INTHESTUDIO

LEON KOSSOFF

A LIFE SPENT LOOKING AT THE CITY

BY COLINE MILLIARD

LEON KOSSOFF HAS DRAWN AND PAINTED London relentlessly for more than six decades. Today, at 86, he can still be found sketching the street corners that have inspired him throughout his remarkable career. London is "Kossoff's Venice, his city of vistas and movement," wrote Andrea Rose in the catalogue for "London Landscapes," a major exhibition that she curated for the artist's four galleries—Annely Juda Fine Art in London, Galerie Lelong in Paris, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York, where it is on view November 7 through December 21, before moving on to L.A. Louver in Los Angeles.

As is customary for this profile, I requested an interview with the artist in his studio, but Kossoff doesn't often allow strangers into the privacy of his working den. Even his London dealer, David Juda, confesses he's been there only once in the 20 years he has worked with the artist. After much fretting, Kossoff agreed to walk me through the exhibition in London.

The man who greets me has the fragile appearance of old age. He is quiet—a critic called him "unassuming"—yet his ice-cold blue eyes shine fiercely below wisps of white hair. There are rules: This isn't an interview but a conversation. I'm not allowed to record it or to quote the artist directly (although many direct quotes are available in books and online). Note-taking is fine at first, but after 10 minutes of my furious scribbling, Kossoff becomes fidgety and asks me to

Leon Kossoff in his garden in north London, 2013.

The oil *Children's Swimming Pool, 11 O'Clock Saturday Morning, August, 1969* is part of a series Kossoff painted based on trips to the Willesden Sports Centre with his young son.

stop. This extreme cautiousness is hard to understand, not to say frustrating. When he takes me around the show, the artist is eloquent and insightful. The only explanation is that Kossoff is determined to let his work do the talking.

It's the same single-minded focus that has made him one of the great names in modern British art, one often associated with the Francis Bacon–Lucian Freud–Frank Auerbach triumvirate. Whereas his peers' reputations rest largely on figure painting and portraiture, Kossoff confines his production to a narrower range, roughly divided between portrayals of a limited group of sitters (mostly family and friends) and London cityscapes, the subject of this retrospective. "There hasn't been an exhibition specifically focusing on Kossoff's drawings and paintings of London before," curator Rose, the British Council's director of visual arts, tells me. "Yet the city is ever-present in his work. He was born in London. He grew up in London. He saw it during the war years and in the years of reconstruction afterward. London is both his subject and his resource. In the aftermath of the 2012 Olympics, and with an extraordinary new body of work depicting Arnold Circus, it seemed timely to look at the great span of his career through the city."

London has had its painters. Its vain society was mocked by Hogarth; the Thames' shimmering reflections endlessly fascinated Turner, Whistler, and Monet. Kossoff's London tells something of his story: It maps his trajectory from an East End childhood to studios in Mornington Crescent and Dalston, and later Willesden Green, where he has lived since 1966. Dating from 1952 to 2012, the 90 drawings and 10 paintings gathered in the London exhibition picture his favorite spots: rooftops, building sites, and tube stations; train tracks overlooked by gas tanks, sweeping views across St. Pancras before it became a glitzy Eurostar terminal. Kossoff tells me he paints anything he finds "visually exciting." He doesn't mean picturesque. Although often concerned with places of personal significance, the artist has little time for the sentimental. He records the experience of a city in perpetual mutation, its dynamism captured with dense charcoal scores and lyrical brushstrokes covering papers and boards like so many vectors of pure movement. For dealer Pilar Ordovas—who is currently presenting works by Kossoff's sometime friend Auerbach in her Savile Row gallery alongside Rembrandts borrowed from the Rijksmuseum—Kossoff's and Auerbach's obsession with London is "one thing that makes them who they are."

The juxtaposition of drawings and paintings in "London Landscapes" goes to the heart of Kossoff's working method. Although he's not, in his own words, "a natural draftsman," drawing has always been the linchpin of the artist's rigorous practice. He draws religiously every day, as if teaching himself how to look at the world—"to practice making discoveries," wrote critic Michael Glover in the *Independent* in 2010. Drawing comes before painting during what could be described as a preparatory phase, but, for Kossoff, the emotional charge it imparts is no less intense than in some of his more ambitious oils on board. Looking at the vigorous strokes at Annely Juda, one senses the artist attempts to reproduce not only the likeness of his subject but what it »

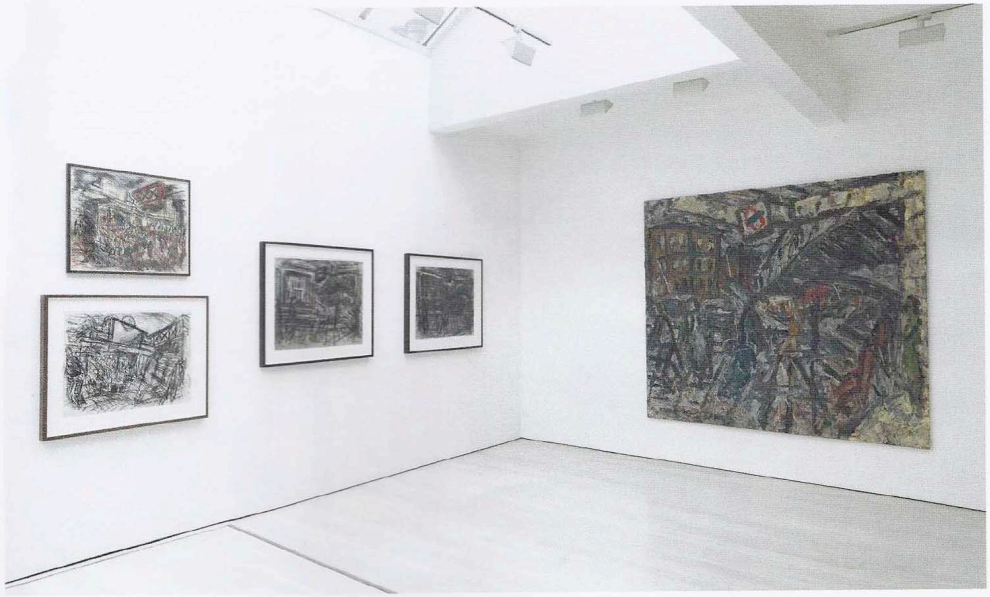
INTHESTUDIO

A serial chronicler in the vein of Whistler and Monet, Kossoff frequently depicts London in transition, first in the aftermath of World War II, and later as the face of the modern city coalesced before his eyes, as here in *City Building Site*, 1961. Below, an installation view of "London Landscapes" at Annely Juda Fine Art.

feels like to be standing in front of it, to absorb the energy it radiates. A series of pastels and charcoals on paper, "Train by Night," 1990, is a case in point. Picturing the tube at the back of Kossoff's garden when shrouded in darkness, these works invoke the observer as much as they do the clanking system itself. Perhaps that figure is looking at the train through a kitchen window, able to grasp only the flickering lights of the carriage and the profiles of late-evening passengers.

When he's not working indoors with a sitter, the artist sets off early, finds his spot, and sketches the scene. Until recently Kossoff would come back in the afternoon and start painting from the morning's harvest, but these days painting has become too demanding physically, so he concentrates on drawing. In this well-honed routine the paintings were more often than not scrapped at the end of the day, and the artist was off again the next morning to draw the same patch some more. "It's the process I am engaged in that is important," Kossoff told John Berger in "Drawing: Correspondence with Leon Kossoff" (a chapter from *The Shape of a Pocket*, 2001). That method implies a progressive internalization of the subject, Kossoff's hardwired belief that, at some point, if he looks and sketches attentively enough, he will be in a position to produce a picture true to both the essence of its subject and his sentiment for it. When I ask Kossoff how he knows if he's done enough drawings, he answers flatly: when the painting is done. One can't help but imagine that somehow, the layers of paint that ended up on the studio floor are part of and contribute to the success of the final piece. "Underneath the completed image are the ghosts of many, many previous attempts at the same subject," Rose corroborates. "What results is a picture of sustained spontaneity, underpinned by a history of the battles and chances that have gone into its making."

When I put forward an equivalent hypothesis to Kossoff, he dismisses it out of hand, insisting that the painting is solely and uniquely the result of the morning's drawings. In the past, though, he encouraged a more mystical approach to his technique. Back in 1993 he told Kristine McKenna of the *Los Angeles Times*, "In the process of making a painting, »



INTHESTUDIO

one's initial intent does dissolve at a certain point and that creates a very perilous condition because it casts you into a world that's totally unfamiliar—yet it's only there that something worthwhile can occur."

Kossoff's understanding of artmaking can be traced back to David Bomberg, a painter largely overlooked during his lifetime but now considered a key influence on the generation of painters that came of age in London during the second half of the 20th century. Encouraged by Auerbach, whom he had met on the benches of St. Martin's School of Art, Kossoff attended Bomberg's classes at Borough Polytechnic in South London between 1950 and 1952. The professor's methods were famously unconventional. He championed long periods of observation of the subject at hand without putting brush to canvas, and then a quick execution—a method Kossoff echoed. The idea of a "true image," of a painterly gesture capturing a pure, absolute connection between artist and subject suggested by these practices is nonetheless a problematic one. Artist Ian Kiaer, 45 years younger than Kossoff but a keen observer of the older man's work,

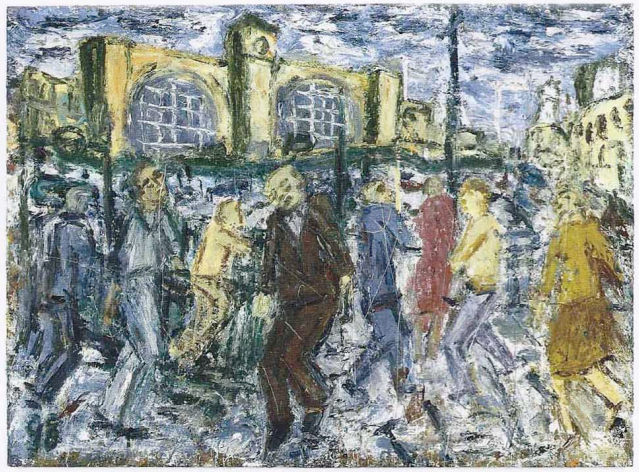
confides, "I find too often in the hands of other acolytes of Bomberg a degeneration of rhetoric. Instead of faithfulness to observation over time, all that flake white is scraped off into a mannered appeal to rather suspect notions of authenticity." Kossoff, however, cites an invaluable lesson imparted by Bomberg. "What David did for me, which was more important than any technique he could've taught me, was he made me feel like I could do it," the artist has said. "I came to him with no belief in myself whatsoever and he treated my work with respect."

Kossoff was born in 1926 in Islington to a Russian Jewish family who had escaped pogroms in the Ukraine and lived on City Road. He had six siblings and a father with a bakery on Calvert Avenue. Although art wasn't much discussed at home, it became an important part of the young Kossoff's life from his first, fortuitous visit to the National Gallery in 1935. He claims not to remember how he got to the museum but knows he was dazzled by Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1654. The young man started painting during the war, spurred by the spectacular pictures of London under German attack he saw in newspapers in Norfolk, to which he was evacuated in 1939 and where he lived until 1943. Back in London, he enrolled at St. Martin's School of Art for a one-year commercial art course and went back there in 1949, but it was Bomberg's classes that set him on his path.

It was around this time that London became one of the artist's favored muses. The city was a dark place in the early 1950s. The Luftwaffe had dropped an estimated 30,000 high-explosive bombs in 1940 and 1941 alone, and the scars were visible everywhere. It was also a moment of intense rebuilding. Charcoal in hand, Kossoff, sometimes with Auerbach, was taking stock of this new reality, engaging in a process of reappropriating a place that had changed beyond recognition. The drawing *Building Site St. Paul's*, 1954, included in "London Landscapes," is indicative of Kossoff's postwar work. The cathedral was specially protected during the Blitz by express order of Winston Churchill, and its dome, an icon of British resilience, looms in the background. Yet the action is elsewhere, in the concatenation of planes in the foreground: roofs, walls, and scaffolding, all buzzing with the energy of a city in the process of reinventing itself. The oil-on-board *City Building Site*, 1961, takes this urban dynamism to the verge of abstraction. Most identifiable elements have disappeared, turned into thick impastos smeared on the surface in layers of olive greens, browns, ash grays, and yellows that, combined, form an expressive pictorial mud. Yet the vigor is unchanged. Looking at both *Building Site St. Paul's* and *City Building Site*, the viewer sees a city mutating before her very eyes.

One of Kossoff's best-known images is set in the Willesden Sports Centre, where the artist taught his son to swim in the late 1960s. The 1969 version, *Children's Swimming Pool, 11 O'Clock Saturday Morning, August 1969*, makes some concessions to verisimilitude. The water is blue, the bodies of the crowded bathers fleshy pink. In another version, dated three years later and shown in the London exhibition (*Children's Swimming Pool, Autumn 1972*), Kossoff has turned up the chromatic heat. The bodies are now golden yellow, darting about like dragonflies in the aquamarine pool. Vibrant patches of orange and navy replace the first piece's more muted tones. The change is a purely visual one, but the entire mood has shifted; the children's shrieks of delight as they run, dive, and splash about are louder, amplified by Kossoff's palette as they bounce off the pool's tiled walls. »

For the past several years Kossoff has sketched Arnold Circus in central London, near where he attended primary school. The three charcoal-and-pastel works on paper here are all titled *Arnold Circus* and date from 2008 to 2010.



As we walk past the painting at Annely Juda, I ask Kossoff if he thinks these pieces, recording a moment with his child, are particularly intimate. He acquiesces but quickly moves on, muttering something about not wanting to go into that. Yet the deeper one digs into Kossoff's work, the harder it is to avoid this sense of intimacy. Pointing at the large painting *Inside Kilburn Underground, Summer 1983*, the artist explains that when he paints a crowd scene, the figures often become portraits of some of his sitters and relatives. Here, the woman reading by the newsstand is his wife, Rosalind (known as Peggy), the man walking toward the staircase is his father, and the woman on the right-hand side is Fidelma—after Peggy, his longest-serving model.

With his "Arnold Circus" series (2008–10 and 2012), the artist revisits his childhood stomping ground. His father's bakery was a stone's throw away, and as a boy he attended the Rochelle School, which opens directly onto the circus. Kossoff, though, discusses the area only in visual terms. So excited is he by the arrangement of colors, the red brick contrasting with the deep green leaves and bandstand on the roundabout, that he asks if I, too, don't feel compelled to reach for a pencil when I wander through the neighborhood.

Kossoff has long been considered a core member of the School of London, alongside Freud, Bacon, Auerbach, and Michael Andrews. But the label must be used with caution. As gallerist Ordovas points out: "There was never a formal group. But what they had in common was a belief in painting, and a belief in working, and working and living in London." What they also had in common was a commitment to the figurative. The School of London term originated in 1976 in an essay American painter R.B. Kitaj wrote for the catalogue of "The Human Clay," an exhibition gathering 48 living British artists, including lesser-known names such as Adrian Berg, John Golding, and Elisabeth Vellacott. Kitaj was attempting to position his adopted city, London, on a par with New York and Paris. Although controversial as soon as first printed, the name provided a convenient framework in which to shoehorn the five lone wolves (ironically, Kitaj is now rarely associated with the group). Dealer and art historian James Hyman, who wrote the 2001 book *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in the Cold War*, has highlighted in an article published in *Art Monthly* how much the School of London was a "curatorial construct rather than a commercial phenomenon… developed through a series of public exhibitions," notably at the Tate Gallery and the Royal Academy of Arts.

This vexed label also had a strong impact on the market for these artists' work. Writing in these pages in 2007, Paula Weideger quoted London dealer Ivor Braka as saying that it was New York gallerist William Acquavella's taking on Freud in 1992 that "springboarded the whole thing."

"The raised awareness of and prices for one School of London member served as a sort of pulley system, hoisting up the rest," concluded Weideger.

Kossoff has a looser foothold in the international market than his comrades, but prices seem to be moving in the right direction; his auction record, $1,086,983, for *Street in Willesden*, 1985, a picture of a man sitting on a bench, was established in 2011. Moreover, his dealers assert, Kossoff's practice-driven works appeal to quieter collectors than fans of the comparatively brash, brawny style of Auerbach or Bacon. Rather than holding up Kossoff works to, say, Bacon's *Triptych*, 1976—sold for an artist-record $86,281,000 to Roman Abramovich in 2008—perhaps pieces by Kossoff should be divorced from this school and compared with one another.

The works are certainly in dialogue already, as "London Landscapes" attests. Looking at the "Arnold Circus" series, one perceives shifts in weather, time of day, and even the artist's mood. Together they offer more than the sum of their parts, not only a record of Kossoff's struggle to capture something of the reality of his life, but also a reminder of the gentle glories of contemplation in the service of art. ⊞

LEON KOSSOFF, MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, ANNELY JUDA FINE ART, GALERIE LELONG, AND L.A. LOUVER