

“The cleavage raises questions”: queer indeterminacies of gender in an alleged photographic portrait of the painter Francis Bacon

Dominic Janes, with Paul Rousseau

In January 1960 one of Britain’s most important artists was photographed by one of the country’s most famous photographers as if propped up in the corner of his studio like an abandoned canvas. The working relationship between the two men, Francis Bacon (1909-1992) and Cecil Beaton (1904-1980), was not good, as Simon Ofield has explored in his 2006 article on the dislike which Beaton felt for his portrait by Bacon. It was not a problem of generational clash since the two men were about the same age. It was, perhaps, a matter of class and style, which their shared (homo) sexual tastes did not serve to overcome. Beaton’s talent was for conjuring glamour through the use of compositional artifice. Bacon, by contrast, was adept at deconstructing the surface of things in order to get at inner drives. When Bacon looked at Beaton he saw an aging animal, but when Beaton looked at Bacon he saw a social mess that seemed resistant to aestheticisation. His response, in the images he took at Overstrand Mansions in Battersea – where Bacon was wont to wipe his paint-smeared hands on the curtains – was to present an instantly recognisable portrait of the painter as detritus. In doing so, he produced a set of images, one of which is reproduced here, which ultimately drew on his interwar interests in surrealism and collage (fig.1).

For in this image Bacon looks almost as though he has been stuck on at a perverse angle, the result we may assume of being asked to lean to one side when the picture was being taken. Two years before this date Bacon had begun a painting of Beaton which he subsequently destroyed, perhaps because it was not up to his usual standards, or perhaps because of the photographer’s likely reaction to its seeming ugliness.



Fig 1. Francis Bacon, by Cecil Beaton, January 1960, bromide print, 7 3/8 in. x 7 1/2 in. (18.8 x 19 cm), NPG x40009, © Cecil Beaton Studio Archive, Sotheby's London

There is, however, one more important difference between the portraits produced by these two men: Beaton's photographic portraits were designed to be instantly recognisable. He specialised in producing images of celebrities, which somehow distilled what was familiar about them into a peculiarly intense form, whereas Bacon's named portraits (such as of his lover George Dyer, or of Henrietta Moraes) are notable for their queer indeterminacy. What we see before us in most Bacon portraits is not clearly a particular person, or necessarily obviously male or female, and sometimes not even necessarily human. Photographic portraits *of* Bacon, by contrast, tend to be instantly recognisable, if only because he had a highly distinctive face. But if the aim of a portrait is to present the essence of a person, rather than to serve as an icon that serves as a convenient method of summary identification, then it is

perhaps an *uncertain* image – merely attributed as being of Bacon –that might be most effective in capturing the essence of the painter’s own queer vision.



Fig 2. c.1939, John Deakin Archive, JMO_16499 (catalogue title of these images by Bruce Bernard), gelatin-silver print, 30.48 x 25.4 cm, reproduced by permission of The John Deakin Archive.

Facial recognition is necessary to the maintenance of human society. Facial *mis*recognition can cause panic or hilarity in social occasions depending upon the results. The opportunities for juxtaposition of images on websites seems to have recently promoted a wave of enthusiasm for, in effect, caricaturing two faces placed in juxtaposition. Thus, when *The Daily Mirror* chose to mock the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, for allegedly burying various pieces of bad news by releasing the news on the Queen's ninetieth birthday, it did so by publishing pictures of Cameron and the Prime Minister with faces at the same scale, and the same angle, such that the one looked a bit like the other in drag (Smith, Bloom and Torry, 2016). This game is widely played online, as can be seen from such as another page that juxtaposes pictures of sloths and pains au chocolat. The face of a sloth, it is revealed, does indeed bear a peculiar resemblance to the end view of a pain au chocolat which has leaked chocolate such as to give the visual impression of a pair of squinting, brown eyes (The Poke, 2016).

Of course the humour of juxtapositions such as these is that we know that the Queen is not the Prime Minister cross-dressed, and a sloth does not really resemble a French pastry. The troubling notion that men, women, humans and animals are in many senses peculiarly interchangeable when it comes to emotions, pain and desire is by contrast quite beyond a joke. This may help to explain the tittering unease which greeted the highlighting by Paul Rousseau, archivist at The John Deakin Archive, of what he hailed as a queerly indeterminate image of Bacon in drag complete with cleavage, from amongst a batch of photographs in Deakin's materials that appeared initially to be 'transvestites' or men in drag (fig. 2).

The term 'transvestite' is not original to the images, but was applied by Bruce Bernard when he catalogued these images. Bernard was a member of the Soho artistic set, who rescued Deakin's archive from where it was stored under his bed when he died in 1972.

This identification became national news in 2014 when The Guardian published a story that announced, 'CIA Facial Software Uncovers the Artist Francis Bacon – in Drag' (Comstock, 2014). This software was employed in the wake of an exhibition at which this photograph was identified by a viewer as looking like Bacon (who was a close friend of Deakin). Rousseau, having re-examined the other images from the same set in search of possible attributions, commented, I quickly landed on his closest friends Denis Wirth-Miller and Richard (Dickie) Chopping. Denis was a painter and Dickie was semi-famous for designing

the original dustjackets for the James Bond books... Dickie was known to love dragging up; he was dame every year at the RCA when he became a lecturer there in 1962. And there are many references to Bacon's interest in drag, his wearing of women's knickers and stockings (quoted in Comstock, 2014).

Another of the images seemed to bear a striking resemblance to the artist John Minton (fig. 3), who was known for occasionally dragging up. Chopping was known for giving drag performances, whilst his long-term partner Wirth-Miller (fig 4) was also Bacon's best friend.



Fig 3. c.1939, John Deakin Archive, JMO_16499 (catalogue title of these images by Bruce Bernard), gelatin-silver print, 30.48 x 25.4 cm, reproduced by permission of The John Deakin Archive.



Fig 4. c.1939, John Deakin Archive, JMO_16499 (catalogue title of these images by Bruce Bernard), gelatin-silver print, 30.48 x 25.4 cm, reproduced by permission of The John Deakin Archive.

The article reporting this news agreed that the use of facial recognition software suggested that the identity of the men in the set was unproven, but the similarity to the men they were suspected of being was indeed striking. *The Guardian's* article concluded:

One question still remains. While the face is very much like Bacon's and the mole on the model's chest closely matches that which can be seen in the famous picture of Bacon holding two sides of meat, it is impossible to ignore the substantial cleavage. 'Deakin was known to fiddle about with photos using basic overpainting techniques,' says Rousseau. 'Or did Bacon learn to manipulate his "moobs" like that from his years in Weimar Berlin?' The origin of the cleavage may be one art mystery that never gets solved.

This is how the image is currently identified; being labelled on Getty Images as 'Portrait of an unidentified transvestite, possibly the artist Francis Bacon in drag, England pre-1945. The cleavage raises questions, but may be the result of photo manipulation' (<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/portrait-of-an-unidentified-transvestite-possibly-the-news-photo/522888113>).

In fact, the software employed was not some top-secret package, but a specialist computer programme produced by the Animetrics Company and widely employed by law-enforcement agencies around the world, including at airport security. Rousseau subsequently decided to obtain the opinion of 'forensic imagery analysis' expert David Anley of Anley Consulting, who works extensively in court cases involving issues of facial recognition. His report produced inconclusive results for the 'Bacon' images, and argued against the identification of Chopping, but supported the contention that others were of Wirth-Miller and Minton (Anley, 2015, discussed in Rousseau, with Cole, 2016, p. 222).

The fact remains, of course, that we are not sure whether these images do in fact show Bacon and a group of his friends in female drag. The only name recorded, which appears on the back on one of the photographs, is of Audrey Cruddas, who was a costume- and scene-designer, painter and potter. Rousseau is now investigating a new possibility that some of the people in these photographs are a group of Cruddas' lesbian friends who were impersonating men dressing in drag. Such convolutions in gender impersonation were nothing new in the interwar period; they underlay, for example, aspects of Mae West's over-the-top performances of hypersexual womanhood.

Dominic Janes and Paul Rousseau are working together to produce a narrative diary of the process of NOT quite discovering the personal and gendered identity of the set of images of which the 'Bacon' photograph is the most famous example. This may involve accepting that we cannot be sure these were even taken by Deakin. Our aim in doing this is to suggest that we can learn a good deal about the visual culture of mid-twentieth century artistic London if we accept both the significance of glamorous celebrity and queer indeterminacy.

In 1939, therefore about the time when we think the ‘drag’ photographs in the Deakin archive were taken, Cecil Beaton arranged a set of uproarious photo-shoots in which a group of his friends dressed (and in many cases cross-dressed) as members of spurious Continental aristocratic families. The results, based partly on Queen Marie of Romania’s arguably kitsch reminiscences, which he was reading at the time, featured the likes of the famous dancer and choreographer Frederick Ashton as a Grand Duchess. The results were published by Beaton in a book entitled *My Royal Past*, concerning which the art connoisseur (and future co-founder of the ICA) Peter Watson wrote that it was astonishing to see its satirical exposition of ‘crass stupidities and general dirt, beaming severely’ from a Mayfair bookshop window (Janes, 2015, p. 166). Transgressive dressing across class and gender seems to have been prominent in certain circles in queer London on the eve of World War Two. The prevalence of such social deconstructions suggests that we might benefit from looking again at the apparent aesthetic chasm that divided the creative worlds of Beaton from that of Bacon. Both men appear to have been adept at spotting supposedly ‘baser’ desires behind surface appearances. It is interesting to think about Beaton’s satirical photography and Beaton’s art overall as both participating in queer visual cultures of the mid-twentieth century that played on the concealment and revelation of identity. From that point of view a photograph that cannot clearly be identified as being of Bacon, but yet seems to resemble him—and which may or may not represent gender transgression—could be viewed as a more successful portrait of the painter as a queer man than the uneasy photographs that Beaton took of him in 1961.

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Biographies:

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