

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

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## Soutine Kossoff, Hastings Contemporary review — thrilling paintings burst into light

Pairing Chaïm Soutine and Leon Kossoff is a masterstroke, showing the restless energy and dizzying brushwork they share

Jackie Wullschläger | 4 April 2023



Kossoff's 'City Building Site' (1961)

Among the season's most unlikely, exciting exhibitions is the meeting of the École de Paris and the School of London in Soutine Kossoff at Hastings Contemporary. An impressively ambitious show for a regional gallery, it's the first UK display of Chaïm Soutine's landscapes in four decades, and worth the trip for his frenzied vistas of Céret alone. The paintings are so turbulent that in "Les Platanes à Céret" and "Paysage aux Cypres" it is as if a tornado uproots the houses and trees of the village in the Pyrenees foothills, sweeping you into a vortex of thick, spinning colour. These come from private collections and their survival is remarkable, since Soutine came to loathe his Cérets and subsequently attempted to destroy them.

A Jewish émigré from a shtetl near Minsk, Soutine arrived in Paris in 1913, assimilated the transfigurations of Cubism into an eloquent, emotive language derived from Van Gogh, flourished in the 1920s, spent the war years on the run and perished in 1943. He was introduced to British audiences at Gimpel Fils gallery in 1947, then at Tate's exhibition in 1963. These shows inspired a cult for Soutine in the small avant-garde circle of artists — Leon Kossoff, his close friend Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon — loosely associated as the School of London. Kossoff, 21 in 1947, said later he was struck by "the living reality of Soutine".

The physicality of his painting — tactile surfaces, impetuous brushwork, forms slashed or extravagantly distorted yet just holding their grip — and the solemnity of his approach, enhanced by his tragic status, were exemplary for heavyweight artists emerging in the postwar period when the future of figuration looked uncertain. It was less a question of direct influence than of affinity and shared sensibility, and one recognises this especially with Kossoff. His force and expressiveness depend, like Soutine's, on a battle between form and formlessness, coherence and chaos, fought out on the canvas.

Soutine in 1920-22 destabilised Céret's steep hills and storm-bent cypresses into restless, writhing compositions — tree trunks pour down like torrents to squash the grimacing little house in "Groupe d'Arbres", the village square churns into crimson and gold rivulets in "Place de Céret". So the young Kossoff wrought from war-ravaged London's construction sites dramas of transformation and renewal.

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Kossoff's 'Between Willesden Green and Kilburn, Winter Evening' (1991)

In "City Building Site" (1961), the earliest of Kossoff's landscapes displayed, black girders and chrome-yellow cranes rise out of muddy walkways forged in layered slathers of pigment: place and painting seem to come into being simultaneously. Through the 1960s, Kossoff's urban panoramas captured London in flux. Concrete cooling towers soar one bright blue morning amid a maze of railway lines, electric masts, industrial ruins and abandoned allotments in "Willesden Junction, Summer No 2". York Way viaduct slices through derelict wasteland, the gloom mitigated by touches of Venetian red and orange, in "Railway Landscape near King's Cross, Dark Day".

As with Soutine, there is a dizzying feeling of being lifted above the ground, of ceaseless energy and movement. The tracks and bridges provide geometric underpinning, but as writer Iain Sinclair said, Kossoff depicts the railway "as an organic entity, a living thing".

Early Kossoff and early Soutine are alike dark, brushstrokes tangled, surfaces barely penetrable. Then both burst into light. For Soutine the change was sudden: his painting brightened and tightened when collector Albert Barnes bought more than 50 works at once in 1923, rescuing him from poverty. His second great landscape series, from the Côte d'Azur in the later 1920s, maintains the Cérêts' curvilinear sweeps and compressed construction but is airier, radiant in colour and more ordered, as in the views of town squares in "Paysage de Cagnes avec arbre" and "L'Arbre de Vence".



Leon Kossoff, 'Children's Swimming Pool, Autumn Afternoon' (1971)

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Kossoff shifted more gradually. Hastings has the rowdy wonder of leaping bodies in splashing silvery water darted with light that is “Children’s Swimming Pool, Autumn”, painted on a board primed with titanium white: a 1970s high point. Then comes the architectonic “Christ Church, Spitalfields” (1989), the facade tilting, about to fall out of the frame, miraculous, monumental, palpable: stone tinged pink in summer heat, sketchy crowds flowing past on Fournier Street.

“Between Kilburn and Willesden Green, Winter Evening” (1991), pale rushing clouds luminous through bare branches, tendrils and loops of paint animating every inch of canvas, records the instant a carriage halts on the north London line — the ordinary made momentous. The train is seen from Kossoff’s garden, the church was close to his childhood home, the pool is where he taught his son to swim. But take these three paintings together and they surge from the local to the grandeur of a London pastoral vision, imbued with democratic, inclusive spirit.

That is felt too in the portraits by both artists. Some of Soutine’s will be remembered from the Courtauld’s 2017 show of his waiters and bellboys. The keynote, as MoMA curator Monroe Wheeler pinpointed, is the young domestic workers’ “pitiable grandeur”. Their uniforms shine in rich impasto hues fit for kings: myriad whites for “Le Petit Pâtissier”, hands on his hips, insouciant as a prince; velvety reds and blacks for “Le Valet de Chambre” with outsize ears and mournful eyes. It was a teenage pastry cook that initially caught Barnes’s attention: “outrageous, fascinating, real, truculent, afflicted with an immense ear, superb, unexpected, and right”.

Kossoff similarly makes a virtue of awkwardness — his own and his subjects’. Dense as a sculptural relief, “Head of Seedo” is dragged out of accretions of paint like the silted paths in “City Building Site”: a record of the tortuous attempt to gouge a likeness. Huddled, weary and cold, Kossoff’s wife Peggy posed for five years for “Nude on a Red Bed” before he suddenly finished the picture in 15 minutes — a portrait of a couple’s tensions and tenderness.

Two likenesses of Kossoff’s brothers, Philip’s youthful head evoked in long creamy streaks, his broad brow topped by a dark quiff, in 1962, and elderly Chaïm, solid, round, meditative, in 1988, are each a psychological unfolding: affection, resistance, respect, awareness of vulnerability.

Deeply private, determined to become painters from childhood, Kossoff and Soutine saw themselves as outliers, partly because their backgrounds — working-class Jewish families of east European heritage — gave no entry to western cultural life. The gravity of their art is connected with the struggle to achieve it, and with something spiritual retained from their religious upbringing. Neither is well enough known; Hastings’ carefully chosen show of 40 works, with the artists hung in separate galleries, enriches our understanding of both by drawing out parallels while celebrating how each created an entirely individual world.

*To September 24, [hastingscontemporary.org](http://hastingscontemporary.org)*