





# Lucian Freud:

## Prophet of Discomfort

MIC MORONEY explores the life and times of Lucian Freud through his paintings on view this summer at IMMA

There must be no westerner alive who has not been dumbstruck by one of Lucian Freud's paintings. He is best known for his 'naked portraits': his almost transgressional depictions of the bodies of models, friends, family and lovers which he renders so naked, they are animalistic; as if flayed of all accoutrements before Freud's lidless gaze. Driven by desire, curiosity or fascination, these 'portraits' often seem less about the psychology of the sitter than that of the painter. Some are chilling power equations; others exquisitely fond. Then there is the vulgar delicacy of his spectacular 1990s sweetmeats of effulgent flesh, such as his portraits of performance artist Leigh Bowery, or *Benefits Supervisor Resting* 1994, his painting of Bowery's friend, Sue Tilley, the large job-centre worker. The hysteric arch of her huge form, braced against the back of a sofa; her great folds and handfuls of voluptuous tissue – all radiate a Bacchanalian or even religious ecstasy.

Even in his fully clad portraits, Freud can remorselessly excavate every peculiarity of a person; accentuating, magnifying it. As a result, he creates some extraordinary likenesses, while others are downright wonky. Yet his best pictures have an extraordinary coherence; a compacted intensity of impressions and weird kinks of perspective. The result can be like trying to flatten a warped sheet of metal, the picture just won't sit still: the figures are too animated, they writhe and flex in the eye.

It's a supremely self-evolved and awkward style, which tinkers with the mechanics of perception. And Freud's hands are the best in the business, like great searching root systems. Interestingly, other than the self-portraits, the sitter's eyes rarely rest on the painter. Instead, they are marooned within their own thoughts; objectified, like a specimen. Even Freud's Queen Elizabeth – not a great portrait, too little time, with its stodgy grimace of matronly displeasure – appears with downcast eyes, whatever the royal or Freudian protocol is here.

Ultimately a traditional figurative painter, Freud is hugely popular. Crowds flock to his shows; paintings fetch silly millions at auction. Each new picture is a news event, with Freud taunting the press with the wilful perversity of his humour: the stunning, naked self-portrait of 1993 in a pair of boots (aged seventy-one and wielding a palette-knife like a decapitating trowel); or *The Painter Surprised by a Naked Admirer* 2005 with a supplicant young female nude clamped around his right leg – especially

1 LUCIAN FREUD  
b.1922 *Esther*  
1982-83  
oil on canvas  
36 x 31cm  
Private Collection

2 Lucian Freud and  
Brendan Behan in  
Dublin, 1952  
Photo: Daniel  
Farson/Getty Images

3 Lucian Freud  
Photo©David  
Dawson 2005  
Courtesy of Hazlitt  
Holland-Hibbert  
Gallery





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when this turned out to be Alexandra Williams-Wynn, the daughter of a Welsh baronet. (In 2002, Freud scandalised commentators by apparently seducing the twenty-seven-year-old journalist Emily Bearn, fifty-two years his junior, while she sat for him.)

A selection of the *oeuvre* arrives at IMMA this summer, after Enrique Juncosa asked American-born curator Catherine Lampert to compile a Freud show for Dublin. Lampert was, until 2001, the long-time director of the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and is now a prolific freelance curator who is close to many artists of the 'London school'. She has often sat for Frank Auerbach, one of Freud's enduring friends.

Freud was born in Berlin in 1922, the second of three boys, one of whom is Clement, the droop-eyed former MP from whom Lucian is estranged. His grandfather was Sigmund Freud, his father Ernst an architect. They lived an affluent, secular Jewish life with servants. However, Hitler's ascendancy in 1933 led them to London, thanks to Princess Marie Bonaparte, who later helped

rescue Sigmund from Vienna. She secured British citizenship for the Freuds over lunch with the Duke of Kent in 1939.

Freud's interest in art was fostered by his family, including Sigmund who gave him Breughel colour prints. Lucian remembers Sigmund, even when mortally ill with jaw cancer, as a very funny man. In England, his most influential art education came in the late 1930s at the East Anglian School at Dedham (Constable country) under Cedric Morris, and his frank approach to portraits and botanical paintings. Freud also befriended Stephen Spender, art collector Peter Watson and the half-Irish critic Cyril Connolly; and their *Horizon* journal first published Freud's drawings in 1939.

After a brief stint with the Merchant Marine in 1941, Freud was invalided out and Watson set him up in run-down, shell-damaged Paddington, where he stayed for over thirty years. Early on, he attracted patrons like the Duke of Devonshire; and joined Lady Rothermere's 'salon' which included Cecil Beaton, Claude Cockburn, T S Eliot, Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward.

Grahame Sutherland introduced Freud to Francis Bacon in early 1945, and the pair formed a friendship and rivalry which lasted three decades. In Paris in 1946, the dandified Balthus looked after Freud, and introduced him to Picasso and Giacometti. Balthus' work clearly influenced Freud's for a time, with its theatrical sense of malice and sexual mischief.

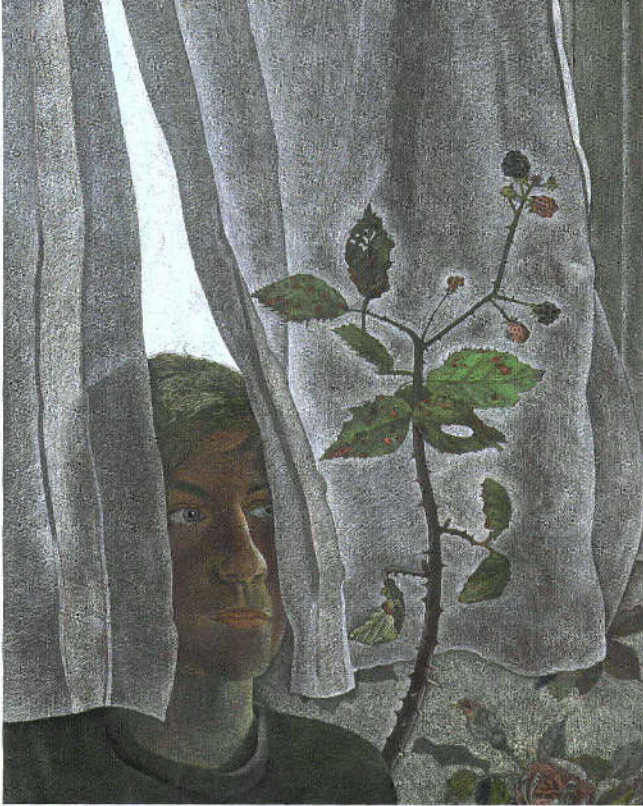
Freud had already shown in London and Paris when he came to Dublin in 1948, partly on pilgrimage to Jack B Yeats, who had just enjoyed a retrospective at the Tate; and whom Freud declared the greatest living painter. Freud rented rooms off Baggot Street, and socialised with Patrick Kavanagh and, more edgily, Brendan Behan (Fig 2).

In 1948, Freud had married Kitty Garman, daughter of sculptor Jacob Epstein, and they had their first child that July. Freud developed a luminous series of portraits of Kitty charting the great lanterns of her eyes from wonder to fear – and tracking a relationship in decline.

The earliest Irish element in the IMMA show is a mysterious pastel, *Interior Scene*, 1948, executed in Connemara, where Freud enjoyed three weeks at the Zetland Arms (Fig 5). The model was his paramour, English painter Anne Dunn. It's interesting that Connemara didn't wrench Freud's painterly gaze out of doors, although Dunn remembers Freud in tartan trousers 'stepping precariously into a bog'.<sup>1</sup>

Irish poet John Montague remembers Freud with his 'shock of black hair' visiting Dublin often; and he particularly loathed Freud's 'glorious green corduroys'. Freud seemed closest to artist Paddy Swift, five years his junior, then the rising star of the Living Art. Swift became a man after Freud's heart. He dressed eccentrically, and shared the passion for *painting truth directly* from life. Freud's emerging realism – tense, fugue-like portraits, panoptic depictions of vegetation; reduced, austere palettes – all fed into Swift's work.

In September 1951, Kitty Garman wrote to her mother about shifting 'from boarding-house to hotel', while post-Emergency 'Dublin looks very beautiful under a mist of Virginia creeper and gulls' wings. It is like nowhere else, very human & sad and lost,



the poorest beggars live in the grandest 18th-century houses & barefoot children play in the parks filled with statues of heroes'.<sup>2</sup>

She mentions Freud working on a painting in Paddy Swift's Hatch Street studio, *Dead Cock's Head* 1951, painted on the same red velvet chair as was Swift's *Woodcock* 1951.<sup>3</sup> Anthony Cronin recalls the two men painting side-by-side when he stayed in Hatch street c.1950, Freud more obsessed by surface and detail than Swift.<sup>4</sup> Freud had a menacing charisma. Oonagh, Swift's widow, remembers him as 'quite wicked'; and recalls an incident at Leopardstown racecourse when 'one of these la-di-daw people' made an anti-Semitic comment. Freud grabbed the chap by the tie, and nearly strangled him.

Another Irish painter who met Freud around this time was Edward Maguire, who studied at the Slade when Freud was tutoring there during 1954–5. Freud apparently told Maguire he had little to learn from the place, and advised him to go ply his trade, which he did.

Freud's stays in Hatch Street coincided with his courtship of Lady Caroline Blackwood, the beautiful Irish Guinness heiress. According to Blackwood's account she first met him at a debutante's ball in London hosted by Lady Rothermere. Caroline recalls Bacon arriving with Freud, and Bacon booing Princess Margaret while she sang a medley of Cole Porter tunes 'hopelessly off-key'.<sup>5</sup> Despite condemnation from the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava (Caroline's mother), she and Freud eloped to Paris in 1952. Freud painted Caroline often in Paris, including the puckishly haunting *Girl in Bed* (which her later husband, American poet Robert Lowell, was clutching when he died in the back of a New York taxi). Once again, Freud documented, with astonishing honesty, another disintegrating relationship, with works like *Hotel Bedroom* (which he exhibited at the 1954 Venice Biennale alongside Bacon and Ben Nicholson). There are two portraits of Blackwood in the upcoming IMMA exhibition. One is *Girl in a Green Dress* 1954, a downcast yet lambent Caroline, with inflamed-looking eyelids (Fig 4). The other is *Girl by the Sea* 1956.

They married in London in late 1953, and settled in Soho, and with Caroline's money, bought a priory in Dorset, where Freud indulged in bareback horse riding. They made frequent visits to Luggala, home of Caroline's favourite aunt, Lady Oranmore – although Caroline's cousin, Garech Browne, remembers Freud also arriving with Kitty, even earlier. Browne recalls Freud, seventeen years his senior, as a generous mentor, teaching him how to use his eyes at the Louvre, or sneaking him into ill-reputed Soho establishments. Freud introduced him to the work of Liam O'Flaherty, and Brendan Behan in person.

Caroline later wrote of their Soho life amongst Francis Bacon's artistic and homosexual demimonde: 'I had dinner with [Bacon] nearly every night for more or less the whole of my marriage to Lucian. We also had lunch ...' Yet she liked the pomaded, leather-clad older painter, with whom she shared a seemingly horrific, if privileged, Anglo-Irish childhood.

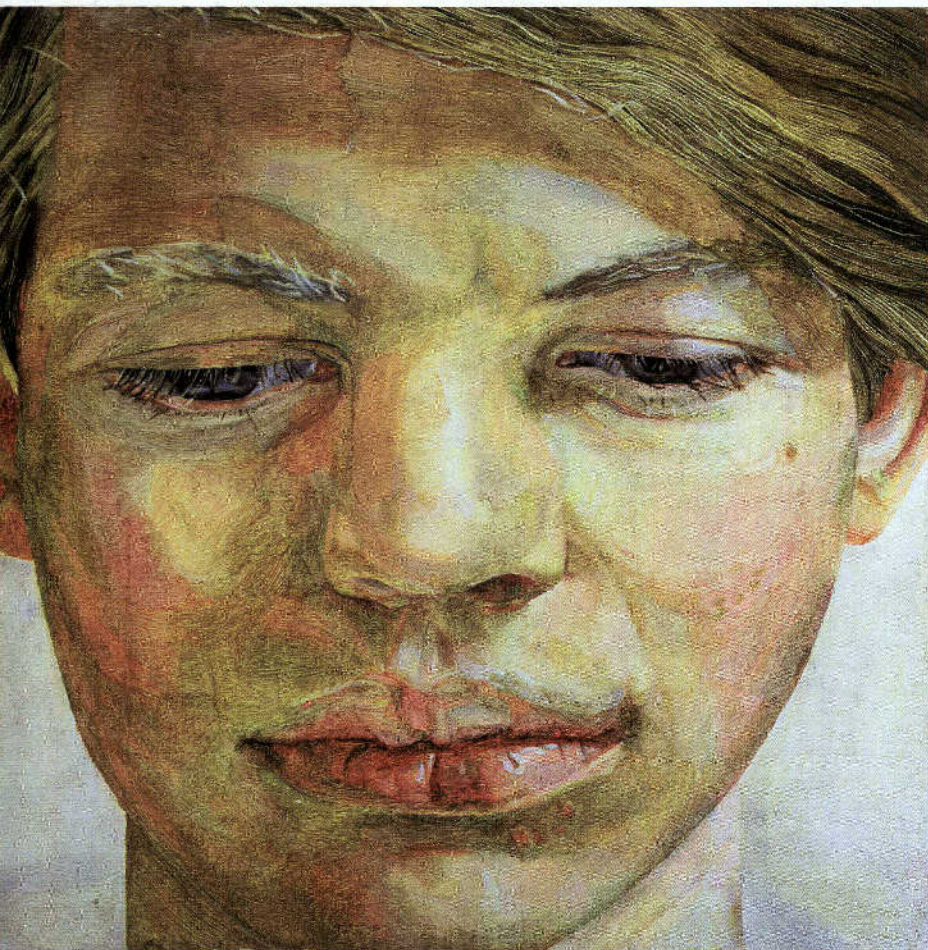
Freud and Bacon's success seemed inseparable. They were both associated with the Hanover Gallery, and by the mid-1950s, the Marlborough. Bacon painted over a dozen portraits of

4 *Girl in a Green Dress* 1954  
(Caroline Blackwood)  
tempera on board  
32.5 x 23.6cm  
Arts Council  
Collection at  
Southbank Centre

5 *Interior Scene*  
1948 pastel  
48.2 x 57.1cm  
Private Collection

6 *The Painter's Mother Resting*  
1976 oil on canvas  
90.2 x 90.2cm  
Private Collection

7 *The Painter's Garden* 2005-6  
142.2 x 116.8 cm  
Private Collection  
Photo: courtesy  
Aquavella  
Contemporary  
Art Inc.



**One transitional work, *Head of a Boy* 1957 (the subject is Irish, but does not wish to be identified) is a beautiful, tiny painting of a shy boy**

Freud, and Freud – somewhat in awe of Bacon’s painterly immediacy – made a number of saucy little drawings of Bacon and, also in 1952, the little oil portrait of Bacon’s face ‘sitting so close their knees touched’ (the painting was stolen from Berlin’s Nationalgalerie in 1988). Bacon’s impulsive ways encouraged Freud’s own: his reckless driving, his unfaithfulness to Caroline; his losing all at gambling dens.

Caroline divorced Freud in 1956, on grounds of ‘mental

cruelty’.<sup>6</sup> Although she didn’t speak to him for years, she was always loyal in her utterances, but claimed his paintings of women turned cruel and corpse-like after she left him. Interestingly, she reviewed an exhibition of his in 1993. On *Hotel Bedroom*, she wrote: ‘His portraits have always been prophecies rather than snapshots of the sitter.’ She called him ‘the supreme chronicler’ of the despair felt by many post-War artists in London.<sup>7</sup> John Montague was in Caroline’s New York hotel room when Freud rang her on her deathbed in 1996.

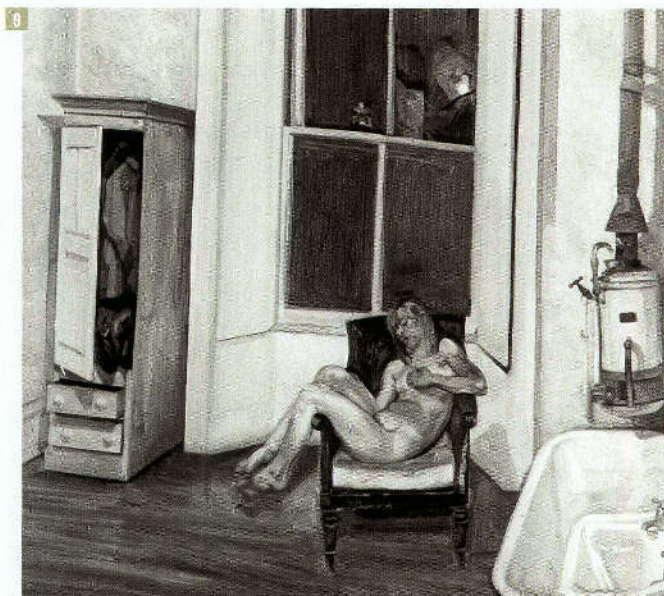
In the mid-1950s, Freud lost patience with sitting down; painting in minute detail, with sable brushes, seemingly every fibre of a carpet or sitter’s hair. He started painting more loosely with larger, hogshair brushes, using more pigment; and standing up to take in multiple facets of a subject, compacting impressions and angles, an effect uncapturable by any lens. One transitional work, *Head of a Boy* 1957 (the subject is Irish, but does not wish to be identified) is a beautiful, tiny painting of a shy boy; an adolescent rash beneath the full lips – a little masterpiece of sweet youth (Fig 8).

Arguably, it is only in the 1960s that you see the Bacon influence truly entering Freud’s painting; particularly the carcass-like approach to the figure. Freud launched into his first nudes then – first exclusively females, and later, men too. He became adventurous with his palette, creating blocks and fields of colour which swim around in pools and hollows, in an almost expressionistic sculpting of physical forms. The colours became more unpredictable: scalding oranges against cold purples; warm yellows against slatey blue which, even with a big daub, can perfectly signify a vein beneath translucent skin.

Freud continued to visit Ireland during the 1960s. He painted several family portraits for the Devonshires (including one of the Dowager Duchess, Deborah Mitford) and was a regular guest at Lismore Castle, where he painted in ‘the tower’. One significant model around this time was Penny Cuthbertson now married to Desmond Guinness, pictured here in *Night Interior* 1969–70: in this dramatically off-kilter, subsiding bathroom, like a world falling over, the bored-looking nude absently-mindedly strokes her chest (Fig 9).

The closest Freud came to landscape painting are the nowhere backdrops of Georgian terraces in London; or his atmospheric *Factory, North London*, 1971. Most recently, he produced *The Painter’s Garden* (Fig 7) with impressionistic looseness, a vertiginous memory-view down into his city garden; near the leaf-strewn grave of Pluto, his whippet and star of many canvases.

After his father died in 1970, Freud’s mother attempted suicide, but was brought back to life. However, she seems to have become a shell. Partly to keep an eye on her, Freud has her model for him until her death in 1989 (he drew her dead face). They don’t seem like warm portraits exactly, more as if Freud is measuring his own responses. But some are transcendent, like *The Painter’s Mother Resting* 1975–6, in which she lies, splay-armed and absent, on a hospital-style cot-bed in a Paisley-patterned silk dress (Fig 6). Freud’s daughter, Ester thought little of posing nude for her father when she visited him at age sixteen. IMMA will show the later exquisite, head



of Ester every feature an aching tendril of curiosity (Fig 1).

As with Balthus, Freud's odalisque constantly resurfaces. One is the mesmerisingly odd, but nonetheless radiant *Irishwoman on a Bed* 2003–4. The head seems dwarfed by the womb and gargantuan limbs; to say nothing of the half-burst cherries stuck to her thighs (Fig 10). Meanwhile, Freud has slitted the pillow which, weighted by the woman's calves, exudes a roe-like substance, which clings to the sheet in little gobs of impasto.

Paradoxically, Freud's comparative frailty means he works longer hours. Daylight sittings last from 8a.m till 3p.m, followed by night sittings from 7p.m until 2a.m. Sitters are fed on game and champagne. Occasionally he will approach and stare at the sitter, centimetres away from the face. Sometimes he works in silence; at other times he is a witty conversationalist, reciting Schiller, Auden or Philip Larkin in the aristocratic tones, which

still retain the Germanic 'r's. He keeps up to date by reading broadsheets (he says the Bacon studio in Dublin looks 'like Francis' make-up box'); and sometimes he will sing an innuendo-laden song, like George Formby's *When I'm Cleaning Windows*.

In 2005, David Dawson, Freud's friend and model, photographed the rambling studio: the paint-stuck walls; models unwinding amongst the studio props. He snapped the artist (Fig 3), heroically stripped to the waist at eighty-three, hard at work in the benighted studio.<sup>8</sup>

There's hope for us all. ■

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All Images ©The Artist

Lucian Freud Paintings, IMMA, Dublin 6 June–2 September.

**8** *Head of a Boy*  
1954 oil on canvas  
20.3 x 20.3cm  
Private Collection

**9** *Night Interior*  
1969-70 (b/w photo)  
oil on canvas  
55.9 x 55.9cm  
Private Collection

**10** *Irish Woman on a Bed* 2003-4  
oil on canvas  
101.6 x 152.72 cm  
Private Collection  
Photo: courtesy  
Aquavella  
Contemporary  
Art Inc.,



1 From film interview with Ann Dunn by William Feaver. Cited in 'Painting into Rooms' essay by Catherine Lampert, forthcoming Freud at IMMA catalogue.

2 From original letter cited in 'Painting into Rooms' by Catherine Lampert, forthcoming Freud at IMMA catalogue.

3 *PS... of course: Patrick Swift 1927-1983*, Ed.,

Veronica Jane O'Mara, p19. Gandon Editions 1993.

4 'Patrick Swift in his Time' by Anthony Cronin In *PS... of course: Patrick Swift 1927-1983*, Gandon Editions 1993.

5 'Francis Bacon (1909-1992)' by Caroline Blackwood, *New York Review of Books*, Volume 39, No 15, 24 September 1992.

6 *Dangerous Muse: A Life of Caroline Blackwood* Nancy Schoenberger, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001, p99 and p127.

7 'Portraits by Freud' by Caroline Blackwood *New York Review of Books* 16 Dec 1993

8 *Freud at Work: Lucian Freud in Conversation with Sebastian Smee*. Photographs by Bruce Bernard and David Dawson, Jonathan Cape,



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