

88 *Three Studies of Figures on Beds*  
1972

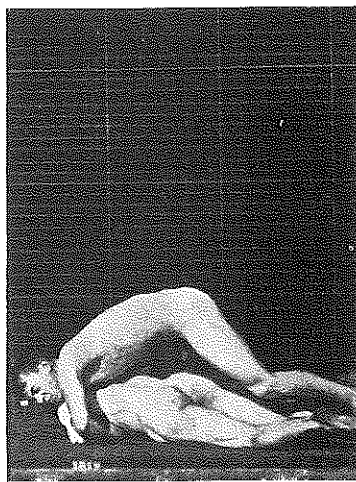
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DS Do you think that certain Michelangelo images of figures entwined have had an influence on your coupled figures?

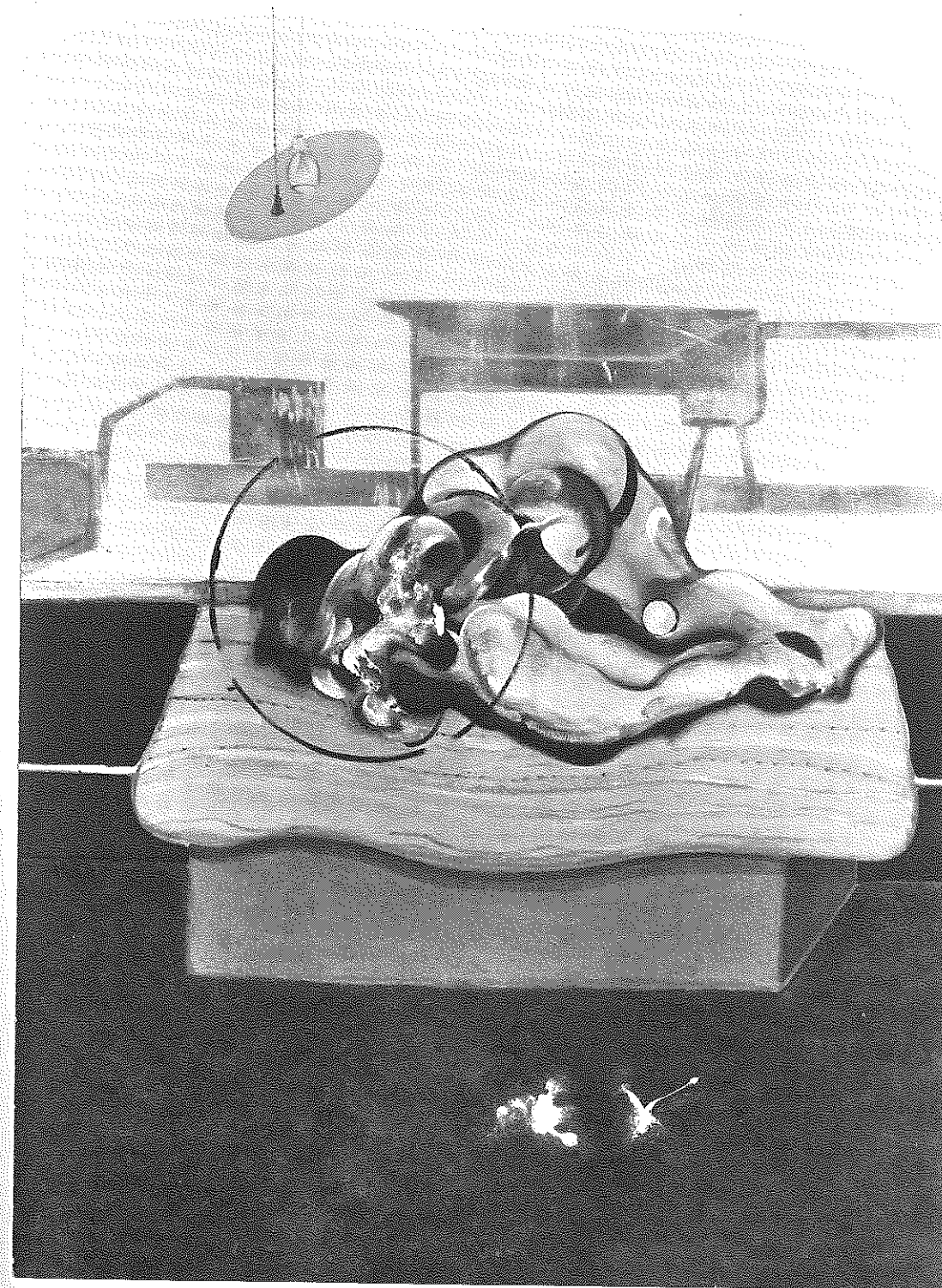
FB Well, these have very often been taken from the Muybridge wrestlers – some of which appear, unless you look at them under a microscope, to be in some form of sexual embrace. Actually, I've often used the wrestlers in painting single figures, because I find that the two figures together have a thickness that gives overtones which the photographs of single figures don't have. But I don't only look at Muybridge photographs of the figure. I look all the time at photographs in magazines of footballers and boxers and all that kind of thing – especially boxers. And I also look at animal photographs all the time. Because animal movement and human movement are continually linked in my imagery of human movement.

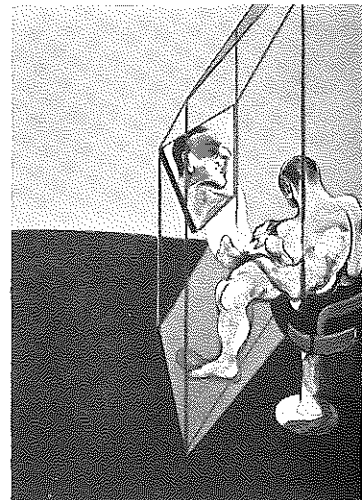
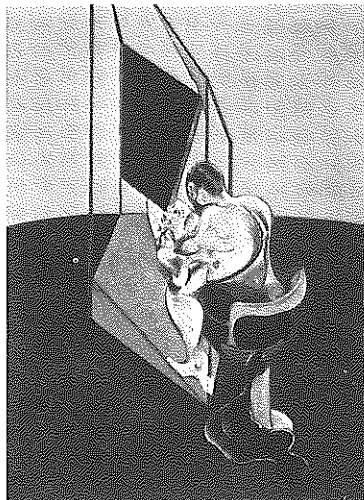
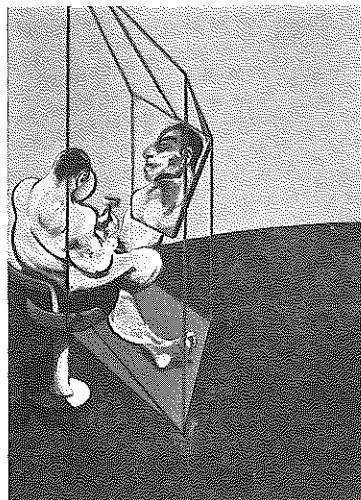
DS And are the nudes, at the same time, closely related to the appearance of specific people? Are they to some extent portraits of bodies?

FB Well, it's a complicated thing. I very often think of people's bodies that I've known, I think of the contours of those bodies that have particularly affected me, but then they're grafted very often onto Muybridge's bodies. I manipulate the Muybridge bodies into the form of the bodies I have known. But, of course, in my case, with this disruption all the time of the image – or distortion, or whatever you



89 MUYBRIDGE Photograph from  
*The Human Figure in Motion* 1887



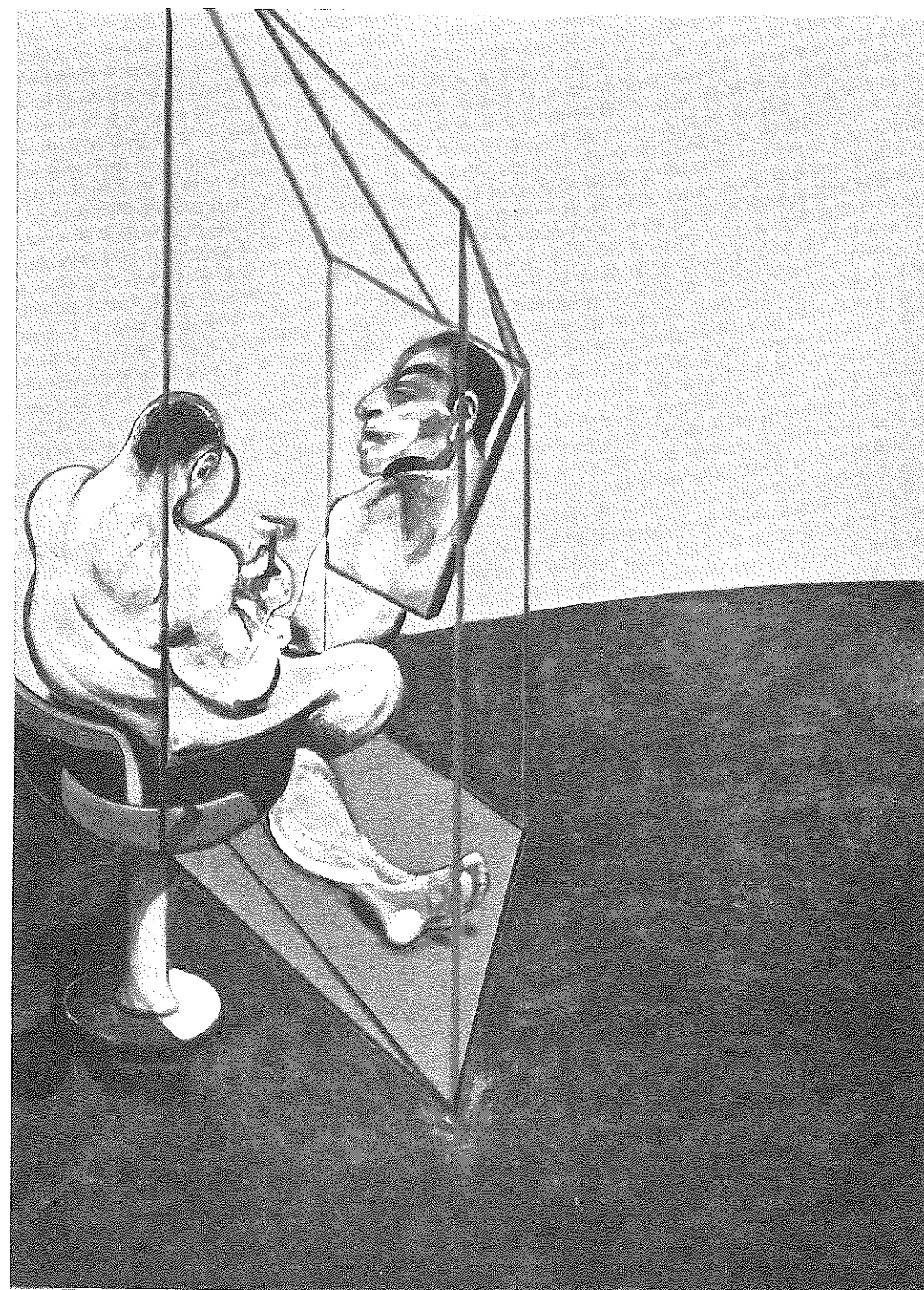


91 *Three Studies of the Male Back* 1970

like to call it – it's an elliptical way of coming to the appearance of that particular body. And the way I try to bring appearance about makes one question all the time what appearance is at all. The longer you work, the more the mystery deepens of what appearance is, or how can what is called appearance be made in another medium. And it needs a sort of moment of magic to coagulate colour and form so that it gets the equivalent of appearance, the appearance that you see at any moment, because so-called appearance is only riveted for one moment as that appearance. In a second you may blink your eyes or turn your head slightly, and you look again and the appearance has changed. I mean, appearance is like a continuously floating thing. And, of course, in sculpture the problem is perhaps even more poignant because the material which you would be working in is not as fluid as oil paint and it would add another difficulty. But then an added difficulty often is what makes the solving of a thing deeper. Because of the difficulty in doing it.

DS It seems to me that in your painting you've confronted an immense and extraordinary kind of difficulty which possibly relates to your desire that the form should be at once very precise and very ambiguous. In that triptych of 1944 (3) you used a hard bright ground for very precisely and simply displayed forms, carved-out forms, as it were, and that was entirely consistent. Then the handling of the forms became *malerisch*, and with this the background became softer, more tonal, often curtained, and all that was entirely consistent. But then you got rid of the curtains; you came to

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combine a *malerisch* handling of the form – and with the paint getting more and more scrambled – with a hard, flat, bright ground, so that you violently juxtapose two opposite conventions.

FB Well, I've increasingly wanted to make the images simpler and more complicated. And for this to work, it can work more starkly if the background is very united and clear. I think that probably is why I have used a very clear background against which the image can articulate itself.

DS I don't think I can think of any other painter who has tried to resolve such a contradiction between a *malerisch* image and a vivid, uninflected ground.

FB Well, that may be because I hate a homely atmosphere, and I always feel that *malerisch* painting has too homely a background. I would like the intimacy of the image against a very stark background. I want to isolate the image and take it away from the interior and the home. □ □ □

DS Going back over those long discussions about chance or accident, I've been especially struck by two of the thoughts that recur. One is your dislike of paintings looking what you call 'chancy'. And the other is your belief that things which come about by chance are more likely to seem to have a certain inevitability than things which come about by will. Can you say why you feel that an image will tend to look more inevitable the more it comes about by accident?

FB It hasn't been interfered with. And it seems to be fresher. The hinges of form come about by chance seem to be more organic and to work more inevitably.

DS Lack of interference – is that the clue?

FB Yes. The will has been subdued by the instinct.

DS You're saying that, in allowing chance to work, one allows the deeper levels of the personality to come across?

FB I certainly am trying to say that. But I'm also trying to say that they come over inevitably – they come over without the brain interfering with the inevitability of an image. It seems to come straight out of what we choose to call the unconscious with the foam of the unconscious locked around it – which is its freshness.

DS Now, you often say that the accidents which are most fruitful tend to happen at the time of greatest despair about how to go on with a painting. On the other hand, when I once asked you whether, on days when conscious operations were going well, chance operations would also be likely to be going well, you said they would. Of course that statement isn't incompatible with the others, but could you enlarge?

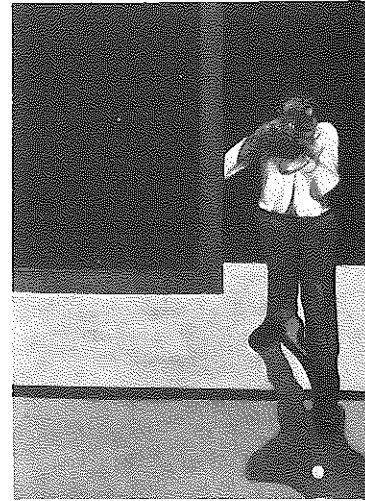
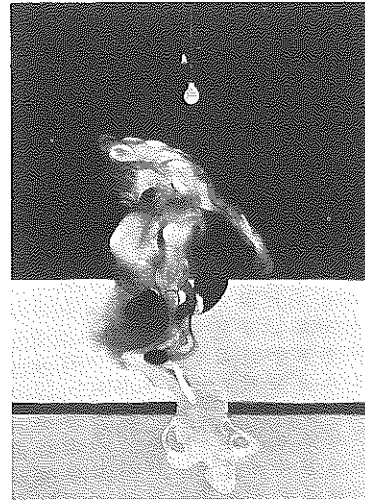
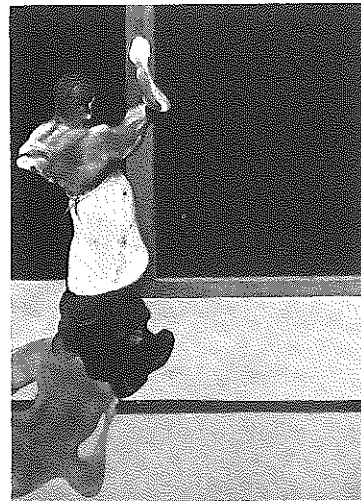
FB Well, there are certain days when you start working and the work seems to flow out of you quite easily, but that doesn't often happen and doesn't last for long. And I don't know that it's necessarily any better than when something happens out of your frustration and despair. I think that, quite possibly, when things are going badly you will be freer with the way you mess up by just putting paint through the images that you've been making, and you do it with a greater abandon than if things have been working for you. And therefore I think, perhaps, that despair is more helpful, because out of despair you may find yourself making the image in a more radical way by taking greater risks.

DS You've told me that half of your painting activity is disrupting what you can do easily. What is it you can do easily and want to disrupt?

FB I can quite easily sit down and make what is called a literal portrait of you. So what I'm disrupting all the time is this literalness, because I find it uninteresting.

DS And I take it that marks made with the brush can be just as disruptive as operations like throwing paint or applying a rag.

FB Oh certainly. With oil paint being so fluid, the image is changing all the time while you're working. One thing either builds on another or destroys the other. You see, I don't think that generally people really understand how mysterious, in a way, the actual manipulation of oil paint is. Because moving – even unconsciously moving – the brush one way rather than the other will completely alter the implications of the image. But you could only see it if it happened before you. I mean, it's in the way that one end of the brush may be filled with another colour and the pressing of the brush, by accident, makes a mark which gives a resonance to the other marks; and this leads on to a further development of the image. It's really a continuous question of the fight between accident and criticism. Because what I call accident may



93 *Triptych* – March 1974

give you some mark that seems to be more real, truer to the image than another one, but it's only your critical sense that can select it. So that your critical faculty is going on at the same time as the sort of half-unconscious manipulation – or very unconscious, generally, if it works at all.

DS Of course, trusting to chance seems to be something that pervades the whole way you live your life. For one thing, it's very obvious in your attitude to money. At the time I first knew you, you didn't get a lot of money for a painting but, even then, the moment you sold one you'd be buying champagne and caviar for everyone in sight. You never held back. You've always seemed free of prudence.

FB Well, that's because of my greed. I'm greedy for life; and I'm greedy as an artist. I'm greedy for what I hope chance can give me far beyond anything that I can calculate logically. And it's partly my greed that has made me what's called live by chance – greed for food, for drink, for being with the people one likes, for the excitement of things happening. So the same thing applies to one's work. I nevertheless, when I cross the road, do look both ways. Because, with the greed for life, I don't play it in the way that I also want to be killed, as some people do. Because life is so short and, while I can move and see and feel, I want life to go on existing.

DS Your taste for roulette doesn't, as it were, extend to Russian roulette.

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FB No. Because to do what I want to do would mean, if

