Figurative painter Frank Auerbach dies aged 93: “Our voices carry ...”

Paul Mitchell
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Frank Auerbach, one of the world’s leading modern painters and last survivor of the post-World War II London School of figurative art that also included Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon, died November 11, aged 93, at his home in Camden Town, north London.

The German-born British artist believed that “the purpose of art is to make us see things anew, to see the world in a way that it’s difficult to describe in words.” His ability to extract and give material expression to the psychological essence of those around him—his friends, family, fellow artists and sitters—comes across most dramatically in his emotionally intense, thickly layered, swirling portraits, exemplified by his 1961 work *E.O.W. IV*. Estella Olive West was his earliest sitter and companion from the 1950s to the 1970s. Auerbach said West was perhaps his “greatest influence” and someone he loved for “her nature, courage and anti-Puritanism.”

West also appears in six wonderful charcoal and chalk drawings displayed earlier this year alongside drawings of other sitters and two self-portraits from the 1950s in the Courtauld Gallery’s *Frank Auerbach: The Charcoal Heads* exhibition.

Another exhibition, *Frank Auerbach: Portraits of London*, the first survey dedicated to the London landscapes from his seven-decade career, is currently showing (until December 7) at the Offer Waterman & Francis Outred gallery, St George Street, London. The landscapes, which beautifully capture light, space and texture, are a record of the development of a postwar London characterised by destruction and poverty but also by a movement of the working class and intelligentsia for a better, egalitarian society, amongst whom one can count Auerbach.

The gallery describes *Portraits of London* as following “the arc of the artist’s career from the enigmatic, densely impastoed, earth-toned building sites of the 1950s, through the vibrant, linear landscapes of the 1960s, to the more fluid and exuberant works of the past 30 years.”

Although Auerbach was not overtly political, he was a deeply humanistic, socially aware and cultured individual totally immersed in his art. Apart from a few weeks, he never left London, working until his death 364 days a year in the same studio he bought in 1954. He would rework a painting continually, reapplying and scraping off paint—often over months or years—insisting he could not “leave a painting until it had an independent life of its own.”

Though his paintings were eventually to sell for vast sums—a record $7 million was paid in 2023 for a 1969 version of his *Mornington Crescent* series—Auerbach lived frugally. He despised the commercialisation of art, explaining,

> When I was young I thought like everyone else that the aim was... to become marvellous and be famous. Totally fallen away by now. I’ve had no contact with what’s called the Art World. I live an amazingly restrictive life and go on in this very quiet way.

In a rare interview, broadcast earlier this year on the BBC radio programme *This Cultural Life,* Auerbach likened his artwork to poetry. “I’m susceptible to poetry,” he explained,

> I’m not susceptible to music at all, ballet or organised religion... Throughout my life one of the many mysteries of life is how the muse, as it were, picks people. Because she picks the most disparate people... Totally incompatible people and then turns them into great poets. Something similar happens in my trade. People are chosen mysteriously from early on and they don’t know what has drawn them to this.

The softly spoken, still lucid and witty artist launched into a word perfect recitation from memory of William Butler Yeats’s poem *Hound Voice*—a rousing call to arms, to join

the struggle for liberation and freedom, symbolised by the wild and independent "hound" of the title. The poem begins:

> Because we love bare hills and stunted trees
> And were the last to choose the settled ground,
> Its boredom of the desk or of the spade, because
> So many years companioned by a hound,
> Our voices carry…

That interview was also remarkable for the way Auerbach eschewed postmodernist ideas of victimhood and identity, something, he of all people, could lay claim to. Auerbach was a Jewish child refugee, born in Berlin in 1931 and sent to England at the tender age of seven just before the outbreak of the Second World War by his father Max, a Jewish patent lawyer, and his mother, Lithuanian art student Charlotte Nora Burchard. His mother had packed two suitcases for him, one with everyday clothes, the other full of sheets, napkins and tablecloths for when he "got married later on." Max and Charlotte both perished in Auschwitz in 1942.

Auerbach revealed he only escaped their fate because his family were "fairly prosperous." He was one of six children allowed into the country sponsored by a family friend, the author Iris Origo, on the condition they would not be a "burden" on the British state.

Auerbach remarks that he was not part of the *Kindertransport* scheme in which the Conservative government of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain reluctantly and temporarily relaxed Britain's rigid immigration rules to allow a token 10,000 unaccompanied, mainly Jewish children into Britain. This was the result of public revulsion at the November 9-10, 1938 anti-Jewish pogrom in Germany known as *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass). The government refused to fund the rescue, denying visas to the children of less wealthy parents and all Jewish adults in Nazi Germany. *Kristallnacht* was the prelude to the most terrible atrocity of the 20th century—the extermination of six million Jews in the Holocaust.

Auerbach claims he never tried to find out about his parents and "simply moved on... life is too short to brood over the past." He plunged into life at Bunce Court, a progressive school in Kent, which housed many Jewish refugee children, and "a little republic pretty much cut off from the world." He recalls the enormous impression a reproduction of J.M.W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* made on him as a boy and continued to influence him as "an example of art breaking the rules." Fellow artist and close friend Leon Kossoff later compared Auerbach's art to "a gleam of light and warmth and life... the same light that seems to glow through the late, great, thin Turners."

Auerbach started painting when he arrived in London from school at 16, first at St Martin's School of Art, then the Royal College of Art and subsequently under David Bomberg in 1948, whose thickly painted impasto method was to prove so influential. Auerbach described him as "the most original, stubborn, radical intelligence that was to be found in art schools." Auerbach once traced his painting heritage, from Bomberg, back through Walter Sickert to Whistler, Degas, Ingres and right to Raphael.

Auerbach's first exhibition took place at the Beaux-Arts Gallery in 1956, his first retrospective exhibition was at the Hayward Gallery in 1978 and he was Britain's representative at the 1986 Venice Biennale. That Auerbach was able to develop a figurative style of art, sticking to his profound and optimistic belief that "I feel there is no grander entity than the individual human being" is extraordinary, given the postwar artistic environment.

The succession of terrible defeats and betrayals that artists witnessed—including the rise of Nazism and Stalinism and the horrors of the Holocaust—resulted in many cases in demoralisation, despair and doubt (or worse) about the working class and the possibility of the socialist transformation of society.

Britain saw the demise of the Kitchen Sink school of artists who, whilst expressing sympathy for the plight of the working class, could only see the mundane and oppressed nature of its existence. Pop Art and its arch-exponent Andy Warhol were in the ascendancy, with young British artist Richard Hamilton praising it for its popular, transient, expendable, mass-produced, witty, "sexy," gimmicky, glamorous and big business nature. The abstract expressionists produced bold and enduring paintings but failed to grasp and creatively transform in their work the social reality they inhabited.

In Auerbach, by contrast, we have one of the few artists whose paintings glow with a light that believes in the possibilities of life and humanity.