Raw Truth: Auerbach — Rembrandt
Orlovsky, 29 Savile Row, W1, until 1 December

Pilar Orlovsky continues to mount extraordinary museum-quality exhibitions in her modestly sized Savile Row gallery. The latest theme is a telling conjunction of Rembrandt and Frank Auerbach. Orlovsky seems somehow to charm museums into lending masterpieces that are never usually seen in a commercial gallery space, and this show has been organised in collaboration with the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Whether the exhibition will travel (12 December 2013 to 16 March 2014). Rembrandt is represented by two paintings and two etchings: an oil on paper of ‘Joseph telling his dreams to his parents and his brothers’, with an etching on the same subject; a small oil on panel, ‘Portrait of Dr Ephraim Bueno’; and a substantial landscape etching of trees. To counterpoise these are two Auerbach paintings of heads (of EOW, a favourite sitter), an interior with figure (‘The Sitting Room’), and a trio of Primrose Hill paintings.

Two of the Primrose Hill pictures will be familiar from public collections (Arts Council and Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art), but the third (and to me the most interesting), the subject under winter sun, is from a private collection. The three present different seasons, spring, summer and winter, and allow the viewer a rare chance to compare and contrast. This is of course an urban subject, but these paintings look more like landscapes than cityscapes, being principally about space and the basic structures of the land, in which the buildings are almost incidental.

I love the idea of Rembrandt’s pictures being in dialogue with Auerbach’s, for this is what the great western painting tradition is all about. The exhibition does not make immodest comparisons between contemporary artist and Old Master, it simply juxtaposes the work of two individuals for our greater edification. Auerbach, while stressing that he cannot really put it into words, suggests that Rembrandt aims at ‘the absolute grandeur of the absolute ordinary’; or perhaps in other words, the majestic dignity of everyday appearance. In his own terms, this is surely what Auerbach also tries to paint, and what thus makes this pairing so stimulating and rich an experience.