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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 a 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 catalogue, presenting Auerbach as an honorary French modernist, and an empathetic and accessible monograph by Catherine

Lampert, one of Auerbach's regular band of sitters, which is replete with published and unpublished thoughts from the horse's mouth.¹ He is evidently an art historian's artist, and I too can claim to have been a fan ever since witnessing Auerbach's first major retrospective in 1978 at the Hayward Gallery, London.

The current show amply confirms that what Auerbach's best work offers the spectator is absorption in the interplay of opposed effects. Whatever the wider philosophical merits of the idea, he effectively summed up his own project in the remark: 'To miraculously hold together contradictions and incompatibilities is a good definition of art'.² 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



60. *Mornington Crescent*, by Frank Auerbach. 1965. Board, 101.6 by 127 cm. (Private collection; exh. Tate Britain, London).



61. *Self-portrait*, by Frank Auerbach. 1958. Charcoal and chalk on paper, 76.8 by 56.5 cm. (Courtesy of Daniel Katz Gallery, London; exh. Tate Britain, London).

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 little 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 intentionally as different from each other as possible', notwithstanding the obsessively reworked themes. On the visual evidence, this seems no more or less true than for any significant artist.

The initial books about Auerbach, as with associates such as Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, have been entrusted to supportive friends. Hughes used Auerbach as a stick with which to beat postmodernism, whereas the tone of Lampert's study is more self-effacing. Although she states that, generally, 'a biographical approach is not really appropriate' to Auerbach, Lampert succeeds in telling us far more than we knew before about the artist's personal, professional and artistic relationships, his travels and his outlook on life. Gossip is kept to a minimum, although we get some sense that Auerbach has not always been unremittingly austere. The book also evokes his aesthetic concerns, attitudes towards the artists he has especially admired, and his working methods and technical procedures, drawing on Lampert's reciprocated close observation of Auerbach since 1978. The illustrations likewise combine photographs of the (highly photogenic) artist, members of his family, finished works and preparatory studies. The book presents Auerbach in his own terms, both through



62. *Head of William Feaver*, by Frank Auerbach. 2003. Board, 45.1 by 40.6 cm. (Collection of Gina and Stuart Peterson; exh. Tate Britain, London).

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 dialogue with other artists, past and present, and his assimilation of the wider culture of his time and place, both matters that might be illuminated, for example, by the evidence of his library. In particular, how did Auerbach's discovery of his distinctive idiom around 1954, embedding his Sartrean feel for viscous 'raw matter' in the substance of paint, involve the creative transformation of ideas from Soutine and perhaps from the recent sculpture (rather than painting) of Giacometti, arguably more profound and lasting points of reference than some of the precursors identified by Clark? Beyond pictorial evidence, personal correspondence is bound to offer different perspectives from those available with hindsight – one passage hints at interesting material in the Marlborough Gallery archives. The contents of the artist's studio could doubtless shed more light on his creative processes. However, the lesson of recent Bacon scholarship is surely that artists like Auerbach and his close friend Freud will probably look quite different in twenty to thirty years' time, in ways that are impossible to predict.

¹ Catalogue: *Frank Auerbach*. Edited by Catherine Lampert, with an essay by T.J. Clark. 160 pp. incl. 120 col. ills. (Tate Publishing, London, 2015), £24.99. ISBN 978-1-84976-271-7. C. Lampert: *Frank Auerbach: Speaking and Painting*, London 2015.

² 'Frank Auerbach on Henri Matisse', in S. Grant, ed.: *In my View*, London 2012, p.29.

John Hoyland

London

by MICHAEL BRACEWELL

THE PAINTINGS OF John Hoyland (1934–2011) are perhaps not so well known to contemporary gallery-goers, and as such seem an intriguing choice for the inaugural exhibition at **Newport Street Gallery**, located in Vauxhall, South London: *John Hoyland – Power Stations (Paintings 1964–1982)* (to 3rd April).

Built by Damien Hirst to display works from his extensive collection, Newport Street Gallery is a generous and ambitious venture. With free admission, the Gallery comprises six large exhibition spaces across the ground and second floors (a restaurant, 'Pharmacy 2', is due to open on the first floor). Housed in a former scenery painting studio, the high-ceilinged spaces – painted brilliant white for this exhibition – are vast, bright and thus well-suited to displaying Hoyland's big, colourful abstract paintings.

The exhibition publication, containing essays by Barry Schwabsky and the late Gordon Burn,¹ also includes the transcript of a conversation between Hirst and Hoyland, parts of which were published in the catalogue to Hirst's own painting show *No Love Lost*, held at The Wallace Collection, London, in 2009.² The conversation opens with Hirst praising Hoyland: 'I was looking at your paintings the other day and you're obviously the greatest British abstract painter by far'. A career retrospective, in effect, featuring thirty-seven of Hoyland's paintings, *Power Stations* makes a case for this statement in a thorough and at times persuasive way.

The exhibition is hung chronologically and the majority of the paintings (up to those made in the 1980s, in this selection) were titled by the artist according to the date of their creation. Beginning with the paintings made in the 1960s (*11.9.65* for example, or *25.9.66*), the viewer is confronted first by big landscape-format canvases, the dominant background colour of which is a copper-tinged, tomato-soup red. The colour seems dense and matt, as though flirting with an industrial drabness.



63. *12.6.66*, by John Hoyland. 1966. Acrylic on canvas, 259.1 by 365.8 cm. (Collection of Damien Hirst; exh. Newport Street Gallery, London).