

GLIMPSES OF ALBION

The matter of the greatest interest is not the man's struggle . . . with his own destiny, but his struggle with his vocation.

—Ortega y Gasset (on Goethe)

Venice / Pierre Picot

Notes from an admirer: Agitate, uncover, plumb, discover, examine, immerse, reveal and pull from the familiar. Art—in this case painting, which for the most part strikes a chord of belief in a world where beliefs and myths have been laid aside for the more compelling world of irony, cynicism and strategic distancing—work imbued with a sense of faith, nurtured in a climate of isolation, mostly from without. British painting as witnessed by *The British Picture*, currently at L.A. Louver Gallery, is a Hard Won, self-sustained Art (yes, capital A). Just as napalm smells of victory (Robert Duval and *Apocalypse Now*), British painting smells and feels substantial. And yet . . .

Stop. Look, listen. British painting is here, running silent and deep, making itself felt with every moment of its existence, fully deserving of attention and praise. L.A. Louver Gallery has for years driven home the point that British artists are a lot to be reckoned with and, in so doing, told us through example that the more painting dies, the more painting gloriously remains alive; the more its identity and value are put into question, the more chance it has to validate itself. Witness the nineteen artists in this show, and you'll muse about

walking softly, carrying a big stick (thank you Theodore Roosevelt, at least for that instruction). These are artists who are not just of the moment but of their time. Theirs is art without frontiers and without dogma, art that speaks for itself, with a voice all its own.

Seen and read: "The revision that is desirable does not involve demotions of the currently accepted giants but significant expansion of the pantheon, and the recognition that the "mainstream" does not follow the pattern of a railway line but rather that of a wide-flowing river fed by many tributaries and composed of interweaving currents" (Richard Morphet). Complete agreement with the text, a validation and witness, is to be found in the product: Therese Oulton—large painterly canvas reminiscent of dense forest undergrowth in autumn, lit up from within its natural habitat (paint, canvas ground) and natural light from above; John Walker—two major canvases, side by side, insisting on presence with their iconic, quasi-geometric shapes, resting on scraped, brushed, troweled-on paint, matter; Leon Kossoff—a titan of scale, not size, with a view from inside the Kilburn tube station, an often-examined location for the artist, and a portrait, vehicles for a storm of toned-down blues, browns, grays, beiges, paint whose viscous quality confuses us into thinking that the process of painting is continuously evolving, about to alter itself with each separate



Leon Kossoff, *Looking Out of Kilburn Underground, No. 1, 1966*, oil on board, 44-1/2" x 52-1/2", at L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice.

viewing; Frank Auerbach—a calligraphic head of medium size, the lines of which resemble a fast-flowing stream of lava or tar, bubbling with energy, searing the canvas with its knowledge of the subject; Tony Bevan—whose large figure painting also confronts matter, in this case crusty caked-on dry pigments, literally a bright spot in an otherwise generally somber-hued show; Lucien Freud—the revealing, penetrating portraitist of consummate experience and skill, so steeped in a mix of tradition and objectivity that the work comes off as refreshingly unpretentious; Avis Newman—whose large open charcoal drawings, echoes of landscapes and figures, promote line and the less-said as they maximize language and vision; John Virtue of the abundant pen-and-ink drawings of singular severe and isolated landscapes arranged gridlike, sometimes up to sixty views of one place, on hardboard supports, proclaiming an obsessive self-imposed ritual as the most obvious way to latch on to a singular vision; and then, still in the heights, Francis Bacon, John Lessore, Charlotte Verity, R.B. Kitaj. On the down side, in the realm of rote: David Hockney, with a gratuitous and cursory "love me, buy me, I'm a David Hockney"; Bruce McLean, looking suspiciously like a recycler of leftover scraps and a maker of dubiously limp decor (gone are the days of Nice Style, the World's First Pose Band,

sniff); Howard Hodgkin impersonating Howard Hodgkin; Tim Head, Gerard Hemsworth, Peter Blake, Christopher LeBrun (??.?.?) looking too right, somehow.

At this point in time, we find ourselves thundering headlong into an ending decade, century and millenium. The weight and impact of such numbers is bewildering; confusion and uncertainty reign. Art—painting—is a minor gesture, one which in the context of the social/geographical/political/moral dynamics of our world must appear to be playing a totally redundant role. Yet any gesture of a positivist nature can stem, even rectify, doubt.

Sean Scully, a British abstract painter, has been quoted as saying that "painting stands so far outside current technology that it can never be obsolete. It is free to keep place with our philosophical sense of where we are and where we come from historically." It is that feeling of great license which sustains the works in the *British Picture*. Voices raised to promote production of objects of transcendence, not merely objects of consumption, affect doubt and combat dread, "keep," as Peter Cook of the visionary British architectural group Archigram said years ago, "the drearies on the run." Art at its most basic, art at its ideal "point zero," illustrates the mind at work, the human touch in evidence. The British Picture is made of such stuff. So speaks an ardent admirer. □



John Virtue, *Landscape No. 8, 1980-4*, pen and ink on paper, 75" x 95", at L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice.