

Many times over the 40 years that I knew him, Lucian Freud talked as a matter of some urgency about what it's like to die. Straight away when we first met, he told me that he was in the habit of making sure that the picture he was working on was in a fit state to survive him were he to "drop off the twig" that night. "I hope to paint myself to death," he used to say.

As it turned out, the painting he worked on most before his death last July was left in a robust state. It's a portrait of his assistant, David Dawson, the person who kept him going over the final years, lolling on a mattress with his whippet, Eli, snoozing at his side. Provisionally entitled *The Hound*, it is the last of Freud's presentations of man and beast sympathetically aligned, the grandest of which is *Sunny Morning—Eight Legs* (1997), in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, featuring Pluto, Freud's own whippet, who died in 2003, and Dawson, with an extra pair of Dawson's legs casually protruding from under the bed.

Some say that this is Freud, grandson of Sigmund Freud, in surrealist vein. Actually it was enhanced practicality.

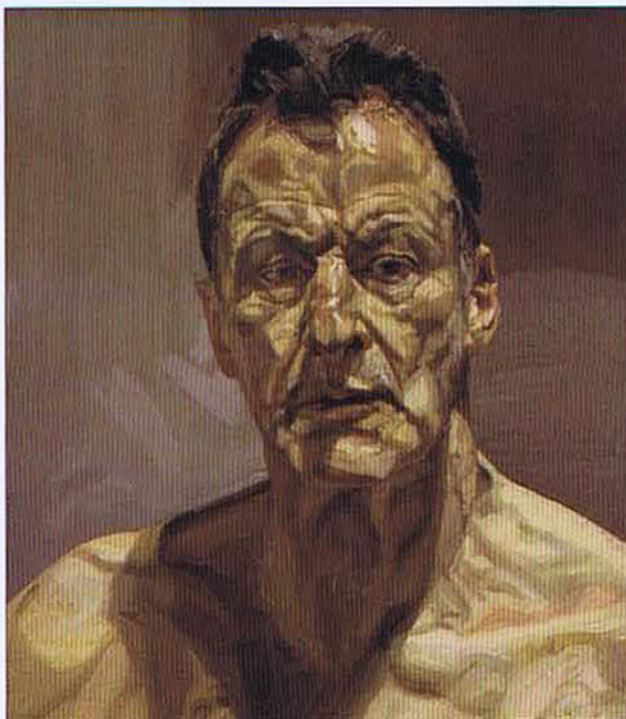
The disembodied legs were necessary to the picture, and, since virtually all his paintings were studio productions, they were there because Freud chose to put them there. No need for excuse or explanation. Looking back, the painting is a celebration of the freedom to compose incongruities. The dog sleeps, the man lies awake, and the painter does his utmost to realize the warmth of the bodies, the sunniness of the setting, and, above all, the power of a painting to keep on affirming itself.

In the course of a working life that lasted over 70 years, Freud progressed

Everything Was Autobiographical

Confounding convention, Lucian Freud made every portrait into his own

BY WILLIAM FEAVER



▲ Lucian Freud, *Reflection (Self-Portrait)*, 1985. Each head the artist painted was an individual discovered.

from examining detailed minutiae to a way of painting and printmaking that confounded convention. His etchings became enormous: splendid great drawings composed of bitten line. The pictures similarly took liberties, becoming ever more gruff and awkward. Where once he had been at pains to be tense or lyrical, latterly he worked the surfaces into battlefields almost; the heads that served as his chief objects of concentration were each an individual discovered.

"I thought," he once said, "that through observation I could make something into my own that might not have been seen or noticed in that way before." Check it out: in *Sunny Morning—Eight Legs*, the lowest kneecaps are two of the most remarkable specimens ever painted.

Freud had an instinct, an animal genius in a way, for hitting on the nature of things. Down the decades he painted buttercups, breasts, lemons, dukes, criminals, fellow artists, and the queen of England, with acute attention to their qualities and characteristics. He insisted that everything he produced was autobiographical, that his art was self-portraiture, by which he meant that he took on the world. This was no rear-guard action; his achievement was to press ahead through the late 20th century and into the 21st regardless of fashion or fashionability (one of his great admirers, incidentally, is Damien Hirst) and to make every portrait tell.

Through this past year he worked only sporadically, but however restricted his energies, he remained conscious of what would do and what wouldn't do. And there was still the urgency to get the big painting going, not pushed to a finish necessarily but at least fully charged. One of his last acts as a painter was to face *The Hound*, to load the brush and—casually almost—to add just a touch or two to Eli. Suddenly, wonderfully, the whippet's ears were transformed and the entire picture perked up. ■

William Feaver, a London correspondent for ARTnews, has written several books about his friend Lucian Freud and curated a number of exhibitions of his work, including the major retrospective at Tate Britain in 2002.