

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

The New Criterion

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Gallery chronicle

by *James Panero*

London modernism doesn't get the same credit as its Paris or New York counterparts. That only means the work of the richly expressive painters of the London School—not just Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, but also Frank Auerbach, Michael Andrews, and R. B. Kitaj, among others—continues to surprise. “Leon Kossoff: A Life in Painting,” at New York’s Mitchell-Innes & Nash, provides a deep dive into the thick impasto of this British painter.¹ Born in London in 1926, and focused on the lives of its working-class neighborhoods, Kossoff imparted the weight of experience in the thickness of his line and heaviness of his brush.



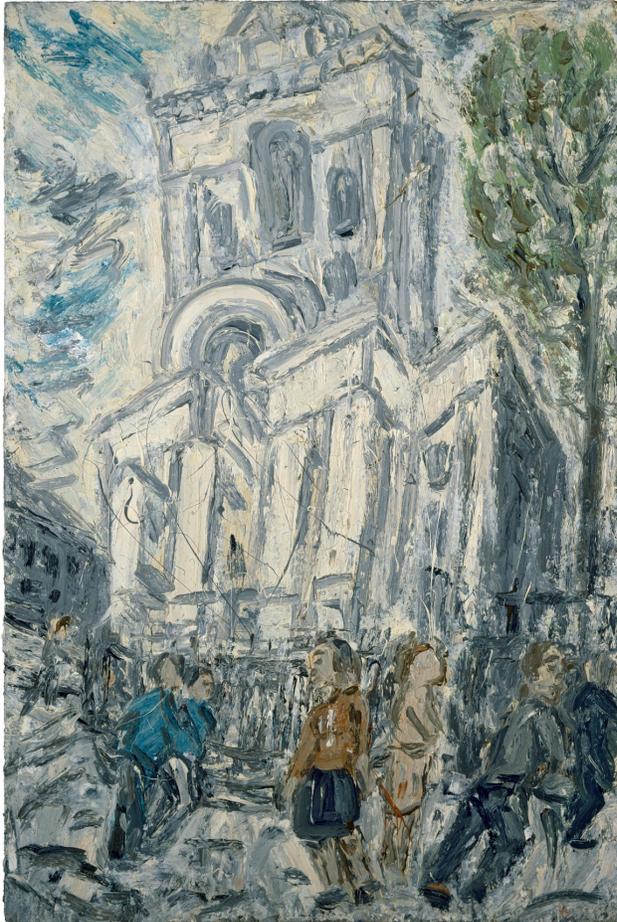
Leon Kossoff, Portrait of Rosalind No. 1, 1973, Oil on board, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

The exhibition of sixteen works, ranging from 1963 to 1993, is a revelation of painterly expression. English artists have never shied away from painting the gutter—sometimes from the gutter. Kossoff, who died in 2019, worked to find the beauty in the sewer. He could build up a density of oil unlike anyone else. His *Seated Nude No. 1* (1963) is a

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swirl of flesh-colored taffy; reproductions cannot do justice to the thickness of its paint-handling. For all of its concreteness, this nude seems to liquefy upon approach into a handful of emotions.

As Kossoff moved from the 1960s into the 1970s and '80s, he began to dig wider, darker lines back into his wet compositions. The gouges gave his paintings their necessary structure, carving in the details of his portraiture and cityscapes without limiting the freedom of his paint-handling. His two tiny self-portraits here, from 1974 and 1978, look like something you might peel off the bottom of your shoe. Meanwhile *Portrait of Rosalind No. 1* (1973) and *Father Asleep in Armchair* (1978) come across as primitively carved relics painted in relief. As he turned to the urban topography of London's East End, the roughness of this same approach lent itself to his paintings *Demolition of YMCA Building No. 3, Spring* (1971), *Red Brick School Building, Winter* (1982), and *Christ Church, Spitalfields, Early Summer* (1992).



Leon Kossoff, Christ Church, Spitalfields, Early Summer, 1992 Oil on board, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

This must-see exhibition is timed to the release of the 640-page *Leon Kossoff: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings* by Modern Art Press and is curated by the catalogue's editor, Andrea Rose. A West Coast version of the exhibition is now on view at California's L.A. Louver gallery, while London's Annely Juda Fine Art showed an iteration of the show last fall. Taken together, these initiatives should convince anyone that Kossoff has earned a place in the pantheon of modern art.