

Leon Kossoff, Annely Juda Fine Art, London

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Taking into account the slow, majestic pace at which he works, Leon Kossoff's new solo show at Annely Juda in London, travelling next year to New York and California, may well be the last in his lifetime. This melancholy thought echoes with the swell of feeling, the sense of life's awkwardness and tragedy, that he always expresses in painting. But it also comes to mind because his latest series, focused on a single cherry tree in a garden next door to his north London home, is above all about time.

In 2002, this cherry tree, which Kossoff had observed for decades – he has worked from his Willesden studio since 1966 – began to deteriorate and a fragile bough was supported with stakes. "As time passed it seemed as if the stakes had always been there," Kossoff notes succinctly in the catalogue. "This subject, so different from other subjects that I had been involved with through the years, became my working life. Time passed, and paintings of the tree emerged . . . the tree in spring, the tree in autumn, the tree with a child passing between the stakes, the tree

with a nearby tube train, and the tree with a house."

It is a given that the tree is a self-portrait of the ageing artist, and that Kossoff brings to the project all his mastery of dense, encrusted brushwork, nervous, vibrant lines and architectonic composition. The boughs and stakes are brutal, thrusting diagonals, dramatically cropped, compressed into the picture plane, their dark, solid mass offset by painterly passages of delicacy and lyricism – a flurry of blossom, pinkish-red roof tiles, a fugitive figure, a passing train. "Cherry Tree with Diesel" has a soft grey tonality yet is also luminous. "Cherry Tree, Early January" shimmers with pallid winter light. A breath of wind seems to whip through the bluish "Cherry Tree, Winter", the brightness of the sky filters down, translucent, between branches in "Cherry Tree, Early Summer".

Stoical and sombre, these works are also suffused with energy and the rapture of the moment. Their subject is not just shifting seasons and different light; in their ridges of layered paint, scraped down, reapplied, built up, they rather record accumulated memories, the artist's changing responses and attempts to fix time as it passes inexorably. Every mark carries representational weight and also the story of the picture's making, the chances and battles that determined its agitated, unstable surfaces. Classical equilibrium is here, but everything also looks about to dissolve into abstraction.

His genius has always been to depict the chaos of the world at the instant at which an image seems to cohere and form before our eyes. More intensely than ever in this motif drawn from landscape – the tangled, energetic large charcoal drawings that were his starting point are exhibited here to stunning effect – he represents nature as a powerful, untrammelled force, on which art just imposes order.

These paintings, then, are about art as well as time, and about the relationship between the two. For Kossoff is now consciously a late artist: what he once said of late Titian – "everything melts but stays strong" – is true of his own radiant, abstracted "Cherry Trees" too. He must also be conscious of working out of time, intransigently against today's conceptualism and most current figurative painting. I saw this show just after visiting overviews of British art at the Saatchi Gallery and the British Art Show, and the gulf

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of difference between them and Kossoff was not only his virtuosity, achieved by daily hard-won patterns of painting emerging out of drawing, but also authenticity of feeling.

In his capturing of sensation, as well as compositional gravity, Kossoff looks straight back to Cézanne. Both isolated themselves to pursue a certain way of seeing and painting; both focused on the motif in series expressing modulations of tone, colour, light, sensibility. Kossoff will be remembered for his early swimming pool pictures, vital, staccato, youthful; for the monumental swaying splendour of his mid-career depictions of Christchurch Spitalfields (some wonderful examples are also in this show); and now for his cherry trees: three utterly different quotidian, democratic subjects that together distil a unique vision of contemporary London. *Until Dec 17, www.annelyjudafineart.co.uk; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, May 5- June 18 2011; LA Louver, Venice, California, Sep 8-Oct 8 2011*

Image: 'Cherry Tree, Early January' (2004)