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Frank Auerbach
London
by MARTIN HAMMER

THE CURRENT EXHIBITION Frank Auerbach at Tate Britain, London (to 13th March), is an overdue celebration. The display proceeds from dark, thick, encrusted paintings made more than sixty years ago in grim, bomb-damaged London, through to the luminous, loosely executed paintings that the artist, now well into his eighties, has produced over recent decades. Understandably, the show has garnered reverential commentary, which has sometimes tended, it must be said, to equate the achievement of the art with the character and personal charisma of its maker. Evoking the sense of existential struggle embedded in the work is usually reinforced by tales of the artist’s traumatic émigré childhood, and his monastic way of life in north London, as the Cézanne de nos jours. When critics identify a heroic, almost moral quest for truth to individual experience in Auerbach’s variations on the narrow repertoire of people and places, their claims are invariably buttressed by quotations from the artist’s distinctive way of talking about art, both his own and more generally. In fact, Auerbach has always attracted eloquent and distinguished advocacy, including criticism from David Sylvester, Michael Podro and Richard Wollheim, and a 1990 monograph by Robert Hughes. Now we have an essay by T.J. Clark in the new Tate monograph by Robert Hughes. Now we have an essay by T.J. Clark in the new Tate catalogue – one despairs when even a museum publisher prioritises design over art!

Thus the attention we might pay to overall organisation and the sensual particulars of surface texture and different kinds of painterly mark gives way to the perception, at the level of detail, of surprisingly specific and naturalistic sensations of the motif and circumstance of light with which Auerbach began, which in turn shade back into more abstract readings of space and surface (Fig.60). To put that another way, the work is steeped in the languages of Modernism, prompting analogies with, say, Van Gogh, Picasso and de Kooning, but in its relative absence of distortion, for want of a better term, it equally proclaims roots in the art of Walter Sickert, surely Auerbach’s key artistic mentor, as well as longer traditions of old-master realism embodied, for example, by Rembrandt and Constable. On another level, it is difficult to think of finished paintings (and drawings) by any other artist that look, simultaneously, so painfully, indecisively slow and so urgently spontaneous and impulsive in their realisation. For the spectator, Auerbach’s creations exert an immediate, visceral impact, but also demand and reward sustained attention, offering an antidote to the more conceptual modes of cognition required by the work of subsequent artistic generations, not to mention the ceaseless whirr of online existence. Reproductions are a very poor substitute, especially when, disastrously, they plunge into the spine, as is the case of virtually all the horizontal works illustrated in the Tate catalogue – one despairs when even a museum publisher prioritises design over art!

What is the cumulative effect of traversing the spaces at Tate Britain and the pages of Lampert’s book? For this reviewer, the show induced enormous pleasure, but also some disquiet. Apparently, the artist himself was allowed remarkable freedom to shape the presentation of his work, a longstanding stipulation according to Lampert. A sequence of six spaces, corresponding more or less to the successive decades of his career to date, are sparsely and beautifully hung with works that Auerbach evidently selected, mostly drawn from private collections. Around eight works, paintings for the most part but interspersed with the occasional drawing (Fig.61), are arranged on walls uniformly painted a beautiful shade of mid-tone grey. There are discreet labels, but no text panels. This was in striking contrast to the somewhat intrusive curation of the Barbara Hepworth show, during the brief period when the two exhibitions coincided. In Auerbach’s show one might become aware of omissions, notably the fact that there is only one modest example of the remarkable building-site paintings assembled at the Courtauld Gallery, London, in 2012. Yet such is the intensity and invention of most of the works in the
first three rooms that one can readily keep pedantic carping at bay. More significant problems emerge with the rooms given over to the 1980s and especially to the 1990s and 2000s. These are given equal weight to the earlier decades, but what passes in the gallery’s literature for a new-found joyousness could also be described, from a more sceptical perspective, as diminished intensity and ambition, and a falling away from the extraordinary fusion of structural rigour, density, boldness and precise observation that consistently elevates the earlier works (Fig 62). Who are we to expect any artist to sustain the highest levels of achievement and inventiveness over an entire long career? Last year the exemplars of Rembrandt, Turner and Matisse coincided in London shows, but such exceptions prove the rule that, in the modern period especially, even the strongest artists have often found it hard in their later decades to avoid declining inspiration, perhaps taking too much to heart the praise and success bestowed upon them. Quality is a matter of judgment, of course, but the undeniable quirk of the show is the fact that Auerbach’s six rooms are succeeded by another larger space, broken up by a divider, in which further works are selected and more densely hung by the artist’s collaborator Lampert, who also curated the 1978 exhibition (that catalogue included the marvellous interview that is reprinted in the new Tate publication) and who features as the subject of three portraits in this final section. It is again dominated by later work, does much to take the concept of the show in new directions and frankly feels tacked on, as if to fill up the allotted space. It also somewhat undercuts the claim that Auerbach’s paintings avoid repetition and ‘are impossible’, notwithstanding the obsessively detailed approach with which to beat postmodernism, whereas the tone of Lampert’s study is more self-effacing. Although she states that, generally, technical procedures, drawing on Lampert’s extensive citation but also through internalising his strongly held convictions, as in the curious notion that speaking of artistic development seems ‘artificial’ in Auerbach’s case. The narrative is broadly chronological and, although the effect is sometimes a little fragmentary, Lampert’s book provides vivid, often moving insights into a life, a personality and a body of practice.

What it lacks, inevitably, is critical distance. Art historians of the future will surely want to dig more deeply into matters that Lampert can only touch on, such as Auerbach’s studio, through which further works are selected and more densely hung by the artist’s collaborator Lampert, who also curated the 1978 exhibition (that catalogue included the marvellous interview that is reprinted in the new Tate publication) and who features as the subject of three portraits in this final section. It is again dominated by later work, does much to take the concept of the show in new directions and frankly feels tacked on, as if to fill up the allotted space. It also somewhat undercuts the claim that Auerbach’s paintings avoid repetition and ‘are impossible’, notwithstanding the obsessively detailed approach with which to beat postmodernism, whereas the tone of Lampert’s study is more self-effacing. Although she states that, generally, technical procedures, drawing on Lampert’s extensive citation but also through internalising his strongly held convictions, as in the curious notion that speaking of artistic development seems ‘artificial’ in Auerbach’s case. The narrative is broadly chronological and, although the effect is sometimes a little fragmentary, Lampert’s book provides vivid, often moving insights into a life, a personality and a body of practice.

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