



John Walker *Form at Snake Bay No. 2*, 1987, oil on canvas, 94" x 84"

Catherine Lampert

SENIOR EXHIBITIONS ORGANIZER
THE ARTS COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

What certain paintings in this exhibition have in common is an intensive, personal way of laying on the paint which joins a vertiginous, mesmerising field. These properties encroach upon our nerves and leave firm images. The artists in this exhibition who set out to achieve such vivid, rugged works are not stimulated by the same subjects nor acquainted with each other. All they have in common is a particular way of living with their art where the episodes and fixations that transpire within the studio walls during the difficult, elusive formulation of painting, come to mirror and digest intimate and autobiographical obsessions. The voiceless, inert objects respond in a way nothing else can to the complexities of feeling and visual sensation. In the end, the canvases acquire an iconoclastic beauty and resilience which replaces the contacts with people or landscapes that pass away. At some point, the field cast within the frame and the touch that has laid on the paint become the opposite of aspects of picture-making. These gross elements of painting become miraculous within the substance of an independent thing; properties of density, space, weight and surface handle their functions organically like genes, flesh, blood, bricks and chlorophyll.

The paintings of Lucian Freud, especially those made in the 1980s, are so extremely alive that they seem to brand themselves on one's eyes. The effect is cumulative; what we learn by the retrospective of his work (presently in London) is what he finds absorbing. The subjects begin without drawings or undersketch and are worked first in the area which arouses most curiosity—often the face—and as he comes to them, the naked limbs, bedclothes, floorboards, rags for wiping brushes and little else. Sometimes the right-angle limits of the original rectangle interfere with a genuine representation of the feeling of what he sees and the stretcher has to be altered or perhaps an object removed or added. The abrupt terminations and his downward gaze fix what it is actually like to be in proximity to the living subject magnified by the cage-like pressure of fleeting time. On the brush are muted organic pigments that are laid down in strokes which stimulate physical sensations—the “feel” of substances, the way they describe degrees of optimism, health, resolution, tenderness and above all the three-dimensional contours. He explains: “I want the colour to be the colour of life, so that you would notice it as being irregular if it changed. I don't want it to operate in the modernist sense as colour, something independent. I don't want people to say, ‘Oh what was that red or that blue picture of yours, I've forgotten what it was.’” It is a fact that the way the clothes envelop the male sitters and their dogged physical expressions reveal to the spectator masculine feelings of being in part imprisoned, in part enthralled by their lives and their own mature characters. Strangely the younger women lying naked on a bed (for months and years) seem significantly more unpredictable and private. Apart from figurative work, Freud's paintings of the last ten years gather in facts about the entire studio and its ambience by night and day and the changing character of the poses to which he responds. At intervals there are landmark group portraits on a larger scale.

Frank Auerbach is excited over and over again by something more primitive in the way of a context. He throws a bell-jar over the sitters' heads, excluding the periphery and incident of the room. The paint is rushed onto the canvas and unreasonably expected to carry the spirit of one moment, a flicker of an

expression, and equally the complications of knowing someone very well. It is hard to explain how Auerbach achieves in this confined area so much mobility and tangibility. The ordering is not exactly illusionistic nor necessarily constructed by the scaffolding lines and the flung paint vectors important to earlier work. The human qualities would disintegrate if a patch were placed under a microscope because all that is there is a fluid paint stream. Now there are soft, smeared areas for flesh and dark stitching around the eyes and mouth which have the clairvoyant, fragile naturalness of 17th century portraiture and the squashed and pinched materiality of Matisse's or Rodin's finger modelling and dabs of gouache.

Something of the feverish intimacy and vertigo of Freud's paintings exists in the work of Thérèse Oulton although her subject matter is imaginary. She works



Thérèse Oulton *Rift*, 1986, oil on canvas, 66" x 57"

in turpentine-thinned paint with fine brushes and rapid finger movements. As with all of these artists, she imposes a standard for deciding when a work is finished that it will be different from the previous picture and end up with something unforeseen. Handicaps seem to stimulate Oulton's mind. At one stage she divided pictures diagonally, a famously difficult imposition on the picture-window bias of painting. The pictures had to be part curtain, part waterfall, part dream. More recently, a structure like weaving on a loom or a spider's web is organised by an accordion-like rhythm executed with plucked, lace-making touches, white on rich greens and flame-colours. Every new painting disorients her audience. She calls her approach a strategy of "unrecognition—a severance of language and meaning from each other so that thought and imagination are not forced into staleness." On the evidence so far this dissection and reconstruction of the anatomy of painting is

healthy because she is so heavily engaged in it and it draws on heartfelt pilgrimages to artists of the past.

The foundations of Oulton's art were pioneered by John Walker. Before it was fashionable, or post-modernist, to reconcile modernism and tradition in an extravagant manner with symphonic breadth, he did so. This has hardly made him popular with critics who wrote the story of the 'New Spirit' of the 1980s with different protagonists. When he worked on surface he could also be imagining a stage-like illusionism and melodrama. One of the achievements of Walker's art has been to establish his geometric shapes as expressive vehicles rather than mere motifs—thus we appreciate the 'form' or upright with triangular base, sometimes called "Alba" after Goya's duchess, the oval or aboriginal shield, and the trapezoid or shutter. In one work they deliver a treatise on painting and its roots and media and in another are protective, shadowy, autobiographical numens. Walker changes tack as he moves from continent to continent carrying something from the last place; in cycles the pictures startle and roughen and in-between become foreboding and restrained. In the last six months, synthetic, rustic effects and three-dimensional metaphors appear rather like the Cubists' mimicking of paper wood-veneer wood planks, fur or smoke within a collage-like ordering. Several paintings seem to conjure up wilderness—forest, canoe, swamp—and speculate on the arrival of three-dimensional forms surrounded by surface reflection.

A protesting, stubborn and steadfast identification with elemental painting adheres to Christopher LeBrun's pictures. He has always been attracted to visionary images, of the 19th century and earlier, but equally to the postivist housepainter's way of travelling thoroughly over the whole surface, scraping down or layering as it proves effective. The horse, tree or moon is allowed a discreet voice but the resonance is clearly coming across and from the depths of the whole. For example, in "Tree and Hill," when LeBrun joins a superimposed branch-like form, almost like a relief attachment, a white spool and a brick-coloured axis, they signpost a journey within the whole picture's supernatural flux. This kind of painting needs and savours the smell, messiness and fictional descriptiveness of oil paint and the losses and gains in the course of painting are patent elements which establish the bond between the artist and his offspring.

It would not be unfruitful to continue this cross-sectional focus on field and touch with other artists in this exhibition who have not been mentioned, or to begin from another point here with others. Michael Andrews and Howard Hodgkin certainly make paintings into surrogate objects of desire. They and Kitaj, one could argue, are capable of expressing their inhibitions and fantasies more matter-of-factly and less laboriously and instead are making over more bizarre transfers. But paintings are not matters of free will. As Freud says "I paint the sort of paintings I can, not the ones I necessarily want." When the artist is his own most stringent critic and has lived through years of not being fashionable, compliments hardly mitigate the anxiety of the present moment. The pictures as they are finished are never sufficiently good.

This is the artist's point of view. Outside the studio the paintings transform our preconceptions and trigger private revelations. This happens meeting Leon Kossoff's formidable, beautiful pictures to an extreme extent. At first encounter they appear landslides of paint bound visually to their support by boundary lines and paint threads. After a moment, looking particularly at the outdoor subjects,

one responds to the curious radiating geometry which serves his devotional nature as the dome of an apse would a Byzantine mosaic artist. The paths of the introspective commuters outside Kilburn Underground slope away and isolate



Leon Kossoff *Looking Out of Kilburn Underground, No. 1*, 1986, oil on board, 44½" x 52½"

humanity against a commonplace background which in turn contains landmarks with emotional import—in this instance the threatening arch of the railway bridge and profile of the prisms of the high street frontage. The portraits have a similarly compassionate, beckoning message that survives the extraordinarily awkward technique. It would be wrong to isolate Kossoff. Like the other artists mentioned, his paintings depend too on an intelligence quickened by seeing a sense of free spirit come to the canvas. The blatant evidence of the substance and support of the painting medium attach in an irresistible way to the moral contents.

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Senior Exhibitions Organizer
The Arts Council of Great Britain