

CHRISTIE'S

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FRANCIS BACON'S *STUDY FOR PORTRAIT*

WILL BE A LEADING HIGHLIGHT OF
CHRISTIE'S *POST-WAR AND CONTEMPORARY ART*
EVENING AUCTION, 17 MAY 2018

EXHIBITED IN LONDON FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE
1977



Francis Bacon, *Study for Portrait*, 1977, oil and dry transfer lettering on canvas
78 x 58½ in. (198.2 x 147.7 cm.)
Estimate on Request

New York – Francis Bacon's *Study for Portrait* (1977, estimate on request) will star in Christie's Post-War and Contemporary Art Evening Auction, which will take place on 17 May 2018. The powerful large-scale eulogy to his great muse and lover George Dyer was painted in Paris in 1977 and was last exhibited in London the

same year at the Royal Academy of Arts in a group exhibition titled 'British Painting: 1952-77'. A poignant celebration of his most important subject, *Study for Portrait* will be on view in London until 15 April, the first time it has been seen there since the show at the Royal Academy over 40 years ago. The work comes from the distinguished collection of Magnus Konow, who acquired it from Bacon through Marlborough Gallery shortly after its creation in 1977. This therefore represents the first time the work will be offered at auction. As a young man, based in Monaco, Konow built an impressive collection of works by School of London painters, and particularly admired Bacon, with whom he became friends during the 1970s. In 1983, Konow gifted a triptych of George Dyer, *Three Studies for a Portrait* (1973), to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, where it remains in the permanent collection. At the time that Bacon and Konow developed their friendship, Bacon was a regular visitor to Monaco from Paris, sometimes with Lucian Freud, staying with Konow for bouts of gambling in Monte Carlo.

With its majestic, near-sculptural figure seated against a screen of deep velvet black, in *Study for Portrait*, Bacon further developed elements from his 1968 masterpiece *Two Studies for a Portrait of George Dyer* (Sara Hildén Art Museum, Finland), as well as his landmark *Triptych* of 1976. The present work also extends the language of the dark, cinematic 'black triptychs' made in the aftermath of Dyer's death in 1971. This tragic event, which took place less than thirty-six hours before the opening of Bacon's career-defining retrospective at the Grand Palais, had a devastating impact upon the artist, prompting him to take a studio in Paris. By 1977, buoyed by the success of his major exhibition at Galerie Claude Bernard that year, his grief had given way to a period of newfound contentment, reflection and innovation. Backlit by streaks of red and green, and bracketed with raw linen, the central panel appears to hover before the viewer in three dimensions. Dry transfer lettering, inspired by Picasso's Cubist collages, evokes the literary rubble of the artist's studio floor, where John Deakin photographed Dyer seated in his underwear. If the black triptychs had replayed the harrowing details of his death, here Bacon weaves a fantasy of reincarnation. As bright red blood stains his shadow – evocative of the artist's own silhouette – Dyer is momentarily restored to the flesh.

Francis Outred, Chairman & Head of Post-War & Contemporary Art EMERI, Christie's: "Whilst Bacon would never fully come to terms with the death of his beloved George Dyer, the works produced in the wake of this tragedy remain some of the twentieth century's most vivid interrogations of the human condition. Held in the same private collection since the year of its creation, *Study for Portrait*, 1977, extends the language of the landmark black triptychs into a glowing, visceral celebration of his most iconic muse. With its virtuosic play of texture, raw canvas and piercing colour, it demonstrates the innovative new directions that Bacon's practice would take as he built a new life for himself in Paris. It is a privilege to be exhibiting this work once again in London for the first time in over forty years, close to its original unveiling at the Royal Academy in 1977."

Magnus Konow: "Bacon would always talk about Dyer. I think that he was the only man he really loved in his life. I find this work is so powerful – for me it is probably one of the best paintings of their mystical love affair, and that's what drew me to it."

Widely exhibited internationally, the work represents the culmination of Bacon's painterly language during one of the most significant periods of his practice. The work's saturated colour fields and stark geometries border on abstraction. Bacon plays with different textures of black, offsetting the matte backdrop with the lustrous central panel. The pale lilac ground, rendered in thin pigmented layers, is juxtaposed with bright accents of blue, canary yellow and red. The billowing shadow, formally at odds with the figure, spreads across the surface like tar. Circular lenses, derived from a book on radiography, punctuate the figure as if attempting to bring his form more clearly into focus. The flesh itself is an ode to carnal pleasure, wrought with fluid, tactile brushstrokes, spectral veils of white and scumbled strains of colour around the eyes and mouth. It is Dyer in his prime, flickering like a projection or an x-ray, presiding over the composition with the tortured grandeur of Bacon's former Popes. Raised upon a dais against a blank, clinical abyss, his quivering form speaks to the transient nature of the human condition.

Magnus Konow's family roots are in Norway: his father was a celebrated Norwegian Olympic sailor, who competed in multiple Olympics between 1908 and 1948, winning two gold medals and one silver. His paternal grandmother, Dagny Konow, sat for Edvard Munch during the late 1880s.

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