The constant painter
Frank Auerbach on his life's obsession
Man of many layers

Frank Auerbach is one of our greatest living artists, whose canvases sell for millions. At 82 he is still tirelessly painting and repainting the same few familiar people and local scenes, taking only one day off a year. Hannah Rothschild interrupts him at his north London studio to find out what drives him. Photograph by Laura Hynd

Tracked down a side alley in Caledon Town, north London, bound by a railway track, a busy high street and a former cigarette factory, there is a small row of Victorian brick studios. An address is written in fading white paint on an outer wall. Apart from the odd weed, the concrete passage way is clean and free of dustbins and debris. The noise of children playing, of birdsong, piano practice and the strains of Radio 4 suggest a certain kind of genteel neighbourhood. The only hint of anything unamal is a whiff of oil paint emanating from one black door. This is the hideaway of the man whom many believe to be Britain’s greatest living painter.

‘Hello, hello, come in,’ Frank Auerbach says. He is simultaneously expansive and shy; pleased to see me (we go back years) but also a little irritated by my intrusion into his life. ‘Forgive me, but I resent appointments. I resent having to see anybody apart from my sisters, anybody at all,’ he says bluntly.
The room measures about 23ft square. It has been Auerbach’s home and studio since 1943. There are a few pieces of furniture— a small wooden desk and two wooden chairs; the latter, slightly more comfortable one is for sisters. Circles painted in different colours on the floor ensure that the chair’s legs are returned to their correct place. A work in progress is on an easel. Other canvases are turned to face the wall. The floor is covered with globes of paint, the detritus of Auerbach’s method of painting. On every surface there are brushes, rags, pots of paint, spatulas, old newspapers, well-chewed monographs and a paint-smeared trolley. Sketchbooks are arranged neatly in one corner, obscured by a collection of plastic bags. The north-facing window is mired with

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London dust, a Wedgwood china jug a faint golden wash over the room. On the wall back there is a functional kitchenette, and on a raised platform a single bed. Tucked to the walls are reproductions of two Rembrandts, a Hogarth, a Picasso, random postcards sent by friends, and three large black-and-white reproductions of Auerbach’s own work.

As a young man Auerbach sold his canvases from premises for a few guineas; these days his major paintings sell for millions of pounds. His work is collected by museums and dedicated individuals. This month the Rijksmuseum and the Ormond Gallery in London will stage an exhibition called Raw Truth, a conversation between two Auerbach paintings and four by Rembrandt. When the show travels to Amsterdam in December Auerbach will become the first living artist ever to show in the Rijksmuseum’s main collection. A retrospective of his work is planned at Tate Britain in January 2015.

These accolades do not mean much to the 82-year-old Auerbach, whose modus operandi has never altered, and almost certainly never will. As long as the four walls remain strong, he will not move from his studio, nor will he award himself any luxuries. I became so solvent so late that it’s too late for me to change,” he says.

Unlike many artists Auerbach does not collect works of art or antiques. He barely drinks, never travels and seldom socialises. But this, he says, helps him create. “I have this year, wear his clothes until they disintegrate and is not interested in material possessions. He works seven days a week and six evenings a week and takes one day off a week. When I suggest that this sounds like a hard life, Auerbach looks genuinely perplexed. “I’ll feel it. It keeps one on one’s toes. People who turn out pictures and think, ‘How nice,’ and then go to the next picture are terribly boring to me. You might as well work in a factory. The whole thing is about the struggle and the struggle makes it a fun activity. So when he wakes up in the morning does he think, ‘Great, another struggle?’ I just think I’ve got to get on with it. Sometimes I feel like what Picasso said. ‘Man is the only animal that pulls himself between the shafts of a cart, the cart doesn’t, he has to be led.’”

The map of Auerbach’s world is sparse. His paintings reveal a life pared down to a few significant co-ordinates: there is the studio entrance, glimpses of Mansfield Crescent, the house next door, a certain tree and a few faces. He does not accept commissions. His sitters include two relations and a couple of friends. None is paid. They come at the same time, on set days, 53 weeks a year. The longest serving sitter, his wife, has sat up 53 years. In the past Auerbach went to the odd restaurant, the cinema occasionally and the National Gallery weekly, but even these activities have dwindled. The main change is that he now sees his wife three nights a week — rather than one. It is the life of an ascetic, but one dedicated to work instead of religious or spiritual goals. There have been painters who almost haven’t a life — Mondrian comes to mind, whose life seemed to be very austere and hermit-like” he says. “On the one hand if one didn’t have a life, there would be no point in paint, but on the other hand if one was in entirely to life, one wouldn’t have any energy to paint. There is the conflict. On the whole I think it is a creative one. Would he describe himself as an obsessive? He hesitates for a moment and then laughs. ‘I would simply say he is.’

Auerbach offers me a choice of coffee, tea, green tea or red wine. I choose green tea and he moves around the studio trying to arrange a clean shirt, but his greatest joy is weaving ‘smart’ clothes – 30-year-old chains and a blue T-shirt. Does he care about clothes? Not at all! It’s a bit late to think of being the Beardsmore of Camden Town,” he says. John found me a complimentary hat at an agricultural show and he has reordered four times.” Auerbach is still handsome. His expression is mostly doleful and ironic, but this serious demeanor is punctuated by bursts of infectious laughter; when he becomes almost impish, his eyes closed, shoulders shaking, head thrown back, mouth open revealing child-size teeth.

Our first encounter took place in the late 1980s, when I asked Auerbach to appear in a BBC film I was making about the denaturation of art. Then as now I was mesmerised by his work, by his ability to capture the essence of a person or place, how the paint on his canvases never seems to dry and easily but remains vibrant, fluid, jewelled, floating, fluent with energy and mystery. His response was an immediate and robust ‘No’. ‘The thing is, painting is mysterious and I don’t want it demystified,’ he wrote to me. ‘It’s no good presenting artists as approachable shirts who happen to paint, although some may have the coolness or grace to lend themselves to this. If I have ever thought of contacting anybody it is the minute in the backroom who rejects the general public. ‘I am the beast in the bureau who does not wish to be invaded.’

In spite of the rebuttal, we kept in touch, meeting occasionally with friends he had in common, including the painter Lucian Freud, Mike Andrews and RB Kitaj. To that group of clever, informed artists, Auerbach, younger than the rest, seemed to be the painters’ painter. It was Francis Bacon who rang Marlborough Fine Art to say that there was a brilliant artist, so poor that he lived on potatoes and yoghurt, whom they must see immediately. Lucian Freud amassed the biggest private collection of Auerbach’s work and used to ask his advice about unfinished paintings. In 1993, when Freud had a major retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, I remember Auerbach taking the decision about where to place pictures, watched by a nervous Freud. “He had no sense of hanging a show at all,” Auerbach says.

Occasionally I witnessed Auerbach and Freud talking about art; there was an air of competitiveness between these two titans of vandalism. “I do main

Lucian, we were friends for 55 years, or was it 60?” Auerbach says. He was basically a very nice man and a loyal friend. He was sort of barman-squire, cutting corners off life, but there was an element of brilliant, common sense about his way of looking at things. In most respects the two men’s livelihoods were quite different. Although they both worked intensively, Freud loved parties and clubs. Lucian got more into a day than anybody I have ever known,” Auerbach says. “I don’t think he slept more than four hours out of 24. In a way he believed heroinically. Very few people do exactly what they feel like doing. It takes some character.”

Does Auerbach resent being lumped into the so-called School of London along with Freud, Michael Andrews, Leon Kossoff, Francis Bacon and such affiliates as RB Kitaj? “I never wanted to belong to a school,” the School of London [led] was total rubbish,” he says firmly. “But I think there are very good painters and I am not ashamed to be put in the same category as them. Most have now died. Does he miss them? “No time goes on I feel these people are in the room with me.” Then he stops for a moment, a rare breath in a long, eloquent train of thought. “I actually feel sorry for these dead painters who can no longer take part in this massively engaging activity.”

In the mid-1990s I started working (collinately) with Auerbach’s son, Jake, first at the BBC and then when we set up a film company. In watercooler moments we would exchange family news. Through these stories, another Frank Auerbach emerged. This one liked rock music and books, Billy Crystal and women’s Indiana Jones movies. In 2001 Auerbach finally agreed to let me direct (and Jake produce) a filmed portrait. To the Storrs. Wanting to remit the feeling of intimacy and intensity of Auerbach’s life, we decided not to use a film crew. Borrowing a hand-held camera from a friend, we followed the sitters on their journey to the

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Head of Julie II, 2002 (private collection).

S o why does Auerbach paint the same face, the same view over and over again? Wouldn’t it be interesting to try a new landscape or a different subject matter? No, Auerbach seems to have settled on something, the more likely it is to be beautiful, he says. The whole business of painting is very much about something that he is not, he doesn’t mind being it, he says, in the studio. He is left with something that he is not, and then he gets it out of his system—no, there is something touching about that, about recoding something that’s getting on. Amid the tyranny of painting, the face of the person in Auerbach portrait. Likeness is a very complicated business indeed, he says. ‘If something looks like a painting it does not look like an experience, if something looks like a portrait it doesn’t really look like a person.’

Most artists work on a picture hit by hit, building on composition and detail in each session. Auerbach makes preparatory drawings but always paints the entire canvas as a single piece. ‘I try to paint the whole picture all the time. Even a beautifully painted section is not of the slightest use to me unless everything is interdependent and lives within the same flow,’ he says. If the composition doesn’t work, then he scrapes off all the paint, again and again, until he has only the outlines on the canvas. If I had 200 blank canvases maybe I would gain one, he says. Often a picture takes many hundreds of sessions to finish. The younger Auerbach tried on so many layers of paint that the canvases were too heavy to hang on a wall. How does he know when a picture is finished? ‘I want everything in the painting to work, that is, every face, every plane, every direction to relate to every other direction in the painting—so there’s no paradising or blot somewhere. I feel very strongly that if a painting is going to work, it has to work before you have a chance to read it. Great Rembrandts shake you. There is a tension between unity and diversity, one great wave or ridge holding it all together as one. A good painting concentrates the experience of being.’

B orn on April 29 1931 in Berlin to Jewish parents, Charlotte, a former art student, and Arthur, a civil engineer who fled the Nazi tide, Auerbach remembers a ‘rather bourgeois life’, a sunny and idyllic one. By the time he was 20 he was completely terrified by events unfolding in Germany to send them sour with the Kristallnacht pogrom. When he left Germany, Auerbach has the film Auerbach if his mother had given him anything to bring on his long journey. At first she was a small suitcase, his mother had given a gymnasia which she might not meet again. ‘I have some things for wearing immediately and then on some items my mother had stitched a red cross in the corner for later use, and some items like tablecloths and sheets for when I was grown up.’ For a time he received letters from his parents via the Red Cross, then they stopped. ‘I don’t remember a specific trauma or event at being told they had died.’ Many years later Auerbach found out they had been killed at Auschwitz in 1943. Does he dwell on this or his early childhood? ‘I never look back. I block out everything and just carry on,’ he says. But this same person claims, ‘Absolutely bloody everything feeds into my work. Scantus can annoy you, the man at the shop corner does not say good morning. It all feeds in.’ Why, then, does he drive himself so hard? ‘Who or what is the demon on his back?’ ‘I have always worked from distraction. I always feel it could have been better, and quite often I feel I could have been different’, he says. Do you ever give yourself a pat on the back? ‘He looks absolutely splendid. No, Auerbach puts his hand over his face and looks at the floor, we sit quietly for a few moments. Then he starts to ruminate on his picture. “I think it has to do with death. My childhood and biographical reasons—I think I must have felt that unless one justifies a life and has something to show for it, the whole thing is wasted.” When the afternoon sun dips and the light in the studio fades, I reluctantly say goodbye. Waddesdon back to Camden Town I hope to capture this man in words. It’s too easy to make Auerbach seem a slightly dusty misfit. I’m not really wrong. He is charming, funny, serious, magnanimous and erudite. Speaking in long discursive paragraphs, his conversation skips from Marcel Proust to Yeats, from Rembrandt to Picasso, from Anand to the Platonic ideal, from his childhood to his work. Scantus can annoy you, the man at the shop corner does not say good morning. It all feeds in.’

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