

THE HOUR OF AUERBACH

Tension / 24 Dec-Feb 1990-91

Frank Auerbach – Recent Work, Marlborough Fine Art, London

Frank Auerbach – The Complete Etchings

Frank Auerbach – A Monograph by Robert Hughes

“The importance of Auerbach’s working method cannot be overstated. It is the all-pervasive problem of paint that is both the key to his work’s regenerating presence and the ongoing relevance of painting in the modern world.”



“What I am not hoping to do is to paint another picture because there are enough pictures in the world. I’m hoping to make a new thing for the world that remains in the mind like a new species of living thing.” – A Conversation with Frank Auerbach, Catherine Lambert 1978, British Arts Council catalogue.

During September/October, there was virtually no arts publication in London that did not make some reference to Frank Auerbach. Some of the colour reproductions on the front or back (or both) of various magazines were an indication of the extensive publicity that accompanied Auerbach’s exhibition – but much of it also attested to the growth of a comparatively new British phenomenon.

The new phenomenon is not Auerbach, he’s been around for years. Rather, it is the expanding recognition of a way of thinking about contemporary art which Auerbach, among others, inadvertently perpetuates.

This way of thinking which has provoked the attention of an ever-widening portion of the arts literati, revolves around a centuries-old interest in the human figure as primary source material and the idea that painting is still a frontier where anything might happen. And it seems to have evolved despite the very different ideological concerns of postmodernism.

As we know, New York in the fifties effectively replaced Paris as the most important art centre. But now that Western media-based art and culture is almost a part of our daily lives, some are looking closely at this other aspect of art in the UK. It is here that certain painters seem to have picked up the purposeful artistic ethos of artists like Vuillard, Soutine and Giacometti who were a vital aspect of the Parisian art scene before the American shift.

In recent times in England, various simplistic labels have popped into common use such as ‘The School of London’ and from the Tate, ‘The New Art’. But rather than confronting a ‘figurative revival’ as some still see it, many artists are claiming that it is merely the ongoing presence of a complex network of artists with figurative concerns – some of whom initiated shifts as bold as the Modernists – from as far back as one cares to trace.

“From Giotto to now it’s one school of art”, says Auerbach who appears to be at the forefront of this development, perhaps more-so today than Bacon or Freud about whom much has already been written.

A concrete indication of this may be found in Robert Hughes’ new monograph on Frank Auerbach, the first comprehensive study of his work. Here at last, this artist is put into context where previously he and fellow artists like Leon Kossoff were often seen as isolated eccentricities.

The main thrust of the Auerbach book is best put by Hughes himself in the opening paragraph and reiterated in a recent interview, “Real art has often been created in spite of the art world”. But it is the last paragraph in the book that should be photocopied and taped to the fridge door. It offers a view of art that has nothing to do with styles, careers, self-expression or easy borrowings, something that is easily forgotten by many artists who readily strive to emulate an international tempo.

It is Auerbach’s lack of any sense of social obligation that distinguishes him.

It was an aspect of good marketing and good fortune that the book should come out on the eve of Auerbach’s latest exhibition; paintings at Marlborough Fine Art and simultaneously, one block away, his etchings at Marlborough Graphics.

The 25 paintings and drawings, some of which are superbly reproduced in Hughes’ book, were completed during the past five years. From the outset, the viewer is confronted by the webbed and worked up nest of activity at the painting’s surface, from which gradually the mind organises an imprecise form.

Auerbach says, “The paint itself seems to breed images”. Indeed it does. In paintings like *Head of David Landau II*, even though the subject is obvious enough, the exact reading of the image is anything but singular. The marbled surface of sawing impasto provokes the need for continual reassessment and this seems at least part of the reason it assumes the character of “a new species of living thing”.

The importance of Auerbach’s working method cannot be overstated. It is the all-pervasive problem of paint that is both the key to his work’s regenerating presence and the ongoing relevance of painting in the modern world.

His approach involves a sustained concentration of endless applications, removals and re-applications of thick buttery pigment in the hope that this month or next – he will catch something of the impulse that drives both he and his sitter. For it is Auerbach's aim to convey an unarguable sense of the *presence* of the subject – some fundamental bedrock of actuality – knowing always that complete success can never be realised.

He works only with subjects he knows intimately – close friends or family or the area within the vicinity of his studio. The four paintings of Mornington Crescent in this exhibition present the elemental core of a province that has become a part of the artist. It is an environ crammed with chaotic arrangements of street diagonals, blackened buildings and the mad tear of traffic amid a monoxide glow.

Of the 21 etchings and drypoints at Marlborough Graphics, none were larger than 15 x 18 cm. Some were produced for a special limited edition of Hughes' monograph, a curious circumstance as there appears to be no reproduction or mention of Auerbach's printmaking in the book.

Of course it does not always follow that an artist who works efficaciously in one medium will naturally be suited to another – and Auerbach is first and foremost a painter. However his recent studies of wife Julia, son Jake and earlier etchings of Freud, Kossoff and Kitaj reiterate, via the unique qualities of the medium, the resonating

'thereness' that is the crucial aspect of his drawings and paintings.

It remains to be said that contemporary painting in the short term, is unlikely to receive anything like the international encore of neo-conceptual or post-object art. And it is true that figurative developments in Britain are unlikely to turn the art world on its head – but that it must do so be 'any good' may be another Western idea of dubious merit. After all, it is Auerbach's lack of any sense of social obligation that distinguishes him. And like Giacometti before him, Auerbach exudes a stoic individuality and a fervent commitment to a precise ideal that may very well turn out to be a more enduring aspect of late twentieth century art than many may imagine.

Robert Hollingworth