

On Francis Bacon (Study for a Portrait of van Gogh VI, 1957 and van Gogh in a Landscape, 1957) — Nigel Cooke

These two paintings are from a larger group of assaults on Van Gogh painted in 1957. Bacon works the Dutchman over thoroughly in this riveting series, throwing up a vividness of colour and handling rarely seen elsewhere in his output. There is a magnetic ambivalence to these works that sees Bacon squeezing out his own twisted homage from the contrary need to bury Vincent's ghost in paint. The man himself is scarcely a shadow, a comical little black spider in a web of 'expression', which is the trace of Bacon's drive to compress the space and make it his own. Although we get to see him up close, he is featureless; carbonised under the glare of the sun (Vincent's own personal obsession), this charred multi-legged thing with his textbook straw hat and wretched easel has been supplanted by the language he himself set in motion seventy years earlier, on his daily pilgrimage to paint out in the fields and streets surrounding his little yellow house. Pillaging for his own ends, Bacon's 'portrait' despatches the future ear-severer to an elsewhere of painterly rivalry, mad brushwork and screaming colour. Picasso went after Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) in his way too, yet where Picasso inundated his opponent with a scopophilic relentlessness that bored into the skulls of Velazquez's figures through the eyes, Bacon comes at Van Gogh from the air. Both artists are waging war with their predecessors. Picasso squared up to Velazquez at ground level like a boxer; Bacon is more pitiless, an assassin - we see the painter from an aerial distance as though through a telescopic sight. Bacon's vulnerable quarry is loaded up with painting gear and dwarfed by a vigorously painted grassy arena. The speed of the painting, the painting's 'life', is all here, in the grass. Bacon's journey through painting is a story of manual thought, a narrative at the intersection of action and image. The grassland that threatens to engulf Van Gogh is the paint speaking on its own terms, scrubbing up an amalgamation of both natural space and human energy. This is the forerunner to Bacon's 'clear and precise' abstraction, the formally defined zone of action that exerted such strange pressures on his bodies in later years.

Yet the trapezes and arenas are present in the Van Gogh series in a surprising way. Bacon has imported his London-made, circus-like arena into Van Gogh's Arles. A reproduction of the painting Vincent made of himself on the road with painting kit and straw hat in 1888 is the starting point for Bacon's painting, yet the highway has been warped into a bowl-like mini-stadium that the Dutch painter delineates like the needle on a record player. The road to Tarascon, a linear dirt track that took Van Gogh to many of his favourite painting sites from the house he shared for nine weeks with Gauguin, has been bent into an inescapable ring, the flatness of which recalls the interest in oriental art shared by both Van Gogh and Bacon. We get the sense of a Beckett-like habitual routine being ground out, a clockwork daily round on a provincial scale. Bacon has created a feedback loop of this dirt road that amplifies the agony Vincent faced when tackling the impossible project of recording his sensations on canvas. In this florid and critical painting series, the daily slog of Vincent's painting routine is parodied in an infinite return to the site of disappointment. In this way, Bacon's Van Gogh

paintings represent one of 20th Century art history's most passionate, if slightly sadistic, back-handed compliments.

This essay downloaded from nigelcooke.net is copyrighted and protected under international copyright laws. This material may not be reproduced in any form or manipulated without prior written permission from the artist and/or the copyright holder(s). Copyright © 2013 Nigel Cooke.