely guarded Bacon market, emphasizes that Bacon "is one of a handful of modern artists whose role in art history is unchallenged" (2008: 146). Yet the insistent continuity of Bacon myths crowds out readings that might shed more light on the internal diversity and particularity of Bacon's oeuvre. The physical relocation of Bacon's studio to Ireland offered an unusual opportunity to reassess the critical as well as methodological underpinnings of the artist's work. Yet the reluctance to address questions regarding national identity has slowed down, if not blocked, the kind of aesthetic rereading that might follow an investigation of Bacon as a political subject.

Albeit on a different level, the curatorial framing of Le Brocquy has been similarly fossilized until recently. The wider public embrace of the works in which Irish elements are visible has meant that the critical significance of Le Brocquy's formally

¹¹⁶ See also Martin Harrison's edited collection *Francis Bacon: New Studies Centenary Essays* (2009).

innovative work from the 1940s and 1950s in particular has been underrepresented in curatorial terms, even in Ireland. To clarify, there has been extensive art historical research, not least Dorothy Walker's definitive monograph on Le Brocquy from 1981. Le Brocquy's work has also been exhibited ad nauseum in Ireland, yet not in ways that really do justice to a range of artistic concerns evident in his oeuvre. His work is typically included a few at a time into museum survey exhibitions of Irish art, group exhibitions of portraiture or medium-based exhibitions celebrating tapestry, drawing or graphics. Two recent exhibitions held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art have been important in reassessing Le Brocquy's art historical context in Ireland. The first, *The White Stag Group*, examined the work of a group of international artists resident in Ireland during the Second World War. The second, *Irish Art of the Seventies*, contextualized his work from the 1970s.¹¹⁷

The most comprehensive exhibitions of Le Brocquy's work to date have been those held in relation to the artist's 90th birthday celebrations. This is especially true of an exhibition held at the Hunt Museum in Limerick which did justice to the *Tinker* series from the 1940s and Le Brocquy's grey period of the 1950s.¹¹⁸ Róisín Kennedy's article from 2005 is an important reminder of Le Brocquy's place in London in the post-war period, which prompts further curatorial treatment of the relationality between Le Brocquy's work and that of his British peers. In 2008 Riann Coulter published a significant essay on the relationship between Le Brocquy's *Presences* series from the mid 1950s-1960s, which recuperates contemporary critics' association of Le Brocquy's work with existentialism and *art autre* and, in the case of Herbert Read, to Kleinian psychology. This again begs for further curatorial exploration.¹¹⁹ These endeavors by a younger generation of art historians help to undo the simplistic reception that took place in both the British and Irish contexts. But there remains much to be done.

Artists are often locked into narratives and myths which prevent us from really seeing their work. The field determines forms of visibility and criteria of evaluation, yet

¹¹⁷ *The White Stag Group*, curated by S.B. Kennedy and Bruce Arnold, took place from July 6- October 2 2005. *Irish Art of the Seventies*, curated by Catherine Marshall, ran from 10 May- 10 December 2006.

¹¹⁸ See *Louis Le Brocquy: Allegory and Legend* (2006). The exhibition was curated by Pierre le Brocquy, the artist's son, with the assistance of Virginia Teehan, Director of the Hunt Museum.

¹¹⁹ Read believed that Klein's ideas held a clue to "the mysterious significance of Le Brocquy's painting", concluding that "there can be no doubt that after many years of patient research this painter has found the irreducible symbols for what is basic to the life of the spirit, those principles we personify as Eros and Thanatos" (qtd. in Coulter 2008).

never in isolation from the ideological needs of the field of power. Several regimes of visibility and intelligibility coexist and intermingle in the works themselves with the result that the art world itself becomes a symbolic battlefield over values that are both aesthetic and social (Rancière 2009a: 50). This means that a redistribution of national belonging will inevitably bring about a redistribution of the visible.¹²⁰ Elements in an artist's work which have been underplayed or overshadowed to secure the investments of one canon will be highlighted in relation to another and vice versa. This calls for a more relational approach to national canons, which goes against their emphatically singular nature. If this relationality is to become a more democratic one, however, the bias of canon formations towards dominant nations has to be recognized and addressed. To date, the undoing of artistic myths at a curatorial level is only likely if this endeavour will increase the symbolic and cultural capital of the artist in question. It is therefore likely that such shifts will always be in favour of culturally dominant nations. For this reason Orpen and Le Brocqy can be curatorially reframed as British but Bacon has yet to be curatorially reframed as Irish.

There can be no objective assessment of any such claims, which are clearly invested in market as well as national interests. Although it may not be visibly differentiable from a culturally nationalistic gesture to extend such a claim for belonging, I want to highlight the importance of this gesture for the self-determination of postcolonial nations in particular. In keeping with the logic of the field, an individual artist's success can help to accumulate cultural and symbolic capital for the country of origin as well as the country of residence but only if the nationality of origin remains visible. If, on the contrary, artists from places with less cultural and symbolic capital are added to the national canon of the country of residence, with no reference to their country of origin, the potential redistribution of cultural capital is foreclosed. This foreclosure leads to a vicious circle in which countries with low cultural capital do not have the cultural authority upon which to base claims to artists for their own national canon. Furthermore, they are blocked from achieving that position of authority by not being able to accumulate cultural capital through the acquisition of the selfsame artists

¹²⁰ My reference to the redistribution of the visible is informed by Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible" which refers to "the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed" (2009a: 85).

for their national canon. In the next chapter I will look at the national exhibition as a moment for the possible renegotiation of cultural and symbolic capital. We will see how implicit or explicit curatorial definitions of Irishness affect readings of the exhibited works. I will consider strategies for dealing with the irreducible duality of the limiting *and* potentially empowering effects of renegotiating the national referent within art and curatorial discourse.