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Review: L.A. gallery-going during Omicron isn't optimal but offers excellent art along the way

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As the pandemic rolls on, spreading the Omicron variant far and wide, visiting art galleries remains a less-than-satisfying endeavor.

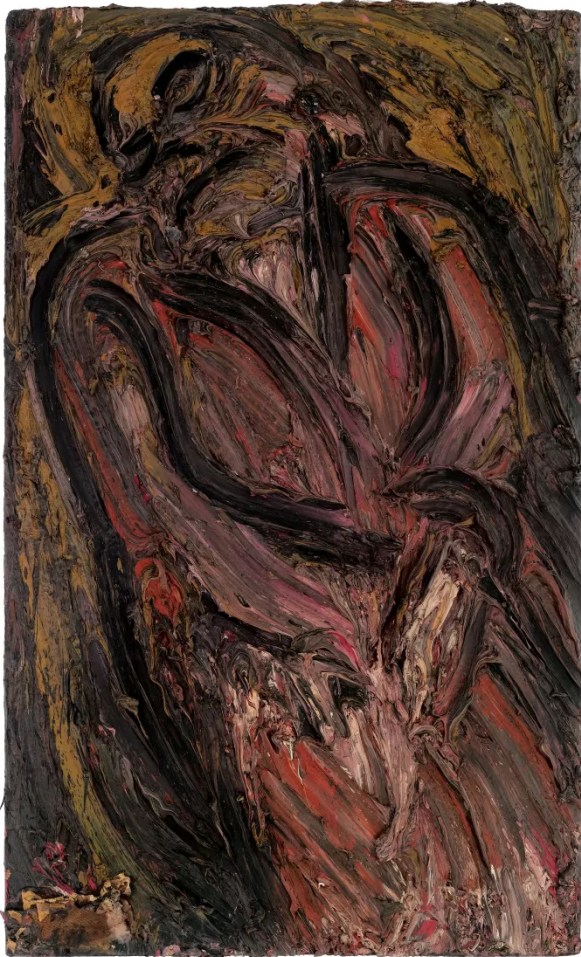
To its advantage, gallery-going offers a better bet against viral transmission than witnessing most performing art, since a gallery doesn't require sitting in one place amid a throng for most of a couple of hours, but it isn't yet optimal. And though COVID cases are in steep decline, the death rate remains disturbingly high.

Recently, I went to a dozen galleries — N95-masked, scheduled for a couple of appointments during the usually uncrowded morning and armed with triple-vaccination proof — seeing some excellent art along the way. I started off at L.A. Louver in Venice, where a fine, compact survey of 17 paintings by the late British artist Leon Kossoff (1926-2019) was coordinated with Annely Juda Fine Art (London) and Mitchell-Innes & Nash (New York). The show accompanies publication of a 640-page catalogue raisonné of the exceptional artist's oil paintings.

There was something unintentionally fitting about seeing Kossoff's complex, sobering art under our currently disrupted circumstances. The show's earliest painting, "Seated Woman" (1957), is a 5-foot-tall panel laden with pounds and pounds of thick, dark paint. Kossoff dragged his brush through the chocolate brown mud, exposing rich tones of purple, crimson and forest green buried within, literally carving out the linear form of a dozing figure, hands clasped in her lap, mouth a hooked slash.

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The carved channels delineate in negative space the pendulous breasts, somnolent grimace and agitated body. Owing something to Willem de Kooning's celebrated paintings of women from a few years before, she's the modern image of a prehistoric Venus, ancient and lifeless yet poised for formidable rebirth.



Leon Kossoff, "Seated Woman," 1957, oil on panel
(L.A. Louver Gallery)

Catalog author Andrea Rose, former director of visual arts at the British Council, chronicles the harrowing history of the painting's sitter, a distant relative of the artist, who survived anti-Jewish pogroms in western Russian provinces. The visceral painting, which dates from London's struggle to rebuild from the wreckage of World War II, is an extraordinary object, packed with churning power.

Upstairs, the gallery has installed an independent show of two Kossoff paintings, 12 etchings and two drawings, all related to classical French

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Baroque pictures by Nicolas Poussin, which the artist had studied in the collection at London's National Gallery. In Kossoff's expressionist reworkings, it's often hard to tell whether we are witnessing a joyful bacchanal or a deadly massacre, a revelry or a riot. They're especially worth seeing now, as the Getty Museum prepares to launch the exhibition "Poussin and the Dance" on Feb. 15, including the two works that inspired Kossoff.