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Lucian Freud Drawings, Blain Southern, London

By Jackie Wullschlager

This small, museum-quality show offers an intimate glimpse into the life and working methods of the late painter



Detail from Lucian Freud's 'Two Figures from "Large Interior W11"'

If the National Portrait Gallery's tremendous Lucian Freud exhibition is the public statement of the late artist's historical significance, this museum-standard, non-selling display of drawings and etchings installed in a Georgian interior in Mayfair offers the private, intimate angle. Opened on Thursday and proceeding to New York in May, it is superbly curated – and was planned closely with Freud – by his biographer William Feaver, and includes outstanding work from every period.

What Feaver calls the “extraordinary allure” of Freud's drawings was already apparent by the early 1940s, when, lacking human models, he sketched dead monkeys acquired from a pet shop. Their pelts, fists and bared teeth, as well as scabby chicken carcasses and the outspread plumage of a heron – a gift from his girlfriend Lorna Wishart – all gave scope to his varied touch. The charcoal, conté and chalk portraits which followed

– “Boy on a Sofa”, his patron “Peter Watson” – are just as texturally alive, with corduroy, greasy hair, the curve of an earlobe, all immaculately depicted. The cheeky 1951 portrait of Francis Bacon, shirt and flies undone, stomach stuck out, hips flexed in a catwalk pose, is a highlight.

Mid-career, Freud moved away from such linear showmanship to “pursue the idea of making paint shoulder all concentration”, but drawing was still a preliminary. There are little-known experiments in watercolour here, very beautiful pencil drawings from the 1970s such as “Drawing of a Girl, Alice”, intriguing figural sketches in charcoal, turpentine and crayon made after the great painting “Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)”, when the canvas remained in Freud’s studio and, Feaver, suggests, “he was satisfying himself as to the inner life of the painting”. A good selection of the wonderfully dense etchings from the last two decades includes the virtuoso “Self-Portrait, Reflection” and “Girl with Fuzzy Hair”, as well as the final copper plate with chalk from 2011, a head of Jeremy King preserved unetched as he had left it.

To April 5, www.blainsouthern.com

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