

Leon Kossoff

Out on a limb

An octogenarian London painter who has never changed his style

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Coping with life's little problems

THE tree's gnarled and heavy limb stretches diagonally across the painting. It is held up by two supports that look like giant, handmade mallets. Dappled light dances over it and the surrounding grass. "Cherry Tree, Spring" (below) is a large, almost square painting by Leon Kossoff, one in a series of paintings of the tree that he began in 2002. They form the core of his current London show; his first solo gallery exhibition in almost ten years.

There is something sad about this tree (that limb is surely in serious trouble) but it has not given up. Though it may need crutches, it will shed its leaves in autumn and bloom again next spring. Inescapably, it seems a metaphor for the artist himself. Mr Kossoff will soon be 84. Nobody gets to be an octogenarian without sometimes feeling heavy-limbed and in need of a prop (usually in the form of a chair).

In the catalogue Mr Kossoff writes simply that the cherry tree series is a new departure for him. Since 1957, when he had his first one-man exhibition, nature has never made more than a cameo appearance in his work. He grew up in London's East End and remains resolutely urban. Early on, building sites were his favoured subject; there were lots of them as London began to recover from wartime bombing.

Lively street scenes followed, including the busy entrances to underground stations. A series of indoor public swimming pools are among his most joyful works. Then in the 1990s came an exciting series of views of the 300-year-old church in Spitalfields, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, and three soaring works from this series are in the current show.

Throughout his career Mr Kossoff has painted portraits of his family and a small group of friends, as well as his favourite models. Perhaps because these people have been sitting for

him for so many years and so many hours at a time, many have nodded off. These portraits, several of which are in the show, provoke the persistent question: if his sitters can't stay awake for the painter, why should we?

It is a thought that never intrudes when looking at his luminous variations on the theme of the cherry tree. It turns out that this tree is also an urban specimen or rather has become one. Originally it may have been part of an orchard but as the city spread north it became part of a large London garden, the one behind Mr Kossoff's house, and he can see the tree from his studio window. Those familiar with the artist's work may recall his paintings of the trains that pass along the railway line at the bottom of that garden. A diesel can be spotted in one of the tree series, although it takes a while to make it out. At first it looks more like a fat white and yellow fish swimming through a green sun-speckled ocean, as if it and the tree and the grass were occupants of a fantastical aquarium.

Mr Kossoff is not the sort of painter who is photographed at glittering parties. Day in day out, decade after decade, he is in his studio working away, scraping off and starting again. Expressionism, as practised by David Bomberg with whom he studied, made its mark on him early on. But the numerous art movements and fashions that have arisen during his long life have not touched his work; he carried on in his own way apparently unfazed. The spotlight shone elsewhere. Today, however, the School of London (of which Francis Bacon might be called the star pupil) is in demand. Mr Kossoff's paintings get attention and his prices are rising.

The wounded limb has now been amputated and Mr Kossoff is no longer painting the tree. The sympathetic, sometimes beautiful paintings in this show are its memorial. But what remains of it will still be covered with flowers in the spring.

"Leon Kossoff" is at Annely Juda Fine Art, London, until December 17th, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, from May 5th to June 18th 2011 and L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California, from September 8th to October 8th

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