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John Wilson & Frank Auerbach.

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John Wilson: In 1954 a young artist moved into a small studio in Camden Town, North London, to begin painting and he never stopped. Frank Auerbach has lived and worked in the same studio ever since, painting virtually everyday of his life and rarely venturing further than nearby Primrose Hill and then only to sketch the landscape. Auerbach is known for his thick gloopy layers of paint, piled onto canvases to create abstract textures from the people and places he captures. He is also known of course as one of the least interviewed artists of his generation, usually preferring to let his paintings speak for themselves.

Well last night he made an exception when he attended the opening of a new exhibition, which pairs some of his works with those of Rembrandt. You can see images at the Front Row website gallery right now.

I met 82-year-old Frank Auerbach at the gallery and asked about the influence of Rembrandt on his work:

Frank Auerbach: Just after the war when there were very few art books, I remember the Phaidon book on Rembrandt with a sort of porridge colored cover and rather brown illustrations and he was one of the first painters who really moved me and he's never stopped being important to me.

J.W: And when you are in your studio, painting day in day out, is Rembrandt there with you, you know you have reproductions of his paintings alongside you?

F.A: Sometimes I have reproductions of his paintings, at the moment I am looking at Delacroix for instance, but Rembrandt and Picasso may be the two painters I've thought about most. He has certain qualities that make me feel close to him, in the sense that I think of him as not only one of the two most miraculous draughtsman of life and emotion, that is Watteau and Rembrandt draw people doing things, rather than people posing and one gets a strong sense of life caught on the hop.

J.W: You have been painting for many years now and you are an incredibly prolific artist, well in terms of the way that you work, in terms of the hours that you put in maybe, maybe not in terms of the amount of paintings that result because I know you destroy a lot of them don't you? But you have time and again returned to the same scenes and you focus your eye on the same patch of North London, there is a continual source of fascination in Camden town and Primrose Hill for you.

F.A: It is a continual source of fascination. I think it may have something to do with my temperament, that I feel on the whole more comfortable going deeper rather than going wider and as the years have passed I venture out less and less. After all the subject of a painting is not the title, is not the word that it is called. I mean two paintings of mine have similar titles

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Primrose Hill and these are more or less of the same period but...

J.W: Mid sixties

F.A: Yes, but the formal material can be very different from one picture to another.

J.W: Interesting you mention *Primrose Hill*, there are three paintings in this gallery all titled *Primrose Hill* from the mid-sixties, by coincidence I walked across *Primrose Hill* in North London this morning and I saw the view that you were painting there. Now we often think of you as an impressionistic painter or an abstract painter, somebody who creates textures in paint but in one of the paintings I've just seen out there in the gallery there is the suggestion on the skyline of the Post Office tower as I saw it this morning and that is, I guess was only just being built when you were painting.

F.A: I'm really, really flattered that you should say this because it's absolutely the case. A great friend of mine, who is dead now, an art historian, a long, long time ago bought a painting of *Primrose Hill* and he asked me to show him where I had done it and he was slightly gob smacked to find that although my paintings are so abstracted, that there is a certain accuracy as regards the material and he recognized when I put him in the place where I had done the drawings for the painting he recognised the image of the painting immediately.

J.W: As I did when I walked into the gallery ten hours ago, I saw that same view and there it was in front of me.

F.A: I'm very flattered and very pleased because the great thing is that if we don't use the awkward reality that is about, you get bland images. Picasso said that we painters make our paintings the way that princes made their children with dairymaids, or something of that sort. Meaning that we use the daily stuff that we have in our hands, our immediate surroundings, in order to make a painting with character, rather than the bland free-floating decorative image.

J.W: But what's extraordinary, is that painting I'm referring to, is from about 1965/66 the post office tower wasn't, and I keep calling it that, it's now known as the British Telecom Tower, but it was still I guess being built at that time.

F.A: Whatever it is, I assure you it was there.

J.W: It's an historic painting in a way then isn't it?

F.A: Well I mean, the intervals, the things that I saw in the skyline are there, it's not that I haven't occasionally moved things around for the sake of the painting, but it's essentially the scene that I saw.

J.W: And you go to your studio every day as far as I know.

F.A: Yes I do.

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J.W: And so you don't give yourself a break, do you have any days off during the year?

F.A: No I don't, I don't have any days off because I find it fun.

J.W: Fun?

F.A: Yes.

J.W: So it's not a really difficult, serious pursuit, painting?

F.A: Well it is a serious pursuit, that's the fun. I mean, I don't want to intrude on other fields, but I'm sure that a professional golfer might say that golf was fun. But it would be a continual preoccupation and he would do it everyday, and as Gary Player said, 'the more I practice the luckier I get'.

J.W: But I wonder whether my surprise at you saying it's fun is because I've heard that you do destroy so many paintings, that you continually scrape off the paint, it makes it sound like it's a process of huge frustration.

F.A: I don't destroy in the sense of chucking them away; I tend to destroy by scraping them off. I mean the more complicated and difficult the game, the more fun.

J.W: This is a very rare interview for you, although I think you are increasingly talking about your work. Is that because really you're not shy of the press and the media, but because you are just too busy to talk to us?

F.A: On the whole I don't like appointments I really hate them. I just like my routine luckily my wife is somehow, in her own way, attuned to similar. I mean, she has a social life more than I do, but I have a social life in the sense that I see my sitters and I just feel happier in a routine. Because Max Ernst said that in the 30's I was lucky enough to have been present at the creation of most of my pictures, if you've got the impulse, it's very nice if you've got the brush in your hand. Do you see, since my painting can't be concocted, since it can overtake me at anytime at all, since I never know when I'm going to finish a painting or see something happening, there are many false finishes, it's very useful to me to just have a routine so that I'm there when it happens, my paintings are always a surprise to me, both in look and when they happen. I never know when something will appear on the canvas that I think is worth leaving.

J.W: How do you know when it is finished?

F.A: Well, I've been asked that before and I've got a stock answer. It's when it looks like and when it hangs together and when it seems new to me, that it's not like any other painting I've done before.

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J.W: Now you talk about doing portraits, you will I think become the first living artist to be exhibited at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and I was there recently, there is an absolutely amazing self-portrait by Rembrandt there, hanging quite near the Night Watch, and it was one of my favorite paintings in the whole place. Now it struck me looking around the paintings here tonight that you don't do self-portraits do you?

F.A: There are no young self-portraits but recently as my face has become slightly more interesting in the way of bags under the eyes and wrinkles and sagging, I have in fact done about a dozen self-portrait drawings.

J.W: But nothing in oil yet?

F.A: Not for a very, very long time, I did one when I was very young. There are always practical considerations, and I don't think I can make this particularly clear but when I've got somebody sitting in front of me, the way to understand the mass, the sculptural entity, is to walk round, to go round the side, so that one has a sense of trying to create this miracle where one is getting something three-dimensional on a flat canvas, although of course the canvas (...) is not particularly flat. Now if you do this with yourself in a mirror, as soon as you walk around the side, the model is looking round the side as well, so I do fairly complicated things when I'm doing a self-portrait, like looking at the image in a mirror, like turning the painting round and occasionally working since it's the same head, working on the left hand side of the head before the right hand side and so on. And for that reason, and because I'm fairly static when I'm painting because I have so much paint around and a sort of trolley to have the paint on, I find it livelier to be able to do this in drawing because I can move around a bit more, and I move around very much more when I'm doing a self-portrait than when I'm painting other people.

J.W: And for decades, home and work have been the same place for you, in Camden Town, but you arrived here in Britain as part of the Kinder transport from Germany.

F.A: I wasn't actually on the kinder transport

J.W: Were you not on the kinder transport?

F.A: No, I was brought over, I had a fairly complicated, and I'm sure its rather boring, but there was a woman called Iris Origo, an American woman in Italy who guaranteed six children to come, so I came with two children and their nanny and we went on to Victoria, then I was put on a train to come to a marvelous school in Kent where I remained for the next nine years.

J.W: But without your parents, you never saw your parents again.

F.A: No I didn't see my parents again.

J.W: But has painting been, without being too simplistic about this, has painting and the way

ORDOVAS

that you paint and that single minded pursuit of paint every day. Has that, do you think, been a way of dealing with the lost of your parents and that early start here?

F.A: I never think about it, I don't find it comfortable to think about it. I forge ahead and not give in to any sort of self-analysis at all, it doesn't interest me and I don't see that it's in anyway fruitful. Given this brief space between birth and death, I think the thing to do is to get on with it. It's get on or get out sleepy head.

J.W: What does the ageing process do? Just finally.

F.A: It makes you clumsier, it makes you more tired. But it also, I mean obviously I wasn't so totally single-minded as not to get into various sorts of trouble appropriate to my age when I was younger, and now that the temptation of that, of going out drinking and various things has gone, so at the same time I've obviously lost energy and strength but I've cut the fat off my life and just get on with the one thing that I really want to do which is paint.

J.W: You've cut the fat off your life, what about the paintings themselves? Are they leaner then?

F.A: Much more thinner, much thinner. For the last 30 years or so they haven't been particularly thick. People are so lazy that once they've characterised one, they keep talking about one in the same terms, but I haven't been a particularly thick painter for the last 30 years.

J.W: Maybe this is not for you to say but do you think that you are a better painter the older you get?

F.A: No. I think I'm different but I don't think so. I've got a certain respect for the young man I was and I've always felt that I was coming off the tightrope all my life, and I'm certainly not better but I hope that I'm not always worse.

J.W: That was talking to Frank Auerbach. His exhibition *Raw Truth: Auerbach and Rembrandt* is at the Ordovas gallery in Savile Row in central London until the first of December. More details can be found at our website.