

ARTFORUM JUNE 2009

REVIEWS

Leon Kossoff

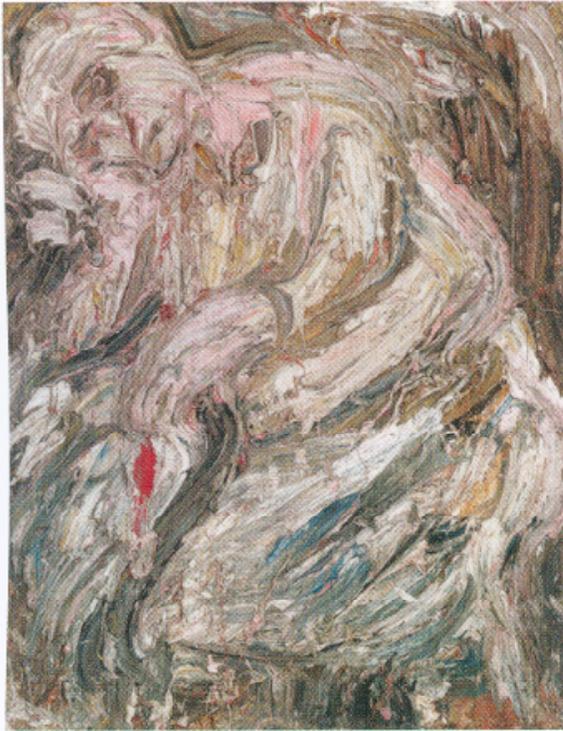
MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Leon Kossoff's painterliness invites us to scan the image for subconscious meaning—to play on Anton Ehrenzweig's idea of the way we approach what he calls “gestalt-free painting”—and the meaning we find involves what Freud called “primary process thinking,” and traces of what D. W. Winnicott, elaborating and deepening Freud's idea, called “primary creativity,” by which he meant the spontaneity innate to us all yet often stifled or channeled into trivial pursuits by society. As shown in “Leon Kossoff: From the Early Years 1957–1967,” a miniretrospective of choice works, there's nothing trivial let alone light in Kossoff's touch: Dense and manic, his marks often have a textural autonomy that not only lifts them out of the image they inform—and at times squash into incoherence—but gives them pugnacious authority.

“London, like the paint I use, seems to be in my bloodstream,” Kossoff writes, and the London in Kossoff's paintings seems bloodied by life—shell-shocked, to refer to *Shell Building Site*, 1962. He in effect turns London inside out, revealing the obscenely beautiful mess—it's crawling with worms—beneath its civilized surface. He's reminding us that London has been built and rebuilt many times, and was under devastating attack in World War II—his brushstrokes bombard us, and have the lightninglike unexpectedness and destructive intensity of a blitzkrieg—but, as *City Building Site*, 1961, makes clear, he's more fascinated by the raw dirt exposed by the catastrophe than by the new buildings that will cover it. There is an air of vigorous gloom to Kossoff's works, as though he were mired in infernal energy brooding upon itself. Spontaneity was joyous for Winnicott, but Kossoff's spontaneous painterliness is contaminated by history—personal as well as social, as the peculiarly nightmarish *Portrait of Mother Asleep*, 1963, and the grotesquely distorted, to the point of unrecognizability, *Head of Mother*, 1965, suggest.

Lucian Freud also showed his mother asleep and in death, and his painterliness also suggested and did emotional violence to his subjects,

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Leon Kossoff, *Portrait of Mother Asleep*, 1963, oil on board, 63½ x 49½".

but Kossoff is much more brutal and unrelenting—even more so than Francis Bacon. (The three together form what might be called the London School of Painterliness.) Kossoff shows his mother decaying—her corpse, as it were, rancid with emotional suffering and wracked with physical pain. She is a horrified ghost of herself, staring at us from her grave in wide-eyed terror. And *Father Seated in Armchair No. 2*, 1960, is the depressing picture of death in life—life as a living of death. And yet Kossoff's brushstrokes are peculiarly vitalizing, suggesting that they defy the draining effect of depression—while pointing to the turmoil they hide. Painterliness is used to convey character and despair—it has an eschatological cast, as though Kossoff were one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse—and is pursued as a vitalizing abstract end in itself.

If oil painting was invented to render the subtleties of flesh, as de Kooning suggested, then Kossoff's flesh is more sordid than subtle, however nuanced its squalor. His painterliness is much more existentially extreme than de Kooning's, and blurs—collapses—the difference between figure and ground more convincingly (*Two Seated Figures*, 1967, is a superb example), thus “solving” the old Cubist problem by reducing it to absurdity.

This exhibition made clear that Kossoff is one of the great painters of his time, and that expressionistic painting will endure, for it conveys existential truths with uncanny spontaneity and prereflective immediacy. Kossoff's painterly skin, with its feverish aesthetics, gets under our skin, inflaming our subconscious.

—Donald Kuspit