

CULTURE MONSTER

ART REVIEW

‘Landscapes’ of an inner world

BY DAVID PAGEL

In an exhibition of 40 drawings and seven paintings at L.A. Louver, Leon Kossoff transforms daily walks around London into a life’s journey. “Leon Kossoff: London Landscapes” reveals the 88-year-old painter’s complex relationship with his surroundings, whose dramatic changes map the contours of his inner life without calling undue attention to his feelings.



Shown is Leon Kossoff’s 1974 oil painting “View of Hackney With Dalston Lane, Dark Day”

There’s no room for fanfare or sentimentality in Kossoff’s workmanlike drawings. The earliest, from the 1950s and ’60s, are dark, shadowy masterpieces, their brooding beauty held in check by a commitment to the real appearance of things.

In the ’70s and ’80, the urgency of Kossoff’s graphite and pastel drawings intensifies. Dominated by vigorous scribbles and slashing lines, his furiously scrawled images capture the chaos of life in the big city, often in astutely observed details.

In the ’90s and ’00s, Kossoff softens the Expressionist edginess of his violent lines. He also increases the tonal range of his grays, which are both dirty and beautiful, their grunginess integral to their glory.

The largest body of work, 14 deliciously vertiginous drawings from 2010-12, was made on walks through the neighborhood Kossoff grew up in, Arnold Circus in Shoreditch. Recently gentrified, its pink brick buildings, foliage-filled park and quaint little bandstand paint a pretty picture. But Kossoff’s drawings have none of that. Instead, their wispy lines, whiffs of delicate pastels and cool luminosity make the physical world seem to be an apparition, something that might disappear in an instant.

That back-and-forth, between inner landscape and external world, has always fueled Kossoff’s art. It takes juicy shape in seven fantastic oils on board, which anchor every phase of Kossoff’s journey.

The buildings, streets and trees in his wet-on-wet paintings appear to be molten, simultaneously congealing into solid substances and dissolving into vaporous nothingness -- like memories and everything else that time touches.

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through March 1. Closed Sundays & Mondays. www.lalouver.com