

# Real women still have value in the art world

But Lucian Freud's majestic work should be on public view, not hidden in a private collection

I spent Friday lunchtime discussing the global economic crisis, the collapse of Bear Stearns, the problems of cheap mortgages in Middle America and the fact that approximately £1.5bn worth of art has left the country since the government decided to tax non-doms. So I found it faintly reassuring to read on the way home that a painting by Lucian Freud of a lady called Sue Tilley, who is the branch manager of a job centre in London's Denmark Street, having previously been a benefits supervisor, is expected to sell for up to £20m in Christie's New York.

The rest of the world may be going to pot, but someone is going to fork out the best part of twenty million quid in order to own a picture which is not particularly fashionable, which requires a certain degree of thoughtfulness to appreciate and which is about nothing more exciting than old patterned fabric and pigment and flesh.

It's an intriguing notion that someone without very obvious physical attractions painted not so long ago in a studio in London's Holland Park by an artist who devotes himself day in day out to the patient observation of ugliness should cost nearly as much as Raphael's *The Madonna of the Pinks*, a price which was regarded only five years ago as outrageously expensive.

In fact, the model is so evidently and fascinatingly ugly in the way she has been painted that she perhaps has an unexpected element of beauty to her, lolling on the sofa in an uncomfortable way.

Freud's painting is said to have taken the best part of two years to complete on the model's days off, day after day, weekends as well, no holidays, holding that uncomfortable pose just in order that an artist should be able to observe and record the way the light falls on a human body, the way a face crumples when nobody is observing. The feet are rather small, as in Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery (in fact, the whole pose derives from Titian and Velázquez), and it's not quite clear where her right arm is because only her right hand is visible holding up her breast.

Since I was passing Christie's early yesterday morning on the way to breakfast at the Royal Academy, I asked if it would be possible to make arrangements to see the painting. It was. I was allowed five minutes only sitting alone in the presence of this magnificent, majestic odalisque, the artistic heiress, but at many removes, to Manet's *Olympia* in the Musée d'Orsay. Here she lies: splendidly solitary, heroically, stupendously fat.

What does it say about the market that a modern British painting should now cost as much as a Raphael? In an odd sort of way, I think it is encouraging that, even in a time of global recession, the connoisseurs of contemporary painting should acknowledge the monumentalism of this work of art, its stateliness, the extreme beauty of the painting of the sofa's base, the contrast between the old, floral fabric and the rough texture of the skin, the ungainliness of the pose and the total indifference of the sitter, asleep to the world.

It's a big painting, rather formal, about the materiality and physicality of close, but completely detached observation. Some critics have accused Freud of being cruel in the way he observes human flesh as a cadaver. I don't think this picture is inhumane.

Where will the picture titled *Benefits Supervisor Asleep* go after the hammer has fallen at Christie's New York on 13 May? Of course, it ought to go to the Tate to join Bigger Trees Near Warter, the Hockney treescape he has so generously donated. It is just possible it will go to an institutional collection in the United States since, for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has an unexpectedly strong holding of modern British figurative painting. Perhaps it could be bought by the Yale Centre for British Art or the new museum that the Thomson family is donating to its home city of Toronto. More likely it will go to join the collections of the non-doms, the transient but passionate collectors of the global art world who, for a while, lived in London, but have now been encouraged to move on to Jersey or Geneva, the tax havens that are more hospitable to global wealth.

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