Lucian Freud’s Mountains of Flesh

Freud’s forlorn, isolated figures and grotty interiors resonate appallingly with the steep cultural and social decline fated by Brexit, if it ever takes effect.

It took me several weeks to decide whether to write about *Lucian Freud: Monumental* at Acquavella Galleries, an exhibition of the painter’s large-scale “naked portraits.” Not that the show isn’t grand or noteworthy, which it is, but because, on the face of it, Freud the artist is so completely out of step with the zeitgeist — the deadest and whitest of dead white men, an insatiable sexual adventurer and the grandson of Sigmund Freud, for God’s sake, whose interests, points of reference, and practice never departed an inch from a thoroughly Eurocentric perspective.

To focus attention on Freud while the world is burning down around us felt at best irrelevant, if not irresponsible; the critical blinders required to assess a well-known body of work that, in the scheme of things, should have been written off as retrograde and parochial, patriarchal and hegemonic, seemed as much an ethical question as an aesthetic one.
Lucian Freud, “Sunny Morning—Eight Legs” (1997), oil on canvas, 92 1/8 x 52 inches, The Art Institute of Chicago; Joseph Winterbotham Collection; © The Lucian Freud Archive (all images courtesy Acquavella Galleries, New York)
But a couple of things nudged me back in Freud’s direction. One was the coincidence of visiting *Monumental* on the same day that I saw the Neo-Conceptual group show *Formula 1: A Loud, Low Hum* at the CUE Art Foundation, organized by Mira Dayal and Simon Wu, artist/curators in their 20s. The immediacy of the materials and ideas presented in that exhibition made me question why I was heading up to Acquavella’s Gilded Age townhouse in the first place: nothing seemed farther from the contemporary frequencies emanating from *Formula 1* than the *malerisch* mystique enveloping Freud like stale cigarette smoke.

But when I got there, the paintings — not all, but more than I expected — were riveting. The relentless cruelty of Freud’s gray light, which I found deadening in past viewings, suddenly felt as piercing as the flash of a strobe, edging his forms with a sculpted, impenetrable blackness. The perspectival distortions of the floors and walls, which turn the rooms he painted into a collapsing house of cards, no longer came off as mannerisms, but as signifiers of a world losing its bearings. And the transubstantiation of paint into flesh possessed an audaciousness as blunt and unyielding as the steel and concrete on display in *Formula 1*. 

Lucian Freud, “Benefits Supervisor Sleeping” (1995), oil on canvas, 59 5/8 x 86 inches, Private Collection; © The Lucian Freud Archive
The other thing that brought Freud to mind since I saw *Monumental* was the new Whitney Biennial, which previewed this week. There is a startling number of paintings included in the show, but for the most part, these works, whose subjects often touched on social issues, were more concerned with content than with the thingness of the paint, which is what Freud, at his best, turns into an obsession.

*Monumental* is comprised of 13 paintings, several of them problematic, especially “Irish Woman on a Bed” (2003-04), a dark-haired nude whose clumsily painted legs seem to belong to a much larger torso, with a head that’s smaller still, as if Freud had to squeeze it to the size of a grapefruit to fit it on the canvas.

By contrast, in the striking “Leigh Bowery (Seated)” (1990), a frontal view of the performance artist who also posed for the famous “Naked Man, Back View” (1991-92), now in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and one of the main draws of this show, Freud ran out of room on the original canvas, laid it over a much larger support, and continued painting from there.
Other works are simply strange, like the well-known “Sunny Morning—Eight Legs” (1997), on loan from The Art Institute of Chicago, in which David Dawson, Freud’s longtime assistant and an artist in his own right (who curated the current exhibition), sprawls naked on a bed (or a platform done up like one), embracing a sleeping whippet.
named Pluto, while a pair of legs (also Dawson’s) is glimpsed on the floor beneath the sheets. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Dawson writes that the legs were added because “the painting demanded a sort of drama” — a capricious gesture made convincing solely through the solidity of the paint.

That incongruity is more than matched by “Large Interior, Notting Hill” (1998), in which Dawson is again pressed into service, but this time as a substitute for the model and actress Jerry Hall, who, according to the catalogue essay from Michael Auping, the former Chief Curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, “decided she could no longer commit the time required, and Freud simply replaced her with Dawson.” Which might sound unremarkable, except that Dawson is naked and suckling a baby at his breast.

The transexual nature of the image, which Freud treats entirely casually — Dawson is set far back in the room, while the writer Francis Wyndham dominates the foreground, relaxing on a leather love seat with a book of Gustave Flaubert’s letters, as Pluto, again asleep, curls at his feet — uncannily plumbs the heart of one of today’s fiercest cultural debates. Completed more than 20 years ago, Freud’s intentions for the painting, as Auping puts it, weren’t “about gender but [to portray] an intimate, tranquil moment: the man absorbed in his book, the sleeping dog, the figure gently breastfeeding the baby.” He then quotes Freud:

I was disappointed at first that it didn’t work out with [Hall], but in the end it didn’t really matter to the painting. […] With David as her replacement the drama got a bit louder, but in the end it was about two people (figure and baby) touching in one of those strangely quiet dramas that are hard to explain.

Freud’s indifference to the connotations of his imagery, when applied to our current context, creates a charged, even trailblazing statement. Who would have thought that aesthetic detachment could be a prescription for social equality? But Dawson’s unplanned hermaphroditism ultimately makes sense if, in Auping’s words, Freud “portrays gender with brutal accuracy, [but] didn’t seem to favor one or the other in his portraits. There are approximately the same number of male portraits as female.” Citing “Large Interior, Notting Hill,” he concludes, “their parts could even be interchangeable.”
Flesh, of course, is Freud’s fixation, and if it doesn’t matter whose skeleton it’s attached to, it’s also true that none of it is delectable — an unlikely impression from an unrepentant roué who fathered uncountable children. The ridiculously long sessions he required of his sitters — as Auping describes it, “for hours a day, a couple of times a week, for months at a time” — resulted in a buildup of paint that seemed an end in itself.

Sometimes he lost control of the mounds of impasto — as he did in “Ria, Naked Portrait” (2006-07), the most recent work in the show, in which the subject’s face disintegrates into leprous scabs of white, pink, and beige — but more often the paint becomes the form it is describing, sharply contoured into the surrounding field while pushing off the canvas into real space.

Lucian Freud, “Portrait on Gray Cover” (1996), oil on canvas, 47 3/4 x 60 7/8 inches, Private Collection
It is this consummate control of form, and the palpable presence it engenders, that felt so vital even against a Neo-Conceptual backdrop: the helmet-like head and dangling foot of “Leigh Bowery (Seated)”; the divan in “Benefits Supervisor Sleeping” (1995); and, most ravishingly, the fabric patterns in “Sleeping by the Lion Carpet” (1995-96) and “Portrait on Gray Cover” (1996). In the latter picture, the diagonal rightward pitch of the female nude’s bed is held in check by the green, blue, yellow, and pink bedspread rising like a bulwark from the canvas’s bottom edge. The massed pigment of the fabric pattern is absolutely mesmerizing — a cluster of matte colors that, while still reading as paint, feels materially inseparable from the thing it represents.

The sheer power of Freud’s formal articulation manages to propel his paintings into the political moment, almost in spite of themselves. His forlorn, isolated figures and grotty interiors, which once might have felt like tamped-down versions of his friend Francis Bacon’s succubi of existential despair, now resonate appallingly with the steep cultural and social decline fated by Brexit, if it ever takes effect. Aside from the one woman of color among Freud’s nude subjects (“Naked Solicitor,” 2003), the folds and stretches of clammy Caucasian flesh splayed out for inspection amid sullied and tattered surroundings can easily be taken as symbols of the morbid nostalgia and hard nationalism that impelled the narrow vote to go it alone.

Freud’s career paralleled the dismantling of the British Empire, and his pitiless eye tracked not only the dissolution of colonial privilege, but also, through the forensic inspection of unsound bodies, the undermining of the grand traditions of Rembrandt and Velázquez, subverting the painterly splendor he so revered with the grating realities of quotidian life. It is most likely not a denouement he anticipated, but here we are.

Lucian Freud: Monumental continues at Acquavella Galleries (18 East 79th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through May 24. The exhibition is curated by David Dawson.