

Leon Kossoff drew inspiration for his dense and dizzy paintings from inner London's sprawl

# Lay it on thick

ART

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People complain about what they take to be the emotionalism of Leon Kossoff, materialised in the thickness of his paintings. Thickness stirred with a stick. The trouble with these people is that they just don't look.

Kossoff's Tate retrospective won't appeal to consumers of quick-fix art. Sentimentalists will find it unrewarding. There's also nothing for fans of art rhetoric to go hallelujah to, apart from a few expressions of despondency early on. Those unattuned to Kossoff's integrity may get impatient with the paintings, not noticing their jauntiness and verve.

Cézanne was a hard exhibition to follow, but Kossoff succeeds more than honourably, magnificently in fact. There is a marvellous quickening of the spirits as he learns his haunts and finds more and more to say in paint about his sitters: more to do with how they must feel, compounded with what they mean to him. The paintings aren't simplifications. You gradually make them out, recognising cars on roads, and roofers and demolition men absorbed in their tasks. The paint is more than solid (earth colours representing earthiness); it serves as depth and aura, as the spaciousness of a chlorinated pool and enveloping night air.

The earliest paintings are the most seized up. They declare Kossoff's ambition to make portraits into effigies and to amass the stuff of cityscapes rather than do mere views of them. Baffling as they are – so weighed down and dense with effort – they should be seen as preliminaries and reapproached later.

Appropriately, they represent bomb sites and building sites, clearances achieved by the Luftwaffe and other redevelopers,

square footage rudely bulldozed and piles banged into the perimeters: literally grounds for recovery. Smitten with the chaos, Kossoff achieved impenetrable stalemates that are, in retrospect, the foundations of the later work. In their present state the paint surfaces tend to be puckered where they have dried unevenly over the years. They are not what they were, and this makes them relics, particularly the paintings of seated figures, shrivelled and embedded.

Dawn comes, and in *Willesden Junction (Early Morning)*, 1962, whiteness streaks from sky to railway tracks, casting furrows even stronger – more worked over – than those encountered by Van Gogh around Auvers. Kossoff talks about 'the pressure of the accumulation of memories and the unique quality of the subject of this particular day'. A mixture of rumination and seeming panic feeds into each painting, whether a study of a woman ill in bed or the spreading routes from King's Cross. The light changes; demolition men move in; the street market packs up for the night.

*Children's Swimming Pool, 11 o'clock Saturday Morning, August*, one of four paintings done between 1969 and 1972, is a sudden influx of clamour: plunging, bobbing and ducking, screeches, splashes and frantic dogpaddling in water wings. Formally the four are all the same: the view from an observation platform down onto the busy rectangle of eau de nil. Wipes and nudges animate countless bobbing bodies. These brilliant paintings leave de Kooning's women gaping.

At the Willesden Sports Centre Kossoff rivals Hogarth in his grasp of individuality in a crowd. Amazingly – or maybe not so amazingly

when you consider their mutual delight in particulars – his crowd scenes and even his family groups are faintly reminiscent of Giles cartoons. The swimming pool figures are netted shoals. The figures in *Family Party, January*, 1969, remembered from 20 years before, and seen from the point of view of the mantelpiece, are as nuclear as the Giles family. The grandparents snooze, mother hands cakes round – no takers – one child feels sick, two others pester the cat.

Where Giles operated for laughs, Kossoff examines human nature. The paintings are provisional. That is, they constantly remind us that, although they may have been suddenly finalised, they were evolved, not snapped like photographs. Kossoff makes every allowance for mood. Sometimes his brother Chaim, a regular sitter, appears perky. More often he is resigned to his position, hands folded, skeins of paint buzzing him, circling his green pullover as Leon keeps the thing going.

Certain locations, outside the studio, have a special appeal for Kossoff. Obviously the outlook from the studio – in Dalston, in the early Seventies, since then Willesden Green – was attractive, being convenient, familiar and secluded. But he has also worked from motifs drawn on the spot elsewhere. The booking hall of Kilburn Underground station has been a good place for studying commuter movements. The railway bridges outside have given him a dramatic structure: girders bang overhead and a constant flow of passers by.

Painting on hardboard allows Kossoff to use the many layers of what hasn't worked as the basis for eventual success. Hence the thick-



Toppling spire as the world roars past: *Christ Church Spitalfields, Morning 1990*.

ness. When he gets a result, Kossoff achieves not expressionism (which is, essentially, heavy-handed styling) but expressive eloquence.

His realms of impulse can occur anywhere. At the bottom of the garden trains rattle past. Between

Kilburn and Willesden the railway cutting flourishes like Constable's Dedham Vale with yellow snouted diesel units – Kossoff's replacement for the stalled haywain. At rush hour in autumn, the carriage windows glare and those souls whose forebears T.S. Eliot saw

flowing over London Bridge ('I had not thought death had undone so many') are borne away to benighted Wembley and beyond.

Those close to Kossoff – Rosalind, Fidelma, Chaim, John Lessore – have the dignity of just being themselves, though when Kossoff paints

them he confers memorability on them. In this sense they are the same as the buildings he singles out, among them a school in Willesden and Christ Church in Spitalfields, both harassed by modern life. The world roars round them. Hawksmoor's portico zooms shut and the stepped tower topples back.

Embankment station, another recent subject, sits surrounded by Kossoffian motifs. The cheese-grater Shell building, across the Thames, is no Hawksmoor but it rears up mightily enough. The Hungerford Bridge is another heavy intrusion, like those on Kilburn High Road. Brightening the foreground, flower sellers' stalls look deliriously lively.

In the final room of the exhibition Christ Church paintings alternate with those of the Underground station. Between them they serve as final vindications of Kossoff's methods. Here (where so recently Cézanne's bathers mingled with his Mte Sainte Victoires) each is an affirmation of the powers of painting. It takes a while to acquaint oneself with the singularity of the dawdling and scurrying figures, to read the architecture and appreciate the handling of cut flowers and greengrocers' grass. You will notice though that thickness is no longer an issue.

Leon Kossoff to 1 Sept, Tate Gallery, London SW1 (0171-887 8000)