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An archive of voices from Studio 10

Episode 5

A Visit with the Big Man:

Studio 10 meets Lucian Freud

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Erin Quinn, *After Freud's Double Portrait*, 2021

'See his life in the pictures'

Narrator (N): We are taking a close look, in this episode, at the great realist painter Lucian Freud and in particular a key work by Freud, [Two Irishmen in W11](#), which was painted between 1984 and 1985. *Two Irishmen* is the centrepiece of the [Freud Project](#), a five-year loan to the IMMA Collection of more than fifty works by this master painter. Freud is almost as well known for his bohemian lifestyle as for his paintings. Barbara Geraghty explained to me and Sandra Murphy why she was drawn to Lucian Freud's work. Barbara Geraghty (BG): Well, I liked the Lucian Freud exhibition. I had seen a [documentary](#) there a few years ago about him and about his work and I never thought that I'd actually be able to see his work here and I couldn't believe it, and it was fantastic, really great. I just like his work and just the



whole – you can kind of see his life in the pictures.

Sandra Murphy (SM): His lifestyle is it?

BG: His lifestyle yeah.

SM: The history, would it be, in relation to his family?

BG: In relation to his family, and the friends.



Evvy Richard of the visitor engagement team shares Lucian Freud's affection for horses.

"It was in the Pyrénées, at the Spanish border. We drove from Bordeaux to overnight in this Basque village. They are actually rain clouds, but we were above, so stayed dry."



Ciara Magee, Visitor Engagement Team, *After Freud's Head of a Girl, 2021*

'The face is marvellous'

N: London became the place that Lucian Freud preferred to all others, and his titles often include the London area codes W9 and W11, where he lived and worked throughout a 70-year long career. When Freud painted *Two Irishmen in W11*, he had an attic studio in Holland Park where the two men from Ballymena came and sat for him, and the artist included the view from his [studio window](#) of old houses and a tower block in the distance, out towards Shepherd's Bush. Barbara and I walked over to the Freud Centre to see *Two Irishmen in W11* in the flesh.

BG: It's such a huge painting and there's so much in it. Like the man, his hands are so big, aren't they? They're massive – absolutely massive. But you can see everything on the hand and –

PB: That's right, the hairs. I love the hairs on the back of the hands.

BG: The hairs on the back of the hands, yeah.

PB: All the veins –

BG: Yeah the veins, the nails

PB: Almost the bones coming through – those yellow...

BG: And then the face is marvellous, the face is fantastic. You can see the hairs, the –

PB: The lovely comb-over.

BG: The comb-over yeah! And all the different brush strokes that are on his face, that make up the face, and then the other man, he looks so sad, doesn't he!

PB: Everyone says that.

BG: He looks so sad – whether he was or not I don't know.

PB: He was his son.

BG: His son.



Installation view of IMMA Collection: Freud Project, *Inaugural Exhibition*, 21 Oct 2016 – 07 Jan 2018

'This is the Big Man'

PB: This is the 'Big Man', as Freud called him. The central figure is the Big Man seated, and then behind him, with one hand on the chair is his son, who was only nineteen at the time, and, I think sometimes you do see the sort of – the boredom of sitting.

BG: Of sitting, I suppose, yeah.

PB: Even though Freud was very engaging to be with, and entertaining, there were times when he'd stop talking to you or listening to you and just have to focus on the work. So it was two years of this.

BG: So maybe it was the boredom rather than being sad. But then when you look out the window – it's like a different painting, isn't it? He's done it in a different way hasn't he?

PB: How do you see it as different? Why a different way? Compared to the man's face?

BG: Well, compared to the man. Maybe it's just because it's so big and, but looking out the window it's nearly like a picture, isn't it?

PB: A photo?

BG: A photo – in a way.

PB: I know what you mean, the brushstrokes are still there.

BG: Yeah they are.

PB: But they are more controlled –

BG: They're more controlled I suppose.

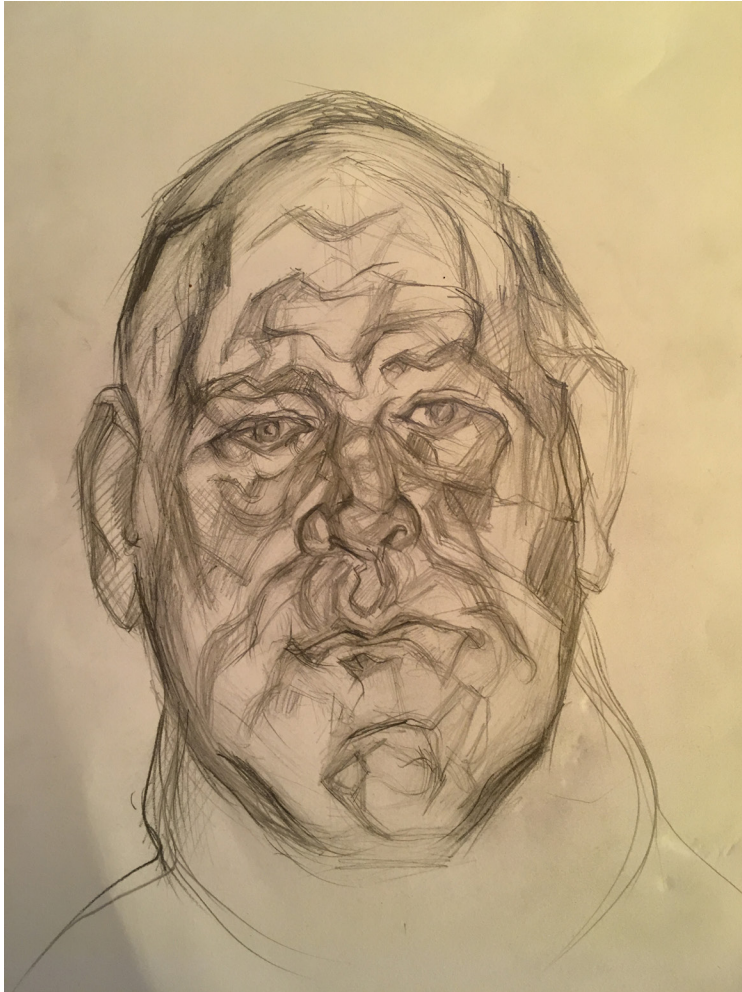
PB: To suit the architecture. We're looking at lovely old houses, maybe Victorian.

BG: The tiles on the roof, and... no it's fantastic.

PB: There's incredible detail in it.

BG: Incredible detail.

PB: In the whole painting.



[Janet Boltax](#)

Portraitist

After Freud's [Head of the Big Man](#)

2017, pencil on paper

30.5 x 22.9 cm

'Did he have a motive?'

BG: And then on the floor you can see where he has started two other canvases, you can see the faces there.

PB: You know that's himself.

BG: Oh, is that himself?

PB: That's Lucian. And in one or both he has a black eye, in this one. He had a fight with a taxi driver. He was – he used to get into fights a lot and it's supposed to resemble the [Egyptian book](#) that he loved and some of the Egyptian artworks from Amarna from 3,000 years before.¹

¹ Button, Virginia, *Lucian Freud*, (London, Tate, 2015), p. 82.

BG: And his brushstrokes then on the tiles, on the wall.

PB: And do you ever wonder about what it all means, Barbara?

BG: The painting?

PB: Yeah, yeah.

BG: Well, what does it mean? The Big Man was a friend of his, wasn't he, and obviously the son was then as well. But I mean, did he have a motive for painting it, for painting them?

PB: Well, he did like the Big Man, they were friends for at least thirty years, until the Big Man died, I think, and he was also his bookie. Yeah, I think it is what we see, yeah. I think so.



Clay workshop
in response to Freud
Photo Ciara Murray

BG: Yeah, and I just noticed there, you can see his watch, like even to that detail.

PB: Every detail is noted. Yeah. I mean, as a colleague pointed out to me – Maggie – even the dirt – in the painting of the [mother reading](#) the book, there's dirt under her fingernail.

BG: Under her fingernail.

PB: And he puts that in, so, he's looking so hard, and I think his intense looking requires ours in return.

BG: Oh it does.

PB: Because we were saying "It is what we see", but you see more each time.

BG: But you see more, you do, the more you look at a painting the more you see and go out and come back again and you see something different. No, it's fantastic.

'One of Freud's best'

N: Ben Dhonau, while appreciating Freud's masterpiece, *Two Irishmen in W11*, casts a more critical eye on the painter. Freud is acclaimed for his achievements in portraiture but is also sternly criticised by some for his lifestyle.

PB: Is this one of your favourites of Lucian Freud's?

Ben Dhonau (BD): It is, yeah. It's a really, really good portrait of people, particularly the elderly man.



Caroline Orr, Curator: Engagement and Learning, visits a Studio 10 workshop in response to Freud as Bernadette McCarthy works on a self-portrait.

BD: You know, I think the younger figure in the background is – he's looking, well, very empty. He looks as if he's not very keen on being there and the figure – the main figure, the father – is really the portrait of a relaxed, confident, powerful man.

PB: Deep in thought.

BD: Yes, it is, as people have pointed out to me, typical of Freud, with his view looking down on, you know, on people.

PB: But he loves, in older men, he loves to get that receding hairline, and he uses it to emphasise the intellect, the brain.²

BD: I don't get the feeling on this one that he's aged the man, either, 'cause I do know he did tend to age his people.

PB: He did. Yeah, I've seen photos of him from around that time. I think he gives him great dignity in this portrait.

BD: Yes.

² Hughes, Robert, *Lucian Freud: Paintings*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1989), 2003 edition, p. 21.

'A telephoto lens'

PB: You've talked about Velasquez earlier and your love for Velasquez and that wonderful portrait of the pope, [Pope Innocent X](#), who looks anything but innocent.

BD: Yeah. (chuckles).

PB: It's known as this, as one of the great portraits of western art.

BD: Yes, yes, yes. Well, I mean, this isn't as good as that, but it is very, very good, and it's one I think, one of Freud's best.



Installation view of IMMA Collection: Freud Project, [Life Above Everything](#), Lucian Freud and Jack B. Yeats, 28 June 2019 – 19 Jan 2020

BD: I find his portraits much more interesting and attractive than his nudes. I mean, his perspective is very odd in these pictures. I mean it's the perspective of looking at something from a telephoto lens. You can see it particularly with the hands and the proportions there –

PB: Well you know that he –

BD: His body that he's stretching out, the way he –

PB: Well as Lawrence Gowing said in his wonderful book in 1982, *Lucian Freud*, he seems – his process is a bit like echo sounding. He takes readings from different positions, he moves around, and if he sees something interesting from one angle, he'll put it in from that point of view. And you get that here, there's that feeling of oddness. It accentuates that feeling of oddness that you get in a Lucian Freud painting.

BD: Yes.

PB: I think he's done it with that other hand.

BD: That hand is far too big for the arm and the body behind it.

PB: You often – you get that with [Guy and Speck](#) as well, the head and hands are very big. But we'll agree it's still a masterpiece.

BD: Oh it is, yes. I find it interesting that he includes that very detailed street scene

into the picture. I'm not sure how it fits, but it means there's more to it than just a blank background, it's not just a portrait.

PB: That's right. Well, Freud said that he thinks it's awful to say a painting is timeless.³ Paintings are of their time, as we said earlier, and of their place. And for him, London and place was always hugely important.



Rosaleen Murphy,
Studio 10 participant

'They had left to escape the Inquisition'

N: Freud's parents, Ernst and Lucie, fled Berlin because of the Nazi threat, in 1933. By coincidence, in the sixteenth century, Ben's ancestors were religious refugees from the Spanish Netherlands who fled to Germany. It happened that Ben's parents were living in France when war broke out and moved to England just before the Nazis marched into the city on June 14th 1940.

BD: Yeah, well my family, both were of German extraction and they were living in France until they left Paris a week before the Germans arrived. So they were, they came from – my mother had lived and worked in Germany and so they didn't come from, they didn't come from a sort of English country background.

PB: Very interesting. So hence the name, which I've probably mispronounced. How do you say it Ben?

BD: Dhonau is how it's pronounced, or how we pronounce it.

PB: Are there many Dhonaus?

BD: No. Very – even in Germany, it's not a common name.

PB: Ok, yeah, so you can probably trace back. Have you done that?

BD: Yes. I haven't, but somebody else did and sent it to me, back to 1540 or something.

³ Button, V., p. 79.

PB: Fantastic.

BD: But I don't think it was very difficult, because they came to a little town in 1540, refugees from the Spanish Netherlands, and then they stayed there 'til nineteen – 'til 1860.

PB: Were they religious refugees?

BD: Yes, apparently. They were Protestants and so they had left to escape the Inquisition. (Chuckles).

PB: Very interesting history.



IMMA Members' workshop
in Studio 10

'He wouldn't paint without the subjects present'

N: His family history may have given Freud a more acute sensitivity to people and to life's fragility as we move through time and space. He was certainly determined to make art that would last.

PB: So I think, yeah, where you are and the time that you're in. So he paints people, he paints this Big Man, as he calls him, at different times. We have the earlier portraits from 1975 onwards. But he's very conscious of that and he spoke to [Martin Gayford](#) about it, how you're different every day and it's so extraordinary, even the cells in your body are being replaced. Your experiences in life are so different on any particular day, that he himself was surprised he could finish anything, finish a painting.

BD: But I find it very strange, I must say, with him, that he wouldn't paint any of this without the subjects present.

PB: Well again, it's not about, exactly, spirituality – he didn't believe in an after-life.

But he said that each person does have an [energy](#) and changes completely the room they're in.⁴

BD: Yeah, but on the other hand, painting that wall, I don't see why he needs to have a sitter present while he paints that wall. I really don't get it when it comes to painting something like that.

PB: You could take that section of wall and it could be an abstract painting.

BD: Oh you could, but if that's what the wall is more or less like, that's what the wall is more or less like, and I don't see that it makes any great difference to the picture and if it was to be slightly different, he'd feel slightly different about it without the sitters present. As I say, I really don't get that, that he felt he couldn't paint without them there.



Installation view of IMMA Collection: Freud Project, [Life Above Everything](#), Lucian Freud and Jack B. Yeats, 28 June 2019 – 19 Jan 2020

PB: I think all of the painting has to have a feeling in it.

BD: Yes, but even so, I mean, I remember asking, the one of the horse here – It wasn't one of the ones on display here. It was when his assistant, whose name I've forgotten ...

PB: David Dawson.

BD: [David Dawson](#) gave a talk here and he showed one of his pictures, it was a horse from the [stables](#) of the – near Freud's house.

PB: The [skewbald mare](#) that he used to ride.

BD: Yeah, and there was this portrait of it and he –

PB: That horse was brought to his graveside.

BD: Yeah, but it took him the same sort of length of time as it took him, you know, several hundred hours to paint it –

PB: Oh Yes.

BD: – And he wouldn't paint without the horse there, 'cause [David Dawson](#) said he had to hold the horse's head all the time (chuckles).

⁴ Freud, Lucian, 'Some Thoughts on Painting', *Encounter*, vol. 3, no. 1, July 1954, pp. 23-24

PB: Oh yes, of course, that's right, and you felt sorry for the horse?

BD: Well, yeah (chuckles). And there was lots of that. Couldn't see what difference it would've made the horse.

PB: They're beautiful portraits.

BD: Oh it is, it's a terrific piece of painting.

'I always loved horses'

N: *The Skewbald Mare* which Ben alluded to is arguably the greatest painting of a horse's backside in the history of art. Ries Hoek, like Freud, is a horse lover and painter. Ries and I visited the Freud Centre too and discussed a small painting there of a horse, [A Filly](#), painted in 1970. Lucian showed an early interest in horses, when he was at Dartington Hall in Devon, the progressive boarding school his parents sent him to. Lucian bunked off classes to spend time with the horses and goats. Not so strange when you realise that here was a ten-year-old boy in a strange country who did not yet speak English.



Patricia Brennan, *After Freud's Filly*, 2020

Ries Hoek (RH): But I always loved horses, when I was young, I worked for a farm, and it was raining, pouring rain, and I had to bring manure to the land with a cart. But I was sitting all the time on the horse, driving through the land, through the rain, and I was just enjoying myself totally. So, I have painted horses, I love horses, I remember all the big horses on the continent, for breweries they had special horses, very strong horses,

beautiful animals. I know painters who have – [Breitner](#) painted a lot of horses.

PB: But you painted horses, and they are notoriously difficult to paint. Did you find that?

RH: Yes. Well, anything is difficult to paint (laughing).

PB: Well, they don't keep still for a start.

RH: But I love painting horses, I love painting anything.



Installation view of IMMA Collection: Freud Project, *Gaze*, 4 Oct 2018 – 6 May 2019

‘Not an attractive face’

N: Freud abandoned many canvases, for different reasons. Sometimes he felt they just could not be satisfactorily resolved, or a model might leave. One such unfinished work is titled *Naked Portrait, Fragment*, from 2001.

PB: Do you think he should have continued with it, that he could have?

RH: Well, yeah, well that is a difficult question to answer. Of course, any artist should finish his pictures, but I know many artists, many works were not finished. So, who am I to judge?

PB: On the other hand, it gives us a clue as to how he thought and how he worked, which we wouldn't otherwise have.

RH: No, I agree with that.

PB: Even the way he has moved the legs, he starts with a charcoal drawing, but he's not tied to it.

RH: Ok, that – does every artist. I have moved heads, even, or noses, what I thought were not right, you know, when I do a portrait. You know, the face is not an attractive face, this. But there!

PB: Of course, Lucian wasn't trying to make anybody attractive, his idea was not the traditional nude, but the [naked portrait](#) and to be truth telling, to reveal what's happening

with the person at that time in their life.

RH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RH: The man – he has done fantastic things.



Installation view of IMMA Collection: Freud Project, *Gaze*, 4 Oct 2018 – 6 May 2019

N: Well, Ries and I certainly agreed on that; Lucian Freud did fantastic paintings. [Double Portrait](#), 1985–1986, is a hugely popular painting by Freud, and one of great tenderness. The sitters were Susanna, who was close to Freud for many years, stretched out half asleep with her whippet, Joshua. The dog's muzzle rests trustingly in her hand, its forelegs entwined with the woman's arms. Sarah Galbraith described how she felt on seeing this portrait to Sandra Murphy, another animal lover.

'The lovely blue eyes'

Sarah Galbraith (SG): And Freud, I loved his [etchings](#). They really moved me; they were, like, not much colour, just I don't know, I don't know the names but the kind of brown-black colours. But it just brought the paintings to life. It was just a plain piece of paper and the amount of work he would've spent. And his whippet, [Pluto](#). He really, that really hit a nerve, because my sister's dog that I used to love and mind – I remember lying out in the back garden with the dog and he was dying. But I was kind of – he had his head on my chest, and I was talking to him – bit mad – and he put his paw up onto my arm, you know, and like as if he knew that I knew that he was dying. And I was like, I just felt close to him.

SM: Yes, yeah.



Erin Quinn, *After Freud's Eli*, 2021

FURTHER READING

Martin Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 2010).

Lawrence Gowing, *Lucian Freud*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1982).

Christina Kennedy et al., *Lucian Freud*, (Dublin, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2016).

Christina Kennedy, Nathan O'Donnell, editors, *Life Above Everything: Lucian Freud and Jack B. Yeats*, (Dublin, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2019).

Catherine Lampert et al., *Lucian Freud*, (Dublin, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007).

FURTHER LISTENING

IMMA Soundcloud

<https://soundcloud.com/imma-ireland/sets/imma-collection-freud-project>

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**ÁRAS NUA-EALAÍNE
NA hÉIREANN**
IRISH MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART

Ospidéal Rioga
Cill Mhaighneán
Baile Átha Cliath 8
D08 FW31, Éire

Royal Hospital
Kilmainham
Dublin 8
D08 FW31, Ireland

+353 1 612 9900
imma.ie / info@imma.ie

