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Coming home: Leon Kossoff

By Jackie Wullschlager

Leon Kossoff's urban landscapes are the 'most enthralling' exhibition so far this year



'Arnold Circus' (2012)

In 2010, Leon Kossoff exhibited rapturous paintings of a cherry tree whose fragile bough was supported by stakes. An implicit self-portrait of the ageing artist, the series was unexpected – building sites, railways, a city swimming pool and Christ Church Spitalfields are Kossoff's famous, insistently urban motifs. And no one was more surprised by the tree than himself.

“I didn't know what I'd done. I was terribly nervous before the Tree show. The truth is that all my life I've been filled with self-doubt. But after the Trees, one or two people became very interested, and after that there was a bit of a change about how I felt about my work, I began to feel it was going somewhere. And it seemed inevitable that I would be painting this tree with a stake.”

Kossoff, small, wiry, grey-haired with limpid blue eyes, is 86 and frail. Huddled in a big coat and checked scarf, he pauses before “Cherry Tree, Winter”, briefly supporting himself by holding the wall, as he allows me to follow while he hangs a new museum-scale retrospective of drawings, pastels and paintings. *Leon Kossoff: London Landscapes* opens at Annely Juda next week, then travels to Paris, New York and California. It is the most enthralling exhibition I have seen this year.

Kossoff was born in Arnold Circus, Shoreditch, east London, to Yiddish-speaking Ukrainian-Jewish parents; they ran a bakery round the corner in Calvert Avenue. Last summer, after ill health had prevented him working, Kossoff travelled from his home in Kilburn, north London, back to Arnold Circus and a dozen large-scale charcoal and pastel drawings “just happened. The school was there, where I used to go, they were very kind to me, they gave me a little space in the shed where I could keep my drawing board and charcoal. It's still there.



Leon Kossoff, photographed in London in March

“The drawings are like paintings really. Perhaps that's why I won't need to do the paintings. Drawings can become paintings, paintings stay drawings. The whole thing about painting is realising that you are experiencing something in your mind.”

The show's pulse is that painting is an extension of drawing done from nature, and it spans the decades when Kossoff stepped out with his drawing board to seize the shifting light, surging energy and passing moments of quotidian London life: at Kilburn Underground Station (“it's at the end of my road, I could just walk down and draw. I never spoke to many people. I've become more sociable now”), for an obsessive spell at Willesden Junction (“I had these landscapes on the go for five or six years”), at King's Cross during its redevelopment (“people would look after me, like the newspaper seller”). Then he would return to paint in the studio.

“This went on for 40 years. Now I can’t,” he says flatly. “I’ve got to find another way completely.”

Yet the depictions of Arnold Circus from the bandstand looking towards Calvert Avenue are not despondent: reflecting an Olympic summer when “everyone seemed happy, London seemed transformed”, they are part of Kossoff’s magnificent swansong, developing from the luminosity of the “Cherry Trees” but less melancholy. Plane trees in full leaf hit brilliant cobalt or turquoise skies. Red-brick mansions with gable-ended roofs stretch to the paper’s edge, as if bidding for freedom. The bandstand and its sweeping staircase curve and soar with democratic grandiloquence. Figures saunter by, except one woman, who simply lay down in the sun, unaware of the artist sketching her.

With his broken, agitated surfaces; tangled, frenetic lines; fugitive forms dissolving yet staying strong; Kossoff is the existential heavyweight of British painting, drawing attention in charcoal swirls and impasto layers to the substantiality of his medium only to record the insubstantiality of life. The solid columns and hooded canopies of “Christ Church Spitalfields” here rise audaciously, almost melting into the sky. Bodies merge, disappear, re-emerge, in the seething “Children’s Swimming Pool, Autumn 1972”.



‘Children’s Swimming Pool, Autumn’ (1972)

By contrast, the latest works are open, looser, suffused with a flickering brightness that breaks through even the overcast atmosphere of “Arnold Circus, Before Rain”, and animates miraculously the last, most sombre, painterly rendering, on which the artist has scrawled “Saturday Afternoon”. “It seemed for a while like the end of a journey. The fact that these finished ones are the happiest – it’s wonderful,” Kossoff says, then looks aghast. “I’ve talked too much. With each work, I just don’t know how it happened, I can’t understand how I did it. Don’t ask me.”

Kossoff speaks reluctantly; he hates talking about painting. “It’s all right,” is the most he shrugs at the sooty charcoal drawings of building sites and train tracks – “Railway Bridge Mornington Crescent”, “Building Site St Paul’s”, “York Way” – as he re-encounters them after half a century. “I was very young! It was all done on the spot. Then I would take them back to the studio, look at them, a few days later decide whether they’re finished. If not, I redrew them completely – like scraping off a painting. I destroy an enormous amount, it’s my greatest regret. I could kick myself. It’s part of my madness.”



'Cherry Tree, Winter' (2006-2007)

Travelling by overground train to an early studio in Dalston, he began observing railways, which “always provide an interesting landscape, it’s all about space and light”. A rush of sensations is packed into converging lines in “Here Comes the Diesel” (the title from a grandson’s scream; a railway line passes Kossoff’s garden); shafts of sunshine illuminate gleaming rails in “Between Kilburn and Willesden, Spring Afternoon”. Building sites too, “beautiful as well as dark”, are “very exciting to see”. In their processes of demolition, excavation, construction, their sense of disequilibrium, they parallel Kossoff’s method of creation, anxiously accumulating then scraping away paint, criss-crossing networks of lines to make stormy drawings – “Demolition of YMCA Building, London”, “Kings Cross Building Site Early Days” – as vividly textural as paintings.



'Christ Church, Spitalfields, Spring' (1987)

felt I couldn’t draw.”

Structure against transience and instability, coherence against chaos, is perhaps the inevitable battleground for any painter picking up the European representational tradition after Cézanne. “I feel embarrassed to use the word ‘Cézanne’, but it’s Cézanne all the time,” Kossoff answers when I ask about influences. “Cézanne gets bigger and bigger. The older I get – I’m pretty old – he could be another Giotto as far as I’m concerned.”

No painter is more steeped in Old Masters than Kossoff, who, aged nine, walked from the east end to the National Gallery and began to teach himself to draw. “My parents weren’t interested in me becoming an artist. They were puzzled by me altogether. I wasn’t much good at anything at school, and at St Martins they didn’t like what I was doing. I always

How does he feel seeing half a century of work now? “Tremendously relieved. I’m so glad I took advantage of all the years when I could get out with my roll of paper and draw. I could never have imagined a show like this.”

*'Leon Kossoff: London Landscapes', Annely Juda Fine Art, London, May 8- July 6,
www.annelyjudafineart.co.uk Galerie Lelong, Paris, September 12- October 26; Mitchell-Innes
& Nash, New York, November 5-December 21; LA Louver, California, January 23-March 1 2014*