
Research Articles

Comparative Research on Pictorial Language in the Figure Paintings of Francis Bacon and Marlene Dumas

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Abstract

The study aims to (1) analyse the pictorial language of each artist, (2) identify their similarities and differences, (3) examine the relationship between pictorial language, cultural context, and identity, and (4) consider implications for contemporary figure painting. An interpretivist qualitative research design was adopted using a multiple-case comparative approach. The study population comprised the figure paintings of Bacon and Dumas, from which representative works were purposively selected as the analytical sample. Data were collected through visual analysis of the selected artworks and supported by the artists' statements and relevant scholarly literature. A six-dimensional analytical framework—line, colour, form, space, brushwork and texture, and composition—was employed, integrating formal, iconological, and comparative analysis.

The findings reveal two distinct modes of pictorial transformation, conceptualised as Bacon's "deconstructive" approach and Dumas's "translative" approach. Bacon's pictorial language is characterised by geometric framing, dissolved contours, bodily distortion, and enclosed spatial structures, producing an existentialist aesthetic. In contrast, Dumas employs concealed line, subjectivised colour, fluid forms, and open space to construct an identity-oriented aesthetic. Despite their differences, both artists move beyond realism, draw on photographic sources, and negotiate the boundary between figuration and abstraction. The study further indicates that their divergent approaches are shaped by distinct cultural

contexts and demonstrate how painterly transformation remains significant in an era increasingly dominated by photographic and AI-generated imagery.

Keywords: Francis Bacon, Marlene Dumas, Pictorial Language, Figure Painting, Formal Analysis, Comparative Art Studies

Introduction

Figure painting, one of the oldest genres in the visual arts, has long served as a vehicle for the exploration of human existence. By the second half of the twentieth century, the proliferation of photography and mass-media imagery had placed the representational function of realist painting under pressure, prompting artists to seek alternative pictorial languages through which figure painting could be redefined. At this pivotal moment, Francis Bacon (1909–1992) and Marlene Dumas (b. 1953) each forged a distinctive pictorial language. Bacon, widely recognized as one of the most influential British painters of the twentieth century, created a singular mode of figural representation through distorted bodily forms, claustrophobic spatial enclosures, and an intense sense of corporeal presence. Dumas, a South African-born painter based in the Netherlands since 1976, produced a highly recognizable vocabulary through her wet-on-wet technique, her transformation of photographic imagery, and her engagement with identity, race, and gender (Özcan, 2024). Therefore, contributes a structured six-dimensional framework consisting of: line, colour, form, space, brushwork and texture, composition. Although the two belong to different generations and cultural milieus, both seek a working balance between figuration and abstraction, and both negotiate the space between inherited tradition and formal innovation.

Existing scholarships on Bacon and Dumas is substantial but predominantly monographic. A notable early point of convergence was the 1995 joint exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli, Turin, where curators offered a preliminary discussion of the two artists' shared concerns with the body and identity (Bloemheuvel & Mot, 1995). More recently, scholars have begun to position the two within a single analytical frame: Chau (2019) reads both through Lacanian psychoanalysis, taking “split portraiture” as a point of entry; Lelik

(2020) examines the portraiture of Munch, Bacon, and Dumas together, advancing the argument that their work constitutes “representations of irrepresentability”; and Battelli (2023) analyses the dialogues both maintain with images of the past through a Warburgian approach. These studies suggest that comparison of Bacon and Dumas is an emerging area of attention, yet systematic comparison from the perspective of pictorial language (encompassing line, colour, form, space, brushwork, and composition) remains underdeveloped.

Pictorial language is the fundamental means by which painters translate ideas and affects into visual form, and the primary bridge between artistic intention and visual outcome. From the standpoint of contemporary practice, figure painting today faces a distinctive challenge: advances in digital and AI-generated imagery have made image production unprecedentedly easy, raising urgent questions about what distinguishes painting as a “handmade” medium. Both Bacon and Dumas draw on photographic imagery as a major resource, yet neither simply reproduces photographs; each transforms the mechanical image into a painterly statement through a distinct pictorial language. An investigation of how each innovated their pictorial language in response to the challenges of their era therefore holds considerable relevance for practitioners and scholars alike.

Objective

1. To analyse the characteristics of the pictorial language in Bacon's and Dumas's figure paintings, identifying the core elements and internal logic of each approach across the six formal dimensions.
2. To compare the commonalities and differences between the two pictorial languages.
3. To explore the relationship between each artist's pictorial language and their cultural context and cultural identity.
4. To identify potential implications of the two artists' pictorial languages for contemporary figure-painting practice.

Literature Review

Pictorial Language and Figure Painting

As a central concept in art research, “pictorial language” took shape within the formalist aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin (1915/1950) advanced five pairs of analytical categories that became foundational tools for the analysis of pictorial form, redirecting attention from the artist's biography to the formal properties of the work itself. British formalist critics such as Bell and Fry extended this project, while Kandinsky, Arnheim, and Gombrich enriched understanding of how pictorial language functions. Sullivan (2009) found that painters habitually resort to linguistic metaphors such as “vocabulary,” “grammar,” and “syntax,” revealing an organisational logic among formal elements that resembles a language system, and supporting the treatment of pictorial language as an organic system rather than an aggregate of isolated components. Figure painting, understood here as painting in which the human figure is the primary subject, has since the mid-twentieth century undergone revival and transformation: artists now move freely between figuration and abstraction, photography has become a major source material, and identity politics has become a central thematic preoccupation. Lelik (2020) contends that the defining shift in contemporary portraiture lies in the move from the pursuit of “likeness” toward an exploration of the irrepresentability of subjectivity itself.

Scholarship on Francis Bacon

Bacon is among the most extensively studied figurative painters of the twentieth century. Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981/2003) raised the critical discourse to the level of philosophical aesthetics, analysing “sensation,” the “body without organs,” and the “diagram.” Sylvester's (1987) interviews documented, in Bacon's own words, his approach to chance, flesh, and space. Recent scholarship has advanced the study of

materiality and process: Finke (2009) documents how Bacon physically manipulated his photographic sources, and De Corte (2021) analyses his distinctive use of linen canvas. Arya (2017a) identifies four functions of Bacon's "space-frame," while Arya (2017b) reads the open mouth as a "gape" revealing the human–animal continuum. Barroso (2023) characterises Bacon's paintings as a "visual rhetoric of pathos," and Lelik (2019) analyses the reflective-glass effect that draws the viewer into the work.

Scholarship on Marlene Dumas

Academic interest in Dumas has grown rapidly. Scholarship spans her identity politics and postcolonialism, feminism and gender, the relationship between image and painting, death and mourning, and her distinctive wet-on-wet technique. Garb (2020) analyses how the painter "overwrites" archival photographs while retaining a "photographic substratum." Lelik (2017) provides a detailed account of Dumas's working method and the function of skin colour as a carrier of meaning. Crous (2013) applies Kristeva's (1980/1982) theory of abjection to Dumas's depictions of the body. Recent work has diversified further: Özcan (2024) analyses how Dumas converts portraiture into a medium of racial-political expression; Munro (2025) examines her practice through embodied cognition; and Fernández (2022) demonstrates that Dumas's technical choices bear the influence of the School of London, and of Bacon in particular, lending art-historical support to the comparison undertaken here.

Comparative Scholarship and the Research Gap

Beyond these monographic traditions, the study also draws on a set of complementary theoretical perspectives. Existentialist aesthetics, together with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception (Johnson, 1993) and Kristeva's (1980/1982) theory of abjection, provides interpretive resources for Bacon's treatment of the distorted, fragile body; postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994) and feminist art theory (Mulvey, 1975) illuminate Dumas's engagement with race, identity, and gender. The anti-formalist concept of the *informe* (Bois &

Krauss, 1997) offers a counterpoint to Wölfflin's classical formal analysis, accommodating the tendency of form in both artists' work to move toward dissolution and dispersal. The 1995 Rivoli exhibition essay identified key affinities: both artists paint from mediated imagery rather than from life, both critically inherit the portrait tradition, and both address the human condition with directness (Bloemheuvel & Mot, 1995). The essay nonetheless remained curatorial in nature. Chau (2019) compares the two through a psychoanalytic lens; Lelik (2020) places them within a shared framework centred on the problem of representation; and Battelli (2023) positions them within the same tradition of image dialogue. In sum, the literature has approached the comparison from psychoanalysis, representation theory, and image genealogy, laying important groundwork. Yet systematic formal analysis from the perspective of pictorial language remains an open scholarly space, which the present study addresses through its six-dimensional framework.

Conceptual framework

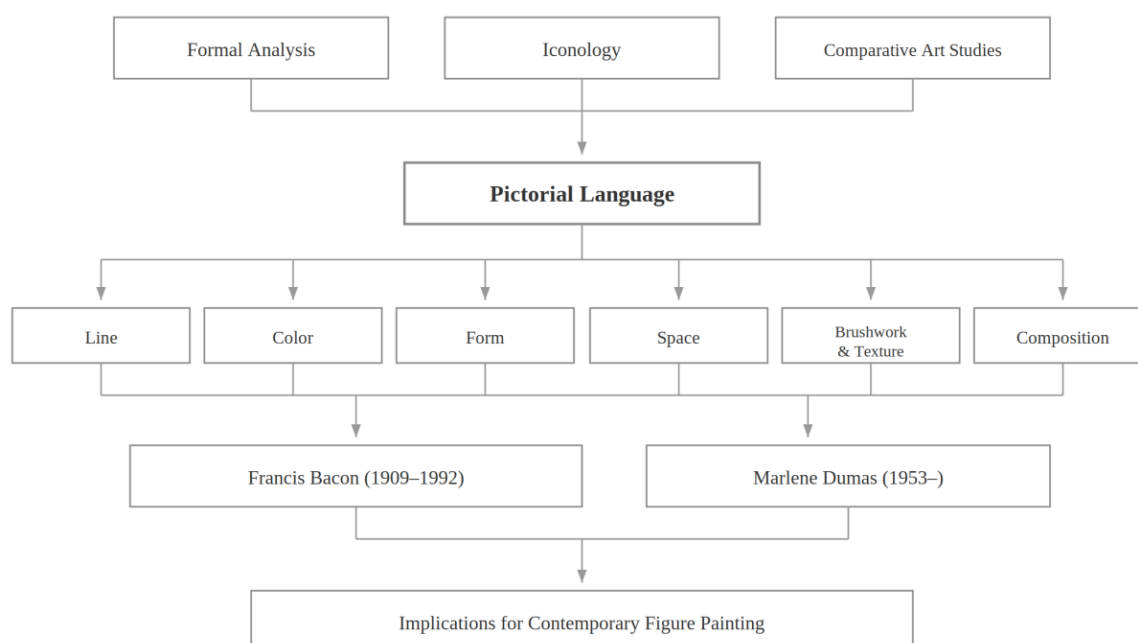


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative design. Analysing pictorial language is fundamentally an act of interpretation and evaluation of visual form, a task for which qualitative inquiry is better suited than quantitative measurement. Meaningful comparison likewise presupposes a deep understanding of each individual case. The study employs a multiple-case comparative strategy on two levels: the two artists themselves constitute the principal cases, selected for typicality and comparability, while a selection of representative works by each serves as the unit of analysis. The scholarly legitimacy of the pairing has been preliminarily established by Chau (2019) and Lelik (2020).

Research Samples

Artwork samples were selected according to four principles: representativeness, diversity, accessibility, and balance. Four representative works were chosen for each artist as the primary objects of analysis (Table 1). These span the major phases of each career; additional works are drawn upon as supplementary reference. Because Bacon died in 1992 while Dumas continues to work, this temporal asymmetry is taken into account in the comparison.

Table 1 Representative works selected for analysis, author's illustration

Artist	Work (year)	Significance for analysis
Francis Bacon	Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X (1953)	Appropriation of canonical imagery; strategies of distortion
	Three Studies for Portrait of George Dyer (1964)	Portraiture and the triptych format

Artist	Work (year)	Significance for analysis
	Three Studies for Self-Portrait (1979)	Self-scrutiny; smearing of the face
	Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus (1981)	Full range of the mature pictorial language
Marlene Dumas	The Painter (1994)	Identity and creativity; distinctive figural treatment
	Stern (2004)	Mature portraiture at its most characteristic
	Dead Marilyn (2008)	The image–death nexus
	Great Men (2014)	Serialised composition; identity as a theme

Data Collection

Three categories of data were collected. Image materials, comprising high-resolution reproductions from authoritative publications (Harrison, 2016; Coelewij et al., 2014) and institutional databases (Tate, MoMA, the Stedelijk Museum), constitute the primary data and direct objects of analysis. Documentary materials, including scholarly literature, artist interviews, and biographical sources such as Deleuze's *The Logic of Sensation* and Sylvester's *Interviews*, provide interpretive reference. Supplementary materials, such as source images (Muybridge's motion photographs, Velázquez's papal portrait) together with historical-cultural background, ground the interpretation of pictorial language.

Data Analysis

Three integrated methods were applied. Formal analysis, the foundational method, examines the visual form of the works through the six-dimensional framework via a four-step procedure: holistic observation, dimension-by-dimension examination, feature synthesis, and

stylistic distillation. Iconological analysis (Panofsky, 1939) extends this by investigating image sources and interpreting the conceptual motivations and cultural implications behind each artist's formal choices. Comparative analysis juxtaposes the two pictorial languages across synchronic, diachronic, and contextual registers. Throughout, the study triangulates across three categories of evidence: the artworks, the artists' own statements, and the scholarly literature. A uniform framework is applied to both artists to ensure comparability. As a study of published artworks, the research involves no human participants; all reproductions are used for scholarly purposes within fair use, and the comparison aims to explore characteristics and interrelationships rather than to judge relative merit.

Results

Objective 1: The Characteristics of Each Artist's Pictorial Language

Bacon's pictorial language combines precise geometric framing with distorted, smeared figures. In *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953), cage-like lines enclose the figure, suggesting psychological entrapment, while *Three Studies for Portrait of George Dyer* (1964) and *Three Studies for Self-Portrait* (1979) use blurred facial contours to challenge the fixity of traditional portraiture (Lelik, 2019). His colour palette contrasts dark grounds of black, brown, and purple with intense orange-red accents and unnatural flesh tones, creating what Barroso (2023) calls a “rhetoric of pathos.” His distorted, fragmented bodies oscillate between human and non-human states, with the “gape” suggesting a pre-linguistic human–animal condition (Arya, 2017b; Moldovan & Palamar, 2024). Spatially, Bacon creates enclosed psychological environments through cage structures, theatrical staging, and flattened backgrounds. These spaces combine formal, existential, and sensory functions and reflect the post-war “geometry of fear” (Arya, 2017a; Hulks, 2010). Smearing, scraping, spraying, and spattering emphasise the materiality and contingency of painting, embodying the informe described by Bois and Krauss (1997) (Finke, 2009; De Corte, 2021). Compositionally, Bacon favours centrally positioned figures and triptychs, using fragmentation and tense figure-ground relationships to convey fractured subjectivity (Chau, 2019). His image transformation is fundamentally deconstructive: sources from Velázquez, Eisenstein, and Muybridge are

appropriated, distorted, and recombined. Together, these strategies construct an aesthetic centred on existential anxiety and corporeal fragility.



Figure 2 Image source and transformation: (1) Velázquez, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (c. 1650); (2) Francis Bacon, *Study after Velázquez* (1953)

Dumas’s pictorial language is characterised by the suppression of explicit contour, expressive colour, simplification, fluid brushwork, and open composition. In *The Painter* (1994), for example, the child’s contours emerge through the natural boundaries of blue pigment, while drip marks function as a distinctive form of “line.” Colour is particularly expressive: Dumas subjectivises and de-naturalises skin, challenging fixed racial categories. Özcan (2024) demonstrates this in the *Black Drawings*, where tonal variation across 111 faces disrupts the idea of “black” as a homogeneous category. Her simplified forms retain recognisability while conveying essential character, reflecting her view that “art is not a mirror” but a “translation” (Lelik, 2017).



Dumas also creates sparse, focused spaces through close-up framing and minimal environmental detail, softening the boundary between figure and ground. Her wet-on-wet technique produces a fluid “liquid aesthetics” in which seepage, mixing, and contingency become integral to the image. As she states, “I like my medium slow and my gestures fast” (Lelik, 2017), a tension that Munro (2025) connects to embodied cognition. Compositionally, she combines intimate single portraits with serial works such as *Great Men* (2014), whose sixteen portraits address persecution and dignity. Through this “translative” transformation, Dumas preserves the source image while stripping detail, subjectivising colour, and intensifying emotion (Garb, 2020). Together, these strategies support her sustained exploration of identity, race, gender, and death through a distinctly “liquid” or “identity aesthetics.”



Figure 3 *Marlene Dumas, The Painter, 1994, oil on canvas, 200 × 100 cm, MoMA, New York*

Objective 2: Commonalities and Differences

Commonalities. Despite their differences, both artists move beyond traditional realism, exploring the space between figuration and abstraction. Bacon seeks the “truth of the nervous system” (Sylvester, 1987), while Dumas pursues emotional truth (Coelwij et al., 2014). Both work from pre-existing images rather than live models, transforming them to explore psychological experience rather than physical resemblance. They also foreground materiality and contingency, using the unpredictable interaction between body and material in ways that resist algorithmic image generation. Both maintain a productive tension between figuration and abstraction without entering pure abstraction (Sullivan, 2009; Lelik, 2020).

Differences. Despite these shared concerns, their pictorial languages differ significantly (Table 2), reflecting distinct artistic philosophies. Bacon’s approach is “additive,” intensifying tension through deformation, while Dumas’s is “subtractive,” distilling meaning through reduction. Drawing on Warburg’s *Nachleben*, Battelli (2023) describes both as activating the “afterlife” of canonical images: Bacon makes the image “spasm” through distortion, while Dumas makes it “liquefy” through simplification.

Table 2 Comparison of Bacon's and Dumas's pictorial language across six dimensions and image transformation, author's illustration

Dimension	Francis Bacon	Marlene Dumas
Line	Dual system: geometric framing vs. dissolved contour	Concealment: edges emerge through chromatic seepage
Colour	Sombre ground, incandescent accents; pathological flesh	Vivid, subjectivised; skin as political vehicle
Form	Violent distortion (“additive”)	Reductive simplification (“subtractive”)
Space	Enclosed, oppressive, theatrical	Open, spare, focused
Brushwork & texture	Heavy impasto, scraping; “texture of flesh”	Wet-on-wet flow; “trace of breath”

Dimension	Francis Bacon	Marlene Dumas
Composition	Triptych; ritual gravity of the altarpiece	Series; taxonomic scope of the archive
Image transformation	Deconstructive: appropriation, distortion, recombination	Translative: preservation, distillation, re-charging

Comparative Tendencies Across the Two Practices

Comparing Bacon and Dumas reveals several shifts in the development of figure painting. First, Bacon focuses on formal anxiety, exploring how to move beyond realism without abandoning the figure, while Dumas addresses identity anxiety, questioning representation in an age of image saturation. Second, Bacon's enclosed spaces create a sense of violence and voyeurism, whereas Dumas's close-up figures establish a more intimate and confrontational gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Third, their practices move from theatricality toward everyday experience, while Dumas's use of oil, watercolour, and drawing demonstrates a broader cross-medium approach. These differences reflect changing artistic contexts rather than a hierarchy of artistic value.

Objective 3: Pictorial Language and Cultural Context

The artists' pictorial languages are shaped by different cultural contexts. Bacon's work emerged from the post-war European climate of trauma and existential anxiety, drawing critically on European artistic traditions (Deleuze, 1981/2003; Peppiatt, 1996). Dumas, born in apartheid-era South Africa and later based in the Netherlands, engages more directly with race, identity, gender, and belonging through postcolonial and feminist perspectives (Bhabha, 1994; Mulvey, 1975). Thus, Bacon's concern with broader human conditions contrasts with Dumas's attention to specific experiences of identity, reflecting the shift from modernist universalism toward contemporary identity-based concerns.

Objective 4: Implications for Contemporary Practice

The comparison offers two implications for contemporary painting. First, Bacon's deconstructive and Dumas's translative approaches demonstrate different ways of transforming photographic and mediated images rather than simply reproducing them. Second, both artists show that the value of painting lies not only in accurate representation but in the artist's transformation of images through individual perception and technique. This remains particularly relevant in an era of photography and AI-generated imagery.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that Francis Bacon's and Marlene Dumas's figure paintings constitute distinct but related pictorial languages structured through six formal dimensions: composition, space, figure/form, colour, material/brushwork, and distortion/mark-making. Bacon's language is organised around tension, containment, and sensation. His spatial constructions frequently isolate figures within geometric frames or cage-like structures, transforming space into an active psychological device (Arya, 2017a; Hulks, 2010). His distorted bodies are not intended simply as anatomical deformation but as means of conveying sensation directly, consistent with Deleuze's account of Bacon's "logic of sensation" (Deleuze, 2003; Barroso, 2023). Smearing, scraping, and other material interventions disrupt stable representation and make the painted body appear simultaneously recognisable and unstable (Finke, 2009; Lelik, 2019). The resulting pictorial language therefore operates through a tension between figuration and abstraction, structure and disruption.

Dumas similarly destabilises the represented body, but her pictorial language is more strongly dependent on photographic sources, fluid contours, translucent colour, and the social meanings attached to images of bodies. Her thin washes and bleeding forms allow identity, gender, sexuality, race, and political meaning to remain open and contested (Crous, 2013; Coelewij et al., 2014; Garb, 2020). Whereas Bacon often intensifies bodily sensation through compression and deformation, Dumas frequently achieves ambiguity through

reduction, blurring, and incomplete definition. Lelik (2017, 2019) and Chau (2019) further demonstrate how both artists challenge the stability of portraiture and the assumption that a painted figure can transparently represent an individual.

The comparison therefore reveals important commonalities and differences. Both artists reject conventional naturalism and use distortion to question the stability of bodily identity. Their figures occupy an unstable territory between representation and abstraction, producing what may be understood as a pictorial language rather than straightforward depiction (Bois & Krauss, 1997; Sullivan, 2009). However, Bacon's formal logic is characterised more strongly by spatial confinement, structural framing, and visceral sensation, while Dumas's is marked by photographic mediation, fluidity, ambiguity, and sociopolitical associations. Their differences demonstrate that distortion can function through different formal and cultural logics.

Cultural context is particularly significant. Bacon's post-war European context, alongside his engagement with photography, existential anxiety, and the instability of the human body, informs a language concerned with vulnerability and sensation (Peppiatt, 1996; Sylvester, 1987). Dumas's position as a South African-born artist working in Europe brings questions of race, gender, colonial history, migration, and cultural hybridity into her representation of the body (Garb, 2020; Özcan, 2024). Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity is useful here because Dumas's practice negotiates identities across cultural locations rather than presenting identity as fixed.

For contemporary figure painting, both practices demonstrate that figurative painting can remain critically relevant without returning to conventional realism. Bacon illustrates how distortion, framing, and material manipulation can communicate embodied sensation, while Dumas shows how photographic appropriation, ambiguity, and socially charged representation can interrogate identity and power. Their approaches consequently encourage contemporary painters to treat the figure as an unstable site where formal experimentation, embodied experience, cultural memory, and social meaning intersect (Schwabsky, 2019; Munro, 2025).

Conclusion

This study has conducted a systematic comparative analysis of the pictorial language in the figure paintings of Francis Bacon and Marlene Dumas, using a six-dimensional framework that integrates formal analysis, iconology, and comparative art studies. The analysis characterises Bacon's pictorial language as an “existentialist aesthetics,” defined by the duality of geometric framing and dissolved contour, sombre tonality with incandescent accents, bodily distortion, enclosed psychological space, materially assertive brushwork, and the triptych. Dumas's is characterised as a “liquid” or “identity aesthetics,” defined by concealed line, vivid subjectivised colour, simplified form, open space, the wet-on-wet technique, and serialised composition.

The comparison reveals deep commonalities: the transcendence of traditional realism, dependence on photographic source imagery, engagement with the inner life of the figure, the embrace of material contingency, and a sustained tension between figuration and abstraction. These coexist with systematic differences across every dimension, summarised as a contrast between Bacon's “deconstructive” and Dumas's “translative” transformation of the image. Both pictorial languages are intimately connected to their cultural contexts: Bacon's to the post-war European existentialist crisis, Dumas's to the identity politics of the postcolonial and feminist condition. As two representative directions within contemporary figure painting, they jointly demonstrate that the genre's enduring value lies not in representational accuracy but in painting's capacity to transform the image and to access deeper levels of meaning.

Suggestions

The contrast between Bacon's “deconstructive” and Dumas's “translative” approaches can be developed into a studio exercise in which students use one photographic source to create two responses: one through fragmentation and restructuring, and the other through colour and gesture while retaining the original configuration.

For future research, the framework could be extended to artists such as Lucian Freud, Gerhard Richter, and Jenny Saville, as well as non-Western artists for cross-cultural comparison. The six-dimensional framework could also be further refined and tested for application to other research subjects.

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