



Leon Kossoff: *Portrait of Mother Asleep*, 1963, oil on board, 63½ by 49½ inches; at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

LEON KOSSOFF
MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

For pure cussedness it's hard to beat the London painters who came to prominence in the wake of WWII. A generation younger than the Abstract Expressionists, artists such as Leon Kossoff, Frank Auerbach and Lucian Freud shared with their New York colleagues a sense of existential angst, expressed through an extended process of scraping out and overpainting that reflected their quest

to encapsulate intense feeling by sheer insistence. While no less engaged by the physicality of their materials than their American precursors, these artists rejected abstraction to celebrate the appearances of the quotidian. Kossoff and his colleagues scrutinized their friends and family, and their marginal London neighborhoods, translating their responses into densely worked surfaces and dragged, murky colors that recorded the ferocity of their efforts to achieve something, they suggested, probably unattainable: the harmonious embodiment of all the artist's intellectual, perceptual and emotional turmoil as paint.

Visitors commented on the rampant disorder of these artists' studios, the floors covered with scraped-off paint—testimony to the impossibility of definitive decisions. Added to this was a notion of the artist as a hypersensitive, isolated figure, working tirelessly at his self-imposed task, avoiding the vulgar intrusions of curators, dealers, collectors and critics. But what about the work itself? American audiences have had difficulty coming to terms with the School of London because, with the exception of Freud, the artists are seldom shown here. Kossoff's last museum show in the U.S., featuring prints and drawings, was held in 2000 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; his last New York show was mounted the same year at Mitchell-Innes & Nash. So "Leon Kossoff: From the Early Years 1957-1967," recently at the gallery's Chelsea space, was a truly remarkable event: 12 important oils—mostly seated figures—

never before shown in New York, nearly all produced when the artist was in his 30s. We could watch Kossoff becoming Kossoff, walking a tightrope between incoherence and eloquence.

The paintings look excavated rather than built-up, discovered rather than made. In the eerie *Portrait of Mother Asleep* (1963), we seem to witness the invention of painting itself: the realization that primordial ooze, sometimes blushed with pink, sometimes cooled to gray-blue, could be made to assume the appearance of a human figure. In *Seated Nude No. 1* (1963), the artist willed paint to eddy into the presence, rather than the semblance, of a thickset, seated woman. Often, pulled-out threads of paint, like immobilized drips, suggest the slow passage of time. Soutine and the German Expressionists frequently come to mind, but *Seated Woman* (1957), with its assertively brushed black arcs and compressed pose, unexpectedly recalls Matisse's portrait of Yvonne Landsberg. The longer one stayed with them, the more complex, truthful and harmonious these loaded, almost brutally realized figures became. Perhaps Kossoff achieved the impossible after all.

—Karen Wilkin