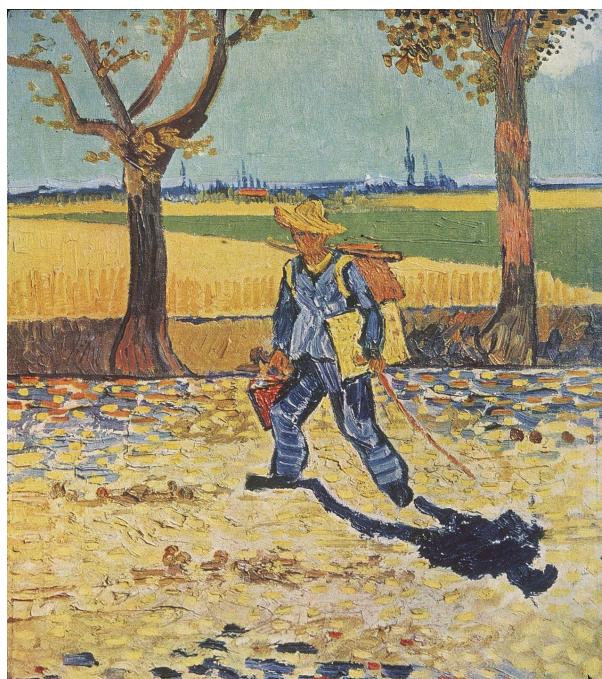


**EXCERPT**

1888: Vincent van Gogh is depressed. He eats too little and drinks entirely too much. In search of solitude and wanting to take his practice more seriously, he moves to Arles, South France. He paints his room. He paints his window. He paints the house itself. Most of all, he ventures out to find other things: starry nights, wheat fields, doctors and old women and lots of Joseph Roulin. August, that same year, he decides to paint himself in his entirety, head to toe, wandering down the road to Tarascon, the nearest commune, armed with a canvas and a case of supplies, presumably in search of his next subject.



Vincent van Gogh, *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*, 1888  
(destroyed 1945), oil painting, 48 x 44cm.

1956: Francis Bacon has explored. A painter with over twenty years of experience, he has drifted through Europe; he has eaten and he has had a lot to drink and he gambled. He comes across *Vincent van Gogh*, a collection of the esteemed Dutchman's paintings. Its frontispiece is a pre-WWII colour copy of *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*.<sup>1</sup> In this painting, Bacon doesn't see a man but a phantom; transfixed, he recreates it eight times.

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<sup>1</sup> Painting is also known as *The Painter on His Way to Work*

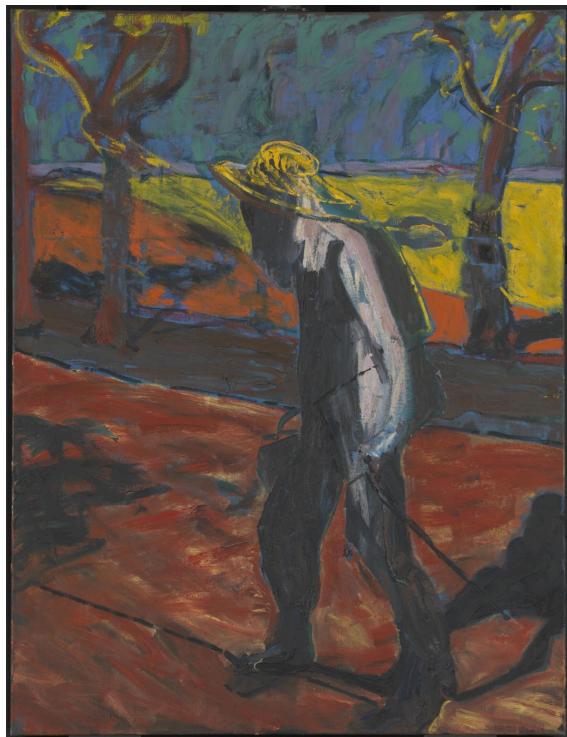
2024: I am at a blank. This year marks 25 years since the release of Ms Lauryn Hill's acclaimed album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, and I decide this to be reason enough for me to write an essay discussing its ideas – and yet, despite my eagerness, I can think of nothing to say. Blank for nothing, blank for everything; potential angles have come and gone, my interest has peaked and waned and my excitement has hindered me from getting started. In need of inspiration, I go to see the Francis Bacon exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Whilst an appreciation of art has always been present, my preference has lain with technique over idea; historically, I was more likely to be bowled over by the figurative than the abstract. Willing to challenge my perspective, but not so much as to be confused by the seemingly randomly placed brushstroke and paint splatter, Bacon's work on the human form, his distortion of the familiar, is welcoming. The exhibition, titled *Human Presence*, promises to highlight Bacon's ability to imprint a person onto the canvas beyond physicality; it will be a hand, I surmise, holding mine as I delve into the world of the abstract.

There's a storm on the day I go. I weather the grey skies and the blue rain, the cold faces against the maroon walls, when, suddenly, there is a strike: there, between the sullen 1952 painting of a *Figure in a Landscape* and the wintery 1955 portrait of RJ Sainsbury, is a seemingly misplaced doorway that leads to a stark, white room. The first paintings presented to the eye, vividly red, are almost identical: a figure, outside, walking; blue sky, dust road, brown trees.

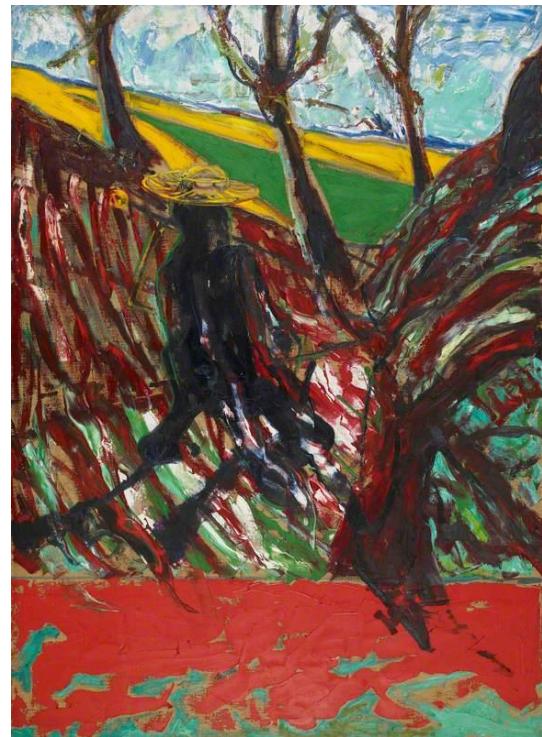
Two of Bacon's eight Van Gogh paintings: *Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh IV* and *Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh VI* (to be referred to as Four and Six respectively).

*Francis and Vincent, Lauryn and I*

Lessia Ledi Mbala



Francis Bacon, *Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh IV*, 1957, oil painting, 1524 x 1166cm.



Francis Bacon, *Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh VI*, 1981, oil painting, 1981 x 1422cm.