

An appreciation of British painter Leon Kossoff (1926-2019)

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British painter Leon Kossoff's death a year ago on July 4, 2019, at the age of 92, received such scant notice that one could be excused for not knowing that the artist was considered, by many familiar with his work, one of the great painters of the second half of the 20th century.

In part, this relative silence reflected Kossoff's own artistic modesty. Over the course of more than 60 years, he had unassumingly dedicated himself to depicting his immediate neighborhoods of Bethnal Green and later Willesden, in London, along with portraits of close family and friends. He observed these commonplace subjects with an intensity and determination to translate what he called their "here-ness," i.e., their material reality, into a painted form.

His method entailed the daily practice of going out with board and charcoal to draw the ever-changing crowds he saw in public thoroughfares, tube stations and crowded swimming pools. In a letter to art critic John Berger, a longstanding admirer, Kossoff explained that the "main thing that has kept me going all these years is my obsession that I need to teach myself to draw. I have never felt that I can draw and as time has passed this feeling has not changed. So my work has been an experiment in self-education" (John Berger, *Portraits*, edited by Tom Overton, 2015).

These dark drawings with their thickly overlaid lines, erasures and re-worked surfaces are more evidence of struggle than they are finished "drawings." Back in Kossoff's studio, they became the basis for paintings, which likewise emerged after a long process of adding, subtracting, scraping and moving paint around until the desired image emerged from an impasto so thick that it has been likened to glue, jam or even engine grease. And yet in these thick, dense bas-reliefs of muddy color with their often awkward figures, one can find surprising suggestions of form and space, often created with traditional, even "academic," techniques of light and color, which is why Kossoff was essentially a figurative painter.

However, to be a figurative painter in the period following World War II, an era in which abstract modernism came to dominate thoroughly and one-sidedly, meant to be relegated to obscurity by critics and art aficionados. Kossoff—together with Frank Auerbach (b. 1931) and a handful of other painters in what fellow artist R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007) first called the

"London School"—maintained the figurative tradition of painting against the tide. Never large, the group included the more widely known painters Francis Bacon (1909-1992) and Lucian Freud (1922-2011).

Kossoff "belonged to a generation that believed in the great continuation of Western painting, its tradition, its renewal, and its survival," said Andrea Rose, director of Visual Arts at the British Council. Significantly, it was a generation many of whose parents had come to London as refugees from Europe fleeing the Holocaust. The son of a baker, Kossoff grew up in a poor, tight-knit Jewish neighborhood of East London, was evacuated from London during the Blitz and did three years of military service in World War II.

After the war, he continued his studies at St. Martin's School of Art while taking night classes at Borough Polytechnic with David Bomberg (1890-1957), who in his day had been one of the Whitechapel Boys, a group of young, avant-garde Jewish artists before World War I. Many of them, like Bomberg, had been drawn to the Young Socialist League (founded in 1911 and a radical forerunner of the Young Communist League). But by the 1920s, Bomberg turned from his earlier Vorticist abstractions to painting landscapes and portraits from direct observation in thick impasto paint. It was in Bomberg's class that Kossoff met Auerbach, who would remain a lifelong friend and mutual influence.

However, even as forms of representation reemerged in the 1960s and 1970s with Pop Art and Photorealism, their purpose was not social or psychological realism per se, but rather to reproduce advertising's slick simulacra of everyday life as a supposed "comment" on commercial consumerism. The arts were increasingly dominated by various trends in self-referential, conceptual, performance, postmodern and identity-based art. Even in the 1980s, the heyday of the more painterly Neo-Expressionism, Kossoff's approach continued to be starkly at odds with the hype and self-aggrandizement that predominated.

As critic Robert Hughes observed in *Time* in 1988, Kossoff was "one of the two tortoises (the other, Frank Auerbach...) who cross the finish line just when so much of the short-winded art promoted in the eighties shows signs of flagging." At the time, Hughes was overly optimistic that the situation in the arts was

about to improve, when in fact it grew much worse to the point that the “entanglement of big money with art has become a curse on how art is made, controlled, and above all—in the way that it’s experienced,” he would conclude in the scathing documentaries *The New Shock of the New* (2004) and *The Mona Lisa Curse* (2008).

Kossoff received a certain amount of recognition even in a degenerate artistic period. In 1996, at the age of 70, the Tate Modern finally gave him a retrospective exhibition. His work was represented by the L.A. Louver Gallery in California, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash in Chelsea, New York presented another major show of his work in 2013. However, the genuine significance of his work will become clearer going forward as the art trends that eclipsed his work in its day stand exposed as incapable of communicating anything enduringly relevant or profound about contemporary social or psychic reality.

Kossoff was born in the convulsive period after World War I, indeed, in the year of the great British General Strike. The breakdown of capitalism, expressed in the outbreak of war in August 1914, led to the imperialist slaughterhouse itself, economic collapse and class conflict with revolutionary ramifications. He would come of age as an artist in the 1950s, which in postwar Britain was not so much a “boom” as it was digging out from under the rubble. The character of both periods taken together, with the unresolved political problems involved, had a formative impact on Kossoff’s outlook, as well as that of other members of the London School.

Theirs was not simply a stylistic choice, but rather an attitude toward history, as a subject to be deeply absorbed, even rescued from obliteration. Notable in this respect were Kossoff’s studies of the Old Masters in the National Gallery—Poussin, Rubens, Titian and Rembrandt, in particular—which he drew with much the same daily persistence as the crowds in the tube station.

They also shared the belief that the artist’s engagement with the material world through direct observation was integral to the creation of art. Like Lucian Freud, grandson of psychoanalysis’s founder Sigmund who had likewise taken refuge from Nazism in London, Kossoff was known for always working with a model, never from a photograph. His models, often friends or family members, sat for hours, days, even years for his portraits. Kossoff remarked that “every time you look, you see, you experience something different. In the end, the differences amount to a sort of presence.” Perhaps both artists’ insistence on creating presence by returning again and again to a model that was always changing owed something to their common experience of displacement, loss and absence.

In his “All Too Human” series for the Tate, critic Peter Fuller said of Kossoff, “He is an artist who is attempting to excavate his origins, not, like the Abstract Expressionists, by trying to plummet his unconscious so much as by scratching at the surviving concrete relics of his history. ...You could say that his constantly frustrated longing to transform the harsh facticity of

the external world into ‘a faintly glimmering memory of a long forgotten, perhaps never experienced childhood’ is rivalled only by his equally inevitably frustrated desire to turn his transient perceptions and fantasies into real and literally sensuous things (hence all the insistence upon concrete paint substance in his attempts to transcend mere imagery).”

Indeed, there is a sense of alienation, even pessimism in Kossoff’s (and even more so, Freud’s) work, despite the humanizing effect of the method of working. In Kossoff’s paintings, one is always aware of, even irked by the individuals awkwardly fixed within the bustling crowds of commuters or swimmers. Kossoff “paints to emphasize the primacy of matter—hence his monumentality, his emphasis of mass, and his use of the medium. Yet at the same time, he is overwhelmed by the powerlessness of man in face of the material world,” in Berger’s view.

The monumentality of Freud’s late nudes of performance artist Leigh Bowery, *Naked Man, Back View* (1991-92), and *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995) was even more pronounced in both the scale of the canvases and the sitters themselves. The fact that they are either turned away or sleeping emphasizes a withdrawal into an interior realm inaccessible to the artist—and viewer—which contrasts with the opulent beauty of the flesh which one is free to visually explore in intimate detail.

However, in contrast to Kossoff’s rather modest reputation at his death, Freud was loudly acclaimed as “the greatest painter of the latter 20th century,” with the prices for his portraits grotesquely inflated by the rising tides of Wall Street speculation. In 2015, *Supervisor Resting* (1994), a slightly different, but equally huge painting of the same model, sold to a private collector for \$56 million, far outstripping Freud’s previous record of \$17 million for *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995). At that point, as Hughes rightly pointed out, one can no longer perceive the painting, just the price tag. This would indeed be a curse for an artist, though we have no way of knowing whether Freud felt this way. It would seem that like Kossoff, and if so, to his credit and our benefit, he continued working in much the same painstaking way as he always had.

The present period will call for more of this kind of observant, probing, even obdurate approach to translating material reality into art. The development of objective conditions themselves will condition whether the artists’ outlook will tend toward pessimism or the opposite. Either way, they will have much to learn from the London School and Leon Kossoff.



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