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The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

Leon Kossoff: Looking at Life With a Loaded Brush

A 13-painting show surveys a great career and marks the publication of a catalog of all the artist's paintings of family, friends and London in a single, weighty volume.



Leon Kossoff's "Portrait of Father No. 3" (1972), in "Leon Kossoff: A Life in Painting," at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York. In addition to that exhibition, the show's title is shared by surveys at the artist's two other primary galleries: Annely Juda Fine Art in London and L.A. Louver in Los Angeles. Leon Kossoff Estate and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

By Roberta Smith

Feb. 3, 2022, 11:12 a.m. ET

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During his decades as an artist, the British painter Leon Kossoff (1926-2019) produced 510 known oil paintings. This can be said because they have all been tracked down and published in a catalogue raisonné just out from Modern Art Press (London).

A catalogue raisonné is a herculean effort of research, detective work, devotion and perception. This one, assembled over eight years by a small team led by Andrea Rose, an art historian and specialist in British painting, conveys the usual breathtaking accumulation of information: images of each painting, its exhibition history and bibliography and a list of its successive owners (called a provenance). An added benefit is the liveliness of Rose's annotations of the paintings, which are peppered with striking observations from sundry art historians, curators and critics, artists, the artist himself and others. One of Kossoff's two small paintings based on Titian's horrific "Apollo Flaying Marsyas," for example, comes with an insightful appreciation by David Bowie, who once owned it.

The publication of a catalogue raisonné is a momentous event, and Kossoff's is being celebrated by the exhibition "Leon Kossoff: A Life in Painting," a title shared by three small, carefully thought-out surveys at the artist's primary galleries: Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, Annely Juda Fine Art in London and L.A. Louver in Los Angeles. A collective catalog reproduces the works in all three of them, which is admirable. It also calls the combined shows "the largest most comprehensive exhibition" of Kossoff's paintings ever staged in a commercial gallery, which seems an empty boast.

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“Christ Church, Spitalfields, Early Summer,” Kosoff’s 1992 rendering of Nicholas Hawksmoor’s English Baroque masterpiece. Leon Kossoff Estate and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

By now, Kossoff is among the most accomplished painters of the late 20th and early 21st century. He has been unfairly overshadowed by fellow Brits like Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, thanks in part to their colorful personal lives. But this may pass.

Kossoff’s greatness lies in the extreme way he pits the two basic realities of painting — the actual paint surface and the image depicted — against each another. First there is the startlingly heavy, even off-putting, impasto of his oil paint, which sometimes seems more ladled on than conventionally applied with a brush (even a big one), and which gives his surfaces an almost topographical dimension. Then there is the reality of his images, initially swamped in paint, that ultimately battles its way to legibility through a process that thrillingly slows and extends the act of looking.

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“Seated Nude No. 1,” from 1963, oil on board. Leon Kossoff
Estate and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

The painter’s subjects fall into two main groups. There are self-portraits as well as portraits of friends and family and paintings of nude models — all made during long sessions in his studio. Then there is everything outside, namely London and its pulsing life. This he captured in paintings of construction sites; pedestrians passing well-known buildings or entering tube stations, as well as trains racing along tracks. These began as numerous drawings made on location, from which he painted in the studio.

The 13 paintings at Mitchell-Innes & Nash span three decades and most of his subjects. They begin with the large “Seated Nude No. 1” (1963) — a Rubenesque woman sinking into a dark armchair — full of early signals of his vision. Among other standouts is a 1992 rendering of Nicholas Hawksmoor’s English Baroque masterpiece, Christ Church, Spitalfields in the East End, towering protectively above the people hurrying past on the sidewalk; a powerful seated portrait of his father; a roiling demolition scene; and two passing trains viewed from above, through trees.

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"Between Kilburn and Willesden Green, Winter Evening," from 1991. Kossoff depicted London and its pulsing life, including its railway and underground stations and their trains. Leon Kossoff Estate and Mitchell-Innes & Nash

The great thing about Kossoff's paintings is the ultimate accuracy of their portrayals, in the psychic and physical sense. All his subjects come across as complex presences, living parts of the living world — whether human, architectural or natural — animated by his thick, quietly vibrating surfaces. It is telling that the only still life in the entire catalogue raisonné is from the early 1950s, when Kossoff was just getting started. Even his paintings based on the old masters are usually multigure compositions to which he adds his own special sense of tumult. This is exemplified in this superb show by the lunging bodies and brushwork in his copy of a Poussin. He had little interest in stillness.