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# The Majesty of Lucian Freud

Edward Goldman · Thursday, July 28th, 2011

The death of great cultural figures always prompts us to assess their impact on art and, ultimately, on the way we perceive ourselves. The recent death of the great painter, Lucian Freud (1922 –2011), at the age of 88, is definitely one of these occasions. Through more than six decades of his career, he stubbornly clung to the particular subject that defines his art: The human body, in all its dark glory. The artist was the grandson of Sigmund Freud. His family left Germany for England in 1933, and that's where Lucian got his education and lived all his life. Not being fond of traveling, he stayed mostly in London.

When the Metropolitan Museum, in 1993, presented an ambitious, in-depth exhibition devoted to the art of this great painter, it was not only Lucian Freud's first museum exhibition in the United States, but it was the first retrospective the Met gave to a living artist ever. For me, it was the first encounter with the artist's work, and I remember walking slowly, entranced by the power emanating from his paintings, with their piles of naked, often grotesque bodies. Even the portraits of somber-looking, fully-clothed people looked as if they'd been undressed by the artist's eye and completely exposed by his brush.

The artist was known for being merciless to his models, who had to sit for him for hours, day after day, usually for weeks, sometimes even for months. Looking at his recently completed self-portrait at the Met exhibition, with the canvas still giving off the smell of fresh oil paint, I realized that the artist was merciless toward himself as well. He stands in front of us, totally naked except for heavy boots protecting him from the rough-and-tumble of the studio. He looks old, he looks tired, and it feels as if he woke up in the middle of the night and, unable to sleep, rolled out of bed and now confronts us with his unforgiving stare.

But wait a moment: in one hand, he has a wooden palette and, in the other hand, he holds a palette knife. The artist, actually, is not staring at us; he is looking and studying himself in a mirror, the way painters have done self-portraits for ages. Whether it's his children, dogs, friends or even himself, each subject is treated by the artist with a tremendous concentration, which reveals layer upon layer of their psyches. And it's ultimately for us, viewers, to summon up the courage to delve into all this troubling complexity.

Inevitably, the shadow of his grandfather, Sigmund Freud, comes into play. In many of Lucian's portraits, he shows people sitting, slumping or sleeping in his studio on a beyond-repair, worn-out couch. It's difficult not to think about the famous couch in his grandfather's office. When, ten years later, another traveling retrospective of Freud's paintings came to MOCA, I discovered a

painting — a relatively small, modest still life of a pillow and an open book — which had even more specific references to Sigmund Freud and his famous book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

The crumpled pillow not only brings to mind the experience of dreaming while sleeping; its very shape mimics particular intimate parts of the human anatomy. Sure enough, Lucian Freud quotes here the famous/infamous painting by Courbet, *The Origin of the World*. And the open book, with its ancient Egyptian portraits, is yet another link to the famous psychoanalyst, who loved and collected Egyptian art. Somehow, I believe that Lucian Freud made his grandfather proud.

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*Lucien Freud rarely gave interviews, but we found one for you:*