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HYPERALLERGIC

Leon Kossoff's Art of Darkness and Light

I soon discovered that this gentle, wary, vulnerable man of 75 possessed a will of steel.



by Michael Glover

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Leon Kossoff, "Self-portrait" (1980), oil on board, 24 x 21 cm (© The Artist's Estate. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and LA Louver, Los Angeles)

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LONDON — I was in the grip of despair. I had arrived to interview the artist Leon Kossoff at his home in Willesden, North London, for the *Independent on Sunday*, but when I arrived, after toiling long and hard uphill by bicycle, I found him to be profoundly unenthusiastic about the prospect. I explained to him that he had already agreed to talk to me, and that I had come all the way from South London. Finally, grudgingly, he let me slip, side-on, into the rather under-lit front hall — but only into the hall.

Yes, he would do it, he said in the end, still havoring, but he had never anticipated such consequences of having his work shown at the Tate and the Venice Biennale I soon discovered that this gentle, wary, vulnerable man of 75 possessed a will of steel.

So we entered the studio, which was the small front room of his house, overlooking the street. What a battleground of a vista it was! Paint-encrusted walls and floors. Wallpaper lapping down from the ceiling. Two dangling, naked light bulbs. Various pairs of independent-spirited, paint-spattered old shoes.

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Leon Kossoff, "Red Brick School Building, Winter" (1982), oil on board
122 x 152 cm (© The Artist's Estate. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and LA Louver, Los Angeles)

He sat me in a chair beside the door, took a seat beside me, and then told me, in reply to a series of tentative questions, all the things that he would *not* be willing to talk about, and all the things he would *not* allow me to do: no tape recording of our conversation; no personal matters of any kind; no talk about modern art or any of his contemporaries. Yes, I might refer to a particular model by name (that was Fidelma), but not the city she was from. There was a ziggurat of teetering books at his elbow: Blake, Kundera, and others ...

When he spoke at all, he did so with great hesitation. There were long, silent spaces between the words. The remark of his that has stayed with me to this day is this one: *every day it is a struggle, to begin again, to re-learn to draw, to prove to myself that I have not lost the ability to do it ...* In a letter to me written three years later, he added a kind of addendum to those words of his from the spring of 2001. "The important thing is to somehow keep going. This is 'the straw to which we cling.'"

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Leon Kossoff, "Portrait of Mother Asleep" (1963), oil on board, 160 x 122 cm. Private Collection (© The Artist's Estate. Courtesy Annelly Juda Fine Art, London, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and LA Louver, Los Angeles)

That interview took place 20 years ago. Later on we developed a bit of a friendship. Kossoff died in 2019. And today I am in the company of a retrospective spanning the 60-odd years of his painterly endeavors, *Leon Kossoff: A Life in Painting* at Annelly Juda Fine Art. And endeavor is the needed word for this man of Ukrainian Jewish parentage — his father ran a bakery in East London and his pummeling and piling up and wrenching about of paint does put you in mind from time to time of a baker kneading his dough. His subjects are, for the most part, two: portraits and London cityscapes. He paints not on canvas, but on board because canvas yields too easily. He needs a surface that can withstand sustained attack from this least aggressive of men. Stubborn, yes, aggressive, no. And attack he does, applying the paint in great, fat collops, and then scraping it back. Again and again and again he does it until a moment of resolution swims into view, and then he stops.

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Kossoff's range of colors is often relatively limited, especially in his portraiture. Duns. Blacks. Grays. Until close to the end of his life, he chose not to let color sing, or act joyously. Color does not dance. Although it also must be said that all this somberness, this earthiness, can also be shot through with a surprise or two of pink, momentary flashes of red, or tones of blue, all rendered muddy.

You can see this happening in a painting called "Father Seated in an Armchair No 2" (1960), how blues, red, creams have inveigled themselves. Or consider the preponderance of pink in "Portrait of Mother Asleep" (1963). The paintings are heavily textured, encrusted, as if they are ancient things. He pushes, drags the paint across, leaving deep-gouged, pitted, wounded surfaces. Such a slow turbulence of paint! Such slatherings! For this show, all the frames have been removed. You see the edges of the boards he has been attacking. Looked at side on, you could be staring at a rock on a seashore, encrusted with barnacles. These early portraits seem to be in love with an inner darkness, at one with it. They seem to be wrested from that darkness. The image emerges grudgingly. Bodies are curled, slumped, bowed over, as if collapsed in on themselves. All this closely observed studio work seems to be happening in slow time.

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Leon Kossoff, "Christ Church, Spitalfields, Early Summer" (1992), oil on board
182.5 x 122 cm (© The Artist's Estate. Courtesy Annelly Juda Fine Art, London, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and LA Louver, Los Angeles)

Not so when he looks beyond the window, and begins to spar with the built structures of London, the city where he lived all his life. The urbanness of the urban, its rush, its roar, its jangliness, was his other great preoccupation. Here his paintings take on speed, movement, rhythm. A railway line was at the bottom of Kossoff's garden. I could hear the momentary whoosh of a train at that first interview. His paintings show lit locomotives: hectic, wormy, rushing headlong through some deep gully just beyond the trees that partly conceal their presence. He would go down to King's Cross Station, annotate in drawings what he had seen, then work on a painting back in the studio.

Hawksmoor's great church at Spitalfields was another subject to which he returned again and again. A particularly fine example from that series is one of the highlights of this exhibition, positioned as it is beneath several skylights, which makes it feel at one with the smudgy gray day of scrappily cloudy turbulence you can see if you look up. The

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painting seems to be sipping at all that light. Kossoff's church lists and leans and bends and bows a little, almost teetering — we may think of Soutine. Human beings pass by in its shadow, with their rapid scissoring walks. Now a new lightness of being seems to have come into play. Kossoff's emburdened spirit is out on the dance floor at last, making its mark. Or marks.



Leon Kossoff, "Between Kilburn and Willesden Green, Winter Evening" (1991), oil on board, 76.5 x 117 cm. Private Collection (© The Artist's Estate. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and LA Louver, Los Angeles)

Leon Kossoff: A Life in Painting continues at *Annely Juda Fine Art (23 During Street, London, England)* through December. It then tours to *Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York (January 13–March 5, 2022)* and *L.A. Louver Gallery, Los Angeles (January 26–March 26, 2022)*. The exhibition was curated by *Andrea Rose*.

Leon Kossoff: Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings by *Andrea Rose* is published by *Modern Art Press*.