

SUBSCRIBE



LONDON

Select a City ▼



PRINT DECEMBER 2021



Leon Kossoff, *King's Cross, March Afternoon*, 1998, oil on board, 58 1/8 × 78".

Leon Kossoff

ANNELY JUDA FINE ART

A key figure of the London School, Leon Kossoff (1926–2019) captures the life force of the British capital—his birthplace and lifelong muse—in all its dolorous splendor. Never has a palette perhaps best described as “shades of gloom” (the dried-blood reds and rusts of postwar Victorian tenements, the gray-brown murk of the Thames) seemed so vigorous.

Surveying six decades of production and organized together with Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York and L.A. Louver in Los Angeles, “A Life in Painting” opens with a series of Kossoff’s portraits. The pigment is built up in dense, sludgy layers, daubed and scoured so that its subjects almost feel excavated from within the thickly slathered boards. In *Seated Figure No. 2*, 1959, one struggles to discern the hard grimacing features of the sitter—N. M. Seedo, a writer and distant relative—from the dark flow of encrusted paint the color of cooled lava. Similarly, the subject of *Seated Woman*, 1957, is both remote and palpably close. As in much of Kossoff’s work, the woman—hands clasped, mouth mournful—comes into focus slowly, as if one’s eyes were adjusting to a pitch-dark room (the trick is echoed in the ghostly materialization of *Woman Ill in Bed*, from the same year).

If Kossoff’s visceral reds, excretive browns, and stripes of bilious green manifest the interior life of his Londoners as somber mortal flesh, then his cityscapes find a pitch of bright expressive volatility. *Willesden Junction, Summer No. 2*, 1966, is at once a study of the urban landscape—dominated by crisscrossing railroad tracks and the three cloudlike cooling towers of Acton Lane Power Station—and an immersion in the possibilities of blueness. Kossoff harbored a particular fascination for London’s railways, bewitched by both their formal intrigue (the derelict tracks of *Railway Landscape near King’s Cross, Early Spring*, 1968, poke out of the green marshes like skeletons) and the poignant symbolism of transient motion as an alleviant for the sadness of finding oneself stuck in place (itself a possible description of the desire to paint).

In *Children’s Swimming Pool, Autumn*, 1972, one can almost feel the clamor of the communal baths as if plunged directly inside. The scene teems with bodies to the point

that the pool itself appears as mere flickers of aquamarine against the chlorinated yellows and humid oranges that radiate from within the frame. The painting offers a counterpoint to *Outside Kilburn Underground Station, November, 1984*, which is lugubrious and turbid, etched out of endless cauldron grays and overcast skies.

On the upper floor of the gallery, the work shifts to Kossoff's softer, more ethereal late paintings. In a far cry from the brutal sprawl of *Demolition of a YMCA Building No. 2, Spring, 1971*, which depicts the city as a ravenous maw of regeneration, *Arnold Circus, 2013*, captures, with a lilac-washed bandstand and pale-green trees as gauzy as a daydream, the neighborhood where Kossoff was born. Gone are the clotted peaks and impacted globs of his earlier work. Instead the paint is dabbed on, almost reticent. *Cherry Tree in Spring, 2015*, is hopeful and light, a symbol of nature's quiet persistence amid the frenzy of human society. In *Christ Church, Spitalfields, Early Summer, 1992*, the imposing East End landmark soars above the commuters pounding the pavement below. Like the later *King's Cross, March Afternoon, 1998*, whose glimmering crowds move like waves across the station concourse, *Christ Church* fixes the animating tension in Kossoff's work between the individual and the mass, both defined always against the great roaring Babel of the metropolis itself.

— Daniel Culpan