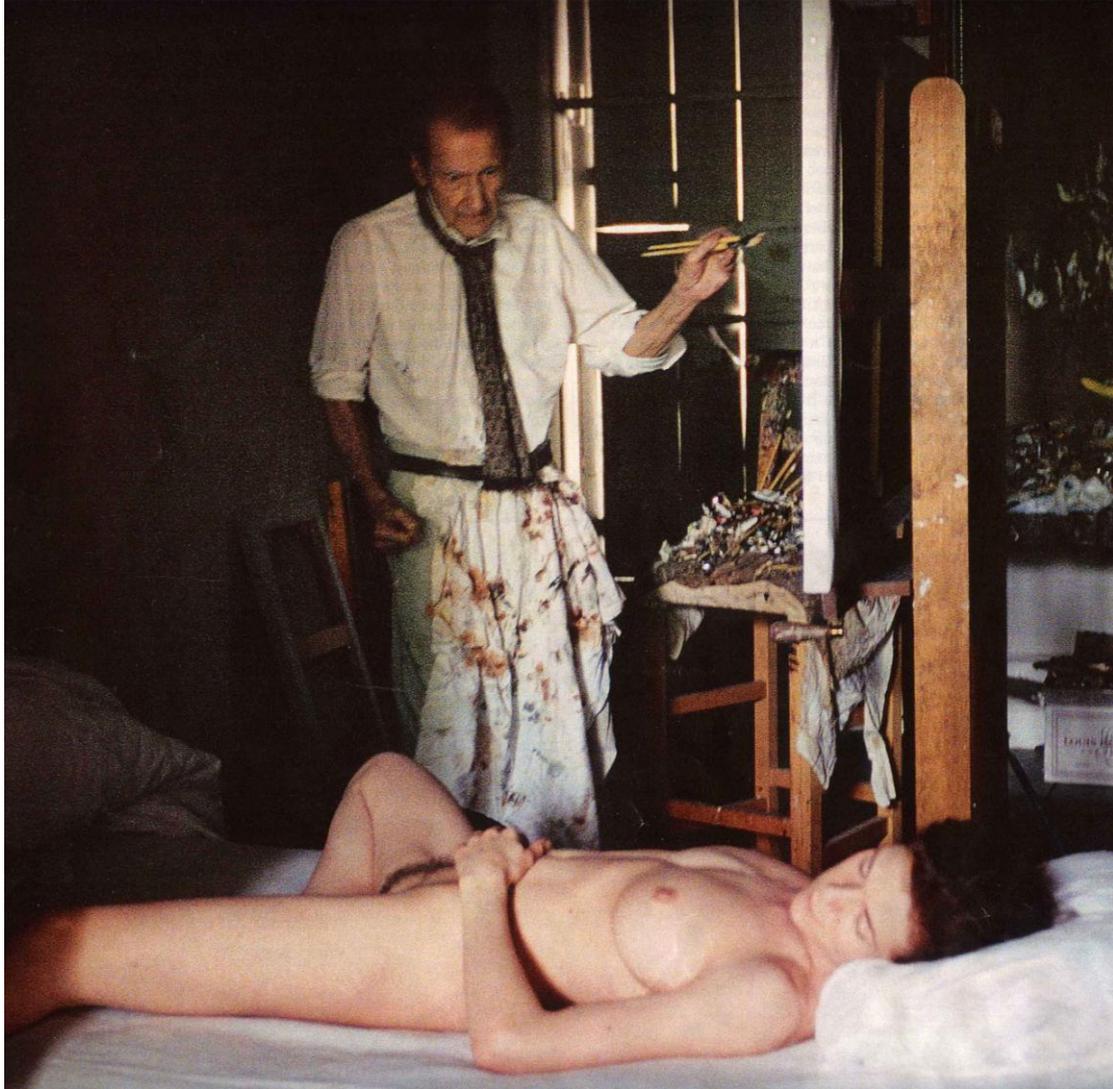


Death of a Salesman

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Lucian Freud's unblinking scrutiny of the human form has redefined European portraiture and nude traditions, making him at age 88, the foremost figurative artist living and working today. The uniqueness of Freud's work lies in his meticulous treatment of his model and his hauntingly beautiful interpretation of human flesh through thick impasto and densely scraped surfaces...¹

An unexceptional piece of art criticism, you might think—and in a sense it is—but it was written by the anonymous agent of an art advisory firm for an HSBC market review of

¹ 'Lucian Freud—Market Review, May 2010,
http://www.hsbcpb.com/perspective/lucian_freud_market_review.html

the painter's prices and prospects. For many years now it has been impossible to untangle Freud's financial and critical reputation, each being the sanction for the other.

Freud's market success, especially during the last contemporary art boom, was extraordinary. In 2008, following a steep ascent, he became the world's most expensive living artist, in part because of Roman Abramovich's purchase of *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* for \$33.6m. Since the year of the crash, Freud's prices have not fallen far, as his work is seen as a refuge from the whims of novelty and fashion.

Unlike the flashy stars of the 1990s and beyond, Hirst and Murakami above all, Freud appeared to be an unbranded artist. He was an expressive painter of the old school, and his supporters stressed the organic connection between the master's touch and the import of his work. He had personal connections with Francis Bacon and other giants of an earlier age, when the idea that great truths could be imparted in paint was little doubted. His lineage—the grandson of Sigmund no less—helped to reinforce the line that there was some singular yet universally meaningful inner self to be illumined in the work. He carried with him the baggage of that age and lineage, which any canny marketer would long since have dropped, not least its primitive view of relations between the female muse, reduced to flesh, and laid prone before the eye and hand of the master. Yet, naturally, in the fervid years of the boom, all of this became a branding of the most effective kind; likewise, so often in the art world, the repudiation of money becomes the most effective way to make it.

Freud's manner of working was notoriously lengthy, involving much slow building up of paint surfaces and frequent reworking. Sitting for a portrait could take months. The effect, as with many artists who labour long over individual works, is to restrict supply and so boost prices. The death of an artist is usually thought to bring a halt to production by capping the supply of work. With many artists though, as families, estates and forgers (these categories may overlap) get to work on the legacy, the supply may actually increase. In the case of some sculptors, there has certainly been an increase in production after death. With traditional painters, for whom reproduction is not an option, decisions are made about what falls in or out of the oeuvre of accepted works. In Freud's case, death may make little difference to the market, since his prices were already greatly inflated and supply already restricted.

Yet is there an added pathos here, that may be used to lever extra value? That Freud may be seen as the last of a line of expressive painters, his like not to be seen again? That this is the extinction of one of the most distinguished artists to have survived the rift of conceptual art, and to have brought with him, largely unaltered, the ideals of the past into a vulgar present? It would be conventional to think so, yet it would also be to forget the fact that traditions are invented and regularly remade, and that artists—the archetypal individualists who sell above all the image of themselves—are in continual need of myth-making, and that they have found (so far) no end of willing supplicants. So, while there will be no repetition, it is far too soon to say that male masters will not once more loom above passive female bodies, that viewers will not believe that deep meaning lies in the artist's painterly touch, that lengthy labour must yield significance, and that art puts those who contemplate it in touch with transcendent values. And for all that, of course, there are a class of buyers who will pay a lot.