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the Galleries

VENICE

The second installment of a sampler of contemporary British figurative painting includes works by Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Peter Blake and the American expatriate R. B. Kitaj. It is a brave venture for a small commercial gallery. Brisk attendance suggests an appetite for a full-scale version in a local museum.

Frank Auerbach's painting becomes the focal point because it is so little known here in person. The artist paints cityscapes, nudes and portraits in goopy, grayed oil impastos usually associated with abstraction. The work has an eccentric power that recalls Chaim Soutine and Georges Rouault. Auerbach shares their intensity, pessimism and almost religious compassion. The work has a working-class aura, as if it grew from the muffled ugliness of industrial England.

Ron Kitaj shows a new direction in pastel drawings that are frank paraphrases of Picasso's Rose Period with its balletic acrobats and somnolent poetry. Kitaj often puts the style in the service of portraits of fellow artists so the whole comes off with an aura of sentimental self-congratulation. If you can get past the inbred smugness of it all, the work is beautifully made.

Peter Blake is a survivor of British Pop. Today he seems to belong in the tradition of Hogarth, Rowlandson and Cruikshank—the illustrator as artist. We see a nice watercolor of a pretty nude girl wearing only boots, towel and an endearing yellow rain hat. A series of wood engravings on sideshow people gives Blake away: Life is a carnival to be watched with sympathetic amusement.

Finally a single small triptych by Francis Bacon reminds us why some still consider him England's greatest living painter. "Three Studies of Henrietta Morales" avoids some of Bacon's recent tendencies to impersonate himself. The strange, distorted face seems perfectly typical of Bacon's world—a place where people do not have noses; they have snouts. (L.A. Louver Gallery, 55 N. Venice Blvd., to Dec. 22.)

—W.W.