

Turning paint into flesh

By Brent Gregston





With the passing of Lucian Freud, the world lost one of the 20th century's greatest artists

"I want paint to work as flesh," said Lucian Freud, grandson of Sigmund. His fleshy masterpieces made him the world's most famous portrait artist.

Freud died in London, on July 20. He was 88 years old.

His subjects included the Queen of England and a very pregnant Kate Moss, but also friends and family, criminals, plants, animals and litter. He painted himself with a black eye after slugging it out with a cab driver and, much later, at 71, standing nude in a mirror.

Freud's painted flesh can be massive and brutal. He immortalized some of his sitters as oversized mammals, particularly his obese

friend "Big" Sue Tillery and performance artist Leigh Bowery. It's these portraits that American novelist John Updike had in mind when he wrote a poem about Freud's work beginning: "Yes, the body is a hideous thing / the feet and genitals especially / the human face not far behind..."

Big Sue made Freud the world's most expensive living artist in 2008, when Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich paid \$34 million for her nude portrait – titled "Benefits Supervisor Sleeping" (she worked at a job center). "I spent nine months posing for him in the mid-'90s," she told the British daily *The Sun* after he died, "so he was very much a part of my life."

The relationship of painter to sitter is at the heart of Freud's work. He was capable of driving his subjects hard, demanding that they pose for hours on end. A single portrait could take a year to complete. "I'm only interested in my sitters as animals," he once insisted, though he knew how to create trust between himself and his models. "As he mixed the paint, he would talk," explained fellow artist and former sitter David Hockney to the *London Evening Standard*. "All subjects seem to come up, but a lot was gossip about people we both knew. He could be very pithy and funny about them, very good putdowns that made me laugh."



Born in Berlin to architect Ernst Freud, Sigmund's youngest son, Lucian Freud moved to Britain with his parents when he was 11 years old. In 1939, he became a British citizen. His earliest work shows the influence of German artists like Otto Dix, George Grosz and Egon Schiele. His portraits, would, in time, be compared to Old Masters like Titian, Rubens and Rembrandt.

Despite the fame and, eventually, money, Freud remained the ultimate outsider. An Austrian Jew often accused of being a "very British" artist, a realist portrait painter living in a contemporary art world inhabited by abstract artists. French arbiters of taste found him outrageous. "To paint like Freud," wrote *Le Monde* critic Philippe Dagen, "you must find a model that has one or several anatomical peculiarities – obesity, pendulous breasts, knock-knees or being massively hung. Undress him or her and place the sitter on an unmade bed or a broken down couch in a position that fully exposes these physical attributes. Throw in a sleeping dog or a withered plant."

Lucian Freud now takes his place in history and, for many people in the art world, will be remembered as the last great portrait artist, "a witness to human nature without equal," according to *New York Times* art critic John Russell. He was "one of the great painters of the 20th century," said friend and gallerist William Acquavella, who added, "He lived to paint and painted until the day he died, far removed from the noise of the art world."