

## EVENT


**GEORDIE GREIG**  
 SHOW OF THE WEEK

**Raw Truth:**  
**Auerbach-Rembrandt**  
 Ordovas Gallery, London  
 Until December 1

**I**t is 59 years since Frank Auerbach first moved into his cell-like artist's studio in Camden, North London. The rent was just £2 a week back in 1954, and there was no heating, only cold water and an outside lavatory. 'It is still very much home, I can never imagine moving,' he told me, mystified by any suggestion otherwise. But then Auerbach, now aged 82, the greatest living British painter, according to many critics, is the ultimate creature of habit. He has painted the same five people – his wife, son and three friends – and the same London streets for decades. All that has altered is his prices, now sky-rocketing into the millions.

This week is a triumphant celebration for Frank Auerbach in an extraordinary roller-coaster life as an artist, which, tragically, his parents never lived to see. Shortly after he was evacuated to Britain in 1943 as a young Jewish boy from Berlin, letters his mother and father sent via the Red Cross suddenly stopped. Their death in the Holocaust left him an orphan, alone in his adopted country.

Auerbach has dedicated his entire life to painting, competing with the greatest old masters to recast a new vocabulary of art in the 20th century. This week a London gallery is paying him the ultimate tribute by showing his work alongside works by Rembrandt, confident they will each hold their own. Auerbach has always been indebted to the influence of the great Dutch master.

To mark this joining of the past and present masters, Auerbach was photographed in his studio for *Event* magazine on the eve of this show.

His method of working is unique. Each morning he scrapes off what he painted the day before and paints it again, repeating the process until he is satisfied with the picture. It can take years, and for a long time Auerbach lived on the breadline, in fear that his uncompromising stance would end in failure. Sales were few because he



## A VERY MODERN MASTER

worked so slowly and prices for years were low.

He lived with no heating, food secondary to his priority to buy paint. It was tough and at times lonely as success crept up on him. There was no obvious trigger point for his change of fortune. His pictures were bought by museums and discerning collectors but only in the past five years have his prices jumped, as his unique contribution to art seems more obvious.

Now there is a growing expectation for him to be given a retrospective at the Tate Gallery. His figurative, obsessive portraits and his cityscapes of Primrose Hill and Camden are as defining of 20th century London as Hockney's palm trees and swimming

pools are of Los Angeles: they have an iconic intensity.

Now in his ninth decade, his ambition is undimmed. But age has altered the physical effort of painting. 'It becomes more difficult. Energy declines and so too the effort to get going; it becomes harder. Francis [Bacon] used to say it is an old man's game and so it is in a way. The very greatest painters have been people who became better in old age. For me the process has never been anything other than uncomfortable, but with the ambition of doing something that is a little bit special. It keeps one on one's toes. I have been uneasy for the past 60 years as a result. I have always made very heavy work of it and I always found it pretty difficult.'

**CREATURE OF HABIT:**  
 Auerbach, photographed for *Event*, in the Camden studio he has worked in for 59 years. Below: *Head Of E.O.W. II*

Auerbach remains unduly modest. But also pragmatic, describing the tightrope-like risks his art needs. 'When authors rewrite there is the terrible dilemma of having two versions and being able to compare them. The great advantage of painting is when you've described an inch [in paint], you can't go back if you've had second thoughts about it. So in a sense it is all or nothing.'

So what does an artist achieve? 'There are two categories: one purpose is avoiding death, as in you have to earn a living to avoid dying. In the same way you have to look both ways when crossing the road. But secondly there is celebratory stuff; painting is a positive and celebratory thing. I can't think of any more direct way through the centuries of conveying humanness. When you stand in front of a Rembrandt you feel his feelings and cast of mind, because he is so powerful. He communicates to you.'

'If you look at the Bronze Age's works of art, you realise that that also is done by somebody with real aesthetic discrimination of the human race. Perhaps art stems from the unkillable, creative, artistic voice that has carried on through the centuries and so passes its messages on. The main reason is always that it is something some people want to do, rather more than anything else.'

'When I was young I created such an impossible situation for myself and other people that I could see no way out of picking up the brush and going to paint. I don't know what else I would have done. I might have tried to do something... I might have tried to write as, like almost everybody else, I had an involuntary literary education simply by going to school. I don't think I would have gone to an office. Because I was an office boy for a bit when I first came to London in Victoria Street and it seemed like a living hell to me, eight o'clock in the morning until five or so on. I couldn't stand it. And that was his driving force to paint, it was also the starting point of his path to genius.'