

## London Painters

Ordovas, London

19 APRIL 2018, WILLIAM DAVIE



Lucian Freud. *Expecting the Fourth*, 2005. © The Lucian Freud Archive / Bridgeman Images

The legends that have become the lives of and works of Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud feel as if, at times, they are on the verge of being so impacting that those painters who were working at the same time in Britain have had their careers eclipsed and skewed in comparison. A case in point is Celia Paul, a student of Freud's while he was a visiting lecturer at Slade School of Art and who then subsequently had a relationship with him between 1978 and 1988, a fact that has continued to accompany nearly every article about her despite a hugely successful career.

Both Freud and Paul's works are currently exhibited together at the Tate Britain, in the survey of British painting over the last century, *All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life*, which again, elevates Bacon and Freud as the fundamental cornerstones of the survey and of a century of painting. Both artists take centre stage and have large rooms dedicated to high quality examples from throughout their careers but it's the attempt to highlight underlying currents from a generation of painters that came before in Walter Sickert and David Bomberg and after, in Cecily Brown and Jenny Saville as well as a selection of their contemporaries such as, Paula Rego, Michael Andrews, R.B. Kitaj, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, and the aforementioned Paul, that feels, curatorially, like an album of filler amongst two insurmountable hits. This is not to say that Bacon and Freud's work shouldn't be lauded, but in this context, to weight it like this feels unjust and only continues to create a hierarchal gulf between them and other artists exhibited.

A more considered and concise investigation of post-war painting in what has been categorized as the "school of London" can be found at Ordovas Gallery in their current exhibition *London Painters*. In it, small-scale works by Andrews, Auerbach, Bacon, Freud, Kitaj, Kossoff and David Hockney are displayed altogether in the main gallery space, at once highlighting the important relationships and the circles of shared friends and acquaintance these artists had against the backdrop of post-war London. Each work is given enough space so that each artist's visual syntax can be celebrated and compared in equal measure.

In Michael Andrews' *Portrait of Jane* (1989 – 1990), one of the few portraits Andrews painted, Lady Jane Willoughby de Eresby is painted in such a way that the viewer feels the stillness and concentration demanded by the moment. She looks down towards the bottom right of the canvas, her expression is slightly sombre, if a bit lost in thought, which is in part, aided by the hazy dirtiness of Andrews' palette on the background. His brushwork is calculated and methodical with the shadows that delicately linger on her face, particularly under nose and on her left cheek, showing a great mutual trust and vulnerability as it's not the most flattering angle or light, but Andrews' need to capture her at this specific moment with this specific light is evident.

Andrews spent a great deal of time at her estate in Scotland and so too did Freud, Bacon and his partner, George Dyer. During one visit when Dyer needed time apart from their often-tumultuous relationship, Freud began working on a portrait of Dyer that became *Man in Blue Shirt* (1965). Freud's brushwork is both firm and soft. It seems dense and heavily worked over; an extension of his necessity to intensely scrutinize his subject and represents a middle ground between his earlier nimble and illustrative painting style that seemed guardedly objective and his later style which was often a viscerally raw and built around flesh-like thick impasto which was subjective as best evidenced in *All Too Human* and to a lesser degree, here, in the poignant and incomplete *Self-Portrait* (2002).

The pencil outline of Freud's face has been filled in with only an initial smattering of impasto flesh-tones and streaks of brown from the lower forehead to just below the nose. Here, the paint that shows the wrought aged skin of his face looks as if it was being carved into rather than painted. His black eyes stare powerfully out drawing the viewer in and sharply assert a dominance that places the viewer momentarily into the role of the subject.

Likewise, Bacon's necessity to investigate the events and characters that shaped his life through the language of painting can be seen in the triptych *Three Studies of George Dyer* (1966), in which Bacon, on top of the pitch-black backgrounds of each segment, desecrates the face of his lover in a tornado of savage swipes. But it's not explosive or manic, it's quiet and inflicted, with an overt sense of sadism. At the same time, though, there is a great tenderness that is made all the more intense and unrelenting by the volatility of their relationship. However, in *Fury* (c.1944), which is a basis for the triptych, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944), Bacon's eye is trained on the universal suffering that had been taking place during World War 2. On a fiery orange backdrop, with no discernible placements, a figure's angular bone structure is contorted backward over itself and its mouth spews a blackness flecks of blood red and yellow. The work is high evocative, the result, it seems, of a primal need for Bacon to unburden himself of the shared anguish.

The impasto found on Freud's later works can perhaps be, to a degree, rooted in Kossoff's sensibilities as a painter. His thickly loaded brush and dense packing of colours that have spent too long together and turned into a sludge of browns and greys, like muddy snow, are built off the canvas so that Kossoff can then force and image out of it. This has been refined to an act of alchemical balance so that the technique of Kossoff's painting never overpowers the image brought to life in it, as seen in *Stormy Summer Day, Dalston Lane* (1975).

As the title suggests, the work shows a stormy summer day in Dalston Lane. But, more importantly, it shows London and Kossoff himself, the son of Ukrainian Jewish parents, still deeply affected by the war but a shifting in its immediacy, now 30 years since it ended. The stormy weather here can be just that but is still undoubtedly a metaphor for the lives of him and his parents. It's a quiet work, at odds with its initial reading, given the painting's tangibility.

The explosive activity in Kossoff's paintings have much to owe to his one-time tutor, Bomberg, who he befriended while a student of his at Borough Polytechnic along with Auerbach. Similarly, Auerbach also utilizes thick impasto; early in his career he would build upon the painting's surfaces with each new session but later this shifted to him scrapping it off and leaving only the traces of his previous session on which build upon, as seen in *Head of J.Y.M. II* (1984 – 1985). On a dense dark-brown background cumbersome ridges of black and white impasto explode from the bottom of the composition from which yellow and pale brown slivers emanate like lightning from storm clouds. The work contains a vitality that has been transferred from the moment between the artist and his sitter, again, highlighting the importance of the act of intensely analysing the subject.

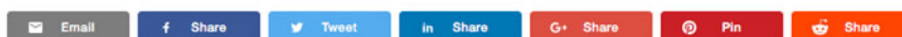
But it's in Auerbach's *Pillar Box III* (2010 - 2011), that the link is best seen. As Pilar Ordovas notes, 'the exhibition reveals Auerbach and Kossoff to be the most literal members of the 'School', using the cityscape as their devout subject.' Here a pillar box, left over from the World War 2, is painted in thick, semi-vibrant yellows and with flashes of light and dark blues and dirty reds. The brushstrokes are visible and highlight the building's geometric structure but any intrinsic seriousness or sobering due to its function is eradicated by the happy-go-lucky colours; it operates now as a tool for celebrating, light, colour and form as seen through Auerbach's eyes.

Colour is the first component in Kitaj and Hockney's works, *Bahama Self-Portrait* (2007) and *The Neo-Cubist* (1976 – 1987) by the former and, by the latter, *Montcalm Pool, Los Angeles* (1980), to which a degree of separation can be made because of their vibrant, artificial colours, particularly burnt yellow and dark red found in the background in both works, which have an inherent American origin which extends from their time spent in North America; Hockney moved to Los Angeles, California, in 1964 and Kitaj grew up in Chargin Falls, Ohio. In *The Neo-Cubist* Kitaj paints a portrait of Hockney broken up into cubist-like segments, at once intimate and touching it also references a mutual love and visual ancestry the two shared.

In contrast, however, *Montcalm Pool, Los Angeles*, is symbolic like *Stormy Summer Day, Dalston Lane*, in which it shows Hockney's in full stride as an artist and personally. There is a warmth and maturity that was poignantly omitted in his earlier paintings, America gave him the tools to become who he wanted to be.

The two Operate as bookends for the exhibition. They met at the Royal College of Art with Hockney establishing himself as a Kitaj's protégé of sorts. Kitaj would go on to include all of the artists in an exhibition he organized, *Human Clay*, at the Hayward Gallery in 1976 on behalf of the arts Council and it was here that the term 'School of London' was first coined by Kitaj.

There is too, a certain amount of stoicism that unifies the artists in London Painters. They were mostly of Jewish origins and even if not overtly, the atrocities of the holocaust must have impacted the lives of those around them. However, it feels more likely to have been in response to the existential battles undertaken by the abstract expressionists but which they furthered through the continuing figurative and landscape tradition in a most British, like it or lump it, manner. In London Painters what becomes evident and is lost in *All Too Human* is that despite the varied approaches to painting and different levels of success and recognition, what unifies all of these artists on to a level playing field, when viewed like this, is the necessity to document and scrutinize their chosen surroundings and the people they chose to let in, through the act of painting. This necessity was intrinsic to all of them and never wavered, even in death, as seen in Freud's incomplete *Self-Portrait*.



## William Davie

William Davie is a writer based in London who regularly contributes to Aesthetica Magazine, Ambit Magazine and This Is Tomorrow where he also serves as editor.

[Author profile](#)