

Ribera: Art of Violence

Tuesday October 2 2018 - Sunday January 27 2019



Jusepe de Ribera, *St Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women*. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao. Photo: The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum.

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Flayed skin and dislocated shoulders are two recurring themes of Jusepe de Ribera's art. The first, normally inflicted on Christian saints as part of their martyrdoms, and the second, the result of a foul seventeenth-century torture device known as the 'strappado'.

There are also crucifixions, arrow-piercings and bindings to stakes. All of which, over the centuries, gained the artist a reputation for being unnecessarily and extremely violent in his art, and possibly in his private life too.

The central point of this show at the Dulwich Picture Gallery is that we've been wrong about Ribera. Specifically, we've been silly to see him as senselessly sadistic. The darkened gallery space (so darkened, in fact, that the faces of the gallery assistants loom out like Ribera's holy martyrs) contains a small number of his large, lushly executed paintings along with many of his drawings and a few exhibition buffer items, such as a tattooed piece of human skin that looks a bit like those pig-ear treats dogs like to gnaw on.

In the age of big and small-screen violence, Ribera's imagery perhaps isn't shocking in the same way it once was. Yet what remains so brilliantly 'can't-stop-peeking-through-my-fingers' about these gorgeous and gory pictures is the essential contrast between the shiver-inducing subject matter and the beauty of Ribera's painting.

Though you could maybe say the DPG couldn't quite borrow enough major Ribera works to justify a full show, look away from the gruesome bits and there's a delicacy to the depiction of flesh – creases in a stomach, wrinkles in a forehead, dents in the palm of a hand – that makes Ribera feel like a precursor to Lucian Freud, but with some very Rembrandt-worthy blackened backgrounds.

The shocking realisation here is that perhaps Ribera wasn't trying to be shocking at all. The intensity he pours into his depiction of saints and their suffering appears as an act of religious devotion (even if you personally find it weird). Ribera couldn't be accused of ignoring the consequences of violence: the pain of these characters seeps out of the canvas. And that (sorry) gets under your skin.

ROSEMARY WAUGH