

CONTEMPORIZING THE FIGURE

Venice / Robert L. Pincus

If *This Knot of Life, Part I* at L.A. Louver revealed the traditional impetus in British painting and drawing concerning "the human clay," *Part II* shows us that the collective sensibility, as it were, cuts both forward and backward in (art) time. Of the artists in this second installment, it is R.B. Kitaj who most fully articulates this dual sensibility. In a somewhat reactionary and nostalgic vein he argues for art that would assume "a specificity and sense of place at the quality level of Dickens or Goya because it remains for that good an art to emerge again...." Yet Kitaj looks forward to such a future when he writes, "The art is ripe for fundamental changes more considerable than the sequence of events introduced into it around 1900."

If the first statement points toward the British impulse, in both its post-World War II literature and its art, to root any new efforts firmly in tradition — a concern American artists don't always share — the second one, albeit somewhat melodramatic, points toward a common concern among British and American painters, in our decade, for "new image painting." There is a common desire to capture images — especially the human image — anew, in light of all the post-1900 developments in abstraction. Drawing on a small selection of paintings, drawings and engravings by Peter Blake, R.B. Kitaj, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon and Leon Kossoff, L.A. Louver has managed to convey effectively the range and depth of the British sensibility as it concerns the human figure.

This is not to say that this sensibility is at all uniform. At one extreme, in terms of readily accessible figuration, are the works of Peter Blake. What accounts for such accessibility is his continuing use of imagery resonant with media connotations. In his set of five wood engravings, *Side Show*, the deft handling of portraits of such vaudeville and archetypal circus characters as a tattoo man, a fat man and an Indian in full regalia is traditional in manner — a manner reminiscent of nineteenth century daguerreotypes — so as to be both deadpan and ironic. This same detachment from expressionism and attraction to irony are apparent in the delicately rendered watercolor which presents Astaire and Rodgers in a typical duet pose within phantasmagoric surroundings. The exclusive use of black and white evocatively

creates the cinematic context of this Astaire/Rodgers media icon, while its intimate size gives it the look of a greeting card. As both engraver and watercolorist, Blake uncannily fits his talents to the content at hand.

His lack of expressionism separates him from the others in this exhibition, except, perhaps, from Kitaj. Although Kitaj and Blake are technically and thematically at variance, they both depend upon the viewer to make the connections between the image and its emotional connotations. Unlike Blake, Kitaj does not convey pop irony in his recent work; rather, like Matisse — for whose later work with the human figure Kitaj has high praise — he implies human dignity through color and form. In *Two London Painters, Frank Auerbach and Sandra Fisher*, a pastel and charcoal rendering, the silent and expressionless faces speak for a full silence; while in *Bad Faith (Warsaw)* the title and the density of charcoal gray reveal the misery of the expressionless, profiled figure who resides in jail — a now historical misery that is, once again, rendered immediate.

Kitaj's pristinely controlled uses of form and color differentiate him from Bacon and Auerbach, whose portraits combine process with product. They seem more concerned with an issue Bacon put forth as a question: "But how can this thing be made so that you catch the mystery of appearance within the mystery of the making?" For Auerbach, the portrait is an expressionistic synthesis of the figurative and the abstract, in which the use of muddy color communicates the oppression of the process. With both *Head of J.Y.M.* and *Reclining Head of Gerda Boehm*, such an effect is heightened through laborious painting and layering; with *Head of Catherine Lampert*, a similar synthesis is achieved with chalk and charcoal through labored draftsmanship and heavily applied color. Bacon's answer to his question often comes in the form of the triptych. The *Three Studies of Henrietta Moraes* are each fluid and subjective readings of the subject, and are primitivistic



LEON KOSSOFF: GIRL RECLINING ON BED, 1977, oil on board, 20"x 22", at L.A. Louver Gallery.

in effect, if not in execution.

The work of Leon Kossoff, perhaps the least-known figure in the exhibition, is primitivistic in both effect and execution. Yet his is no simplistic version of this impulse; rather, his subject matter consists of both isolated individuals — *Girl Reclining on Bed* and *Pauline Sitting on Bed* — and individuals within urban and suburban environments — *Dalston Lane*, *Summer Day No. 2*. His style, combining thickly and crudely applied paint with solidity of form, seems an appropriate and powerful esthetic solution for his apparent efforts to capture the emotional effects of the environment and the importance of human existence.

If the late seventies marked a full-fledged renewal of interest in "new image painting" in the U.S., that interest had, as its primary concern, American painting. Yet *This Knot of Life, Part II* assertively shows us that any such interest must include British painting as well. A milieu that encompasses the widely disparate and important images of such painters as Blake, Kitaj, Auerbach, Bacon and Kossoff, as well as those represented in *Part I*, is one to which American attention must more fully be paid. □