

## LUCIAN FREUD

(1922 – 2011, British)

PORTRAIT HEAD, 2001

etching on Somerset textured white paper

59.5 x 46.5 cm image; 72.5 x 57.0 cm sheet

edition: 33/46

signed with initials and numbered below image: 33/46 L.F.

proofed and printed by Marc Balakjian at Studio Prints, London

published by Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Bruce Bernard, picture editor and lifelong friend of the late Lucian Freud, once wrote that the very medium of copper-plate etching allowed the artist to pursue a softer examination of his female sitters, sparing them the surface scrutiny so closely associated with Freud's hogshair brushes.<sup>1</sup> Freud's etched portrait heads, in particular, display the artist's delight in minor imperfections, those appearing in the physique of his sitter as well as the artistic imperfections inherent in engraving and printing procedures. Furthermore, this medium allowed Freud to pursue a more abstract investigation of the human body, absent in his painting since his early Surrealist works of the 1940s.

Stripped bare by Freud's penetrating gaze, the girl in *Portrait Head, 2001*, seems to be suspended in a melancholy meditative state. Cast in flattering natural light as opposed to the harshly lit studio paintings, the elongated topography and sculptural nature of the sitter's face is still far from a contrived ideal conception of female beauty. As Bernard mentions, the multiple nervous lines of Freud's copper-plates create a tightly woven net over the distorted busts of his sitters, marking out rather than outlining their forms. Although Freud came to etching relatively late in his career, it quickly became a constant and integral part of his practice. Following the creation of a handful of etchings in the late 1940s, it took Freud over thirty years to return to the demanding medium. The impetus for doing so came from his biographer Lawrence Gowing, who asked Freud during the early 1980s to create one hundred limited edition prints to accompany a deluxe publication of his monograph, published in 1982.<sup>2</sup>

*Portrait Head* was created many years after this return to the medium. A product of the collaboration with Marc Balakjian (Freud's professional printer in London from 1986), this copper plate is of a much larger format and is more generously cropped, a strong artwork in its own right. The girl who appears in this portrait remains anonymous to the spectator, presumably to preserve the privacy of her artistic exchange with the painter. She was undoubtedly a regular sitter of Freud's, and the etched work is a tangible record of a long process of intimate interaction and scrutiny. The American art critic Donald Kuspit writes that a sense of emotional urgency is characteristic of Freud's etched oeuvre, and indicates an intimacy between artist and model different to that produced by his painted portraits.<sup>3</sup>

1. Bernard, B. and Birdsall, D., *Lucian Freud*, Random House, London, 1996, p. 21

2. Figura, S., *Lucian Freud, The Painter's Etchings*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2008, p. 18

3. Kuspit, D., 'Lucian Freud. MoMA. Marlborough Graphics', *Artforum*, XLVI, no. 7, March 2008, p. 360

LUCIE REEVES-SMITH

