

APOLLO



ALWAYS MOVING: KOSSOFF'S LONDON

Digby Warde-Aldam, Friday, 17th May 2013

Kilburn High Road is melting; the weight of time and oil paint is pulling this unloved north-west London thoroughfare back into the primitive quagmire from whence it sprang, and passengers alighting at the Underground station are caught in a crossfire of colours and shapes, grotesquely stretched and distorted by gravity. Residents of NW6 can breathe a sigh of relief – as far as this reviewer is aware, no natural disasters have been reported in the vicinity – but should they care to take a trip south on the Jubilee Line to 'Leon Kossoff: London Landscapes' at Annely Juda Fine Arts (until 6 July), they might start to see their locale in a different light.

The work in question, *Outside Kilburn Underground Station* from 1984, is just one of over a hundred paintings and drawings in an exhibition that stretches from the beginning of Kossoff's career in 1952 to as recently as 2012. It is as comprehensive a record of development and destruction in Kossoff's native city as any Ackroydian 'biography' or oral history. Extraordinarily consistent but never less than thrilling, the show is a document of London's liminal fringes; certain views (Kilburn, Dalston, Willesden Junction) recur across the decades, orbiting the focal point of Embankment Tube Station, an edifice represented as an immovable monolith standing firm against a whirlwind of human tumult.

Nostalgia is notably absent from Kossoff's London – but so is any sense of celebration in urban 'regeneration'. Having spent much of his childhood on Shoreditch's Boundary Estate, we might expect him to throw an argument for one or the other into his recent depictions of newly-gentrified Arnold Circus – but no, all we see is the silent bandstand and distinctive red-brick blocks. Kossoff takes the same approach to painting municipal swimming pools as he does demolition sites: to sum it up in a phrase, *everything is moving*.

Early charcoals of the moonscape surrounding post-war Saint Paul's evoke memories of the opening chase in Jules Dassin's crepuscular 1950 noir *Night & The City*; 1970s representations of the railway terminal hinterland around York Road are juxtaposed with contemporary drawings of the hive-like private redevelopment of King's Cross Station and its environs; paintings of Christchurch Spitalfields render Hawksmoor's masterpiece into an object pregnant with potential energy, looking for all the world as if it is about to blast into the stratosphere, cutting short the spire but only embellishing its incongruous magnificence. The artist's garden, meanwhile, becomes an eyrie looking out over the foreboding tracks of the North London Line.

The exhibition is, quite simply, one of the most dizzyingly exciting painting shows I have ever had the occasion to visit. As a Londoner, it holds a fascination of its own (one cannot help but place oneself within the context of the locales represented; 'I walk past that building every day' or 'that's the railway that goes past my house'), but this need have no bearing on how a spectator from elsewhere should read the work. Kossoff's mastery of kinetic representation is revelatory; reproductions of his *oeuvre* give little sense of the experience of confronting one of his canvases face to face, and to call him one of Britain's greatest living artists does precious little justice to the power and energy of his work.

'Leon Kossoff: London Landscapes' is on show at Annely Juda Fine Art, London until 6 July 2013

Image credit: Leon Kossoff, *Outside Kilburn Underground Station*, 1984, oil on board, 197 x 213 cm.
Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London