

The raw truth of death and becoming

In the re-opened Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, millions of visitors usually head straight for the famous "Night Watch". Now there is something more modern: landscapes and portraits alongside Rembrandt's pictures - in thick impasto style by Frank Auerbach.

Every gallery will have its prestige work. And if you were to ask those 2 million visitors at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam who have been coming in droves to see the Night Watch since the reopening in April, the answer would be clear: they come above all for Rembrandt.

But now the young director, Taco Dibbits, has placed a hurdle across the way to the most hallowed works: on the right, in a recess directly in front of the permanent "Night Watch" and directly opposite Rembrandt's "Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul", the "Jewish Bride", the picture of his son "Titus as a Franciscan Monk" and the impressive "Sampling Officials", six expressive paintings draw visitors' attention.

Frank Auerbach is a Londoner who was born in Berlin in 1931. He relates his new series "Raw Truth" to the Dutch painter who showed light on dark. Alongside those aged face landscapes he places his pictures from the sixties, dealing with the truth of transience in a harsh way. Now something interesting is happening: visitors walk past and appear irritated. Some hurry on towards the "Night Watch", Rembrandt's large, illustrious military picture. But some stay and sit on the seats in front of Auerbach's pictures – a study of the raw truth of aging. This means staying at one location. They take on, as it were, the view from Auerbach's studio window in Camden on the edge of London over the same landscape in spring, summer, autumn and winter. The inexorable process of birth and death.

Dark green, deep to dirty yellow, rust red in between: when you spend a long time gazing at it, the theme emerges: "Primrose Hill, Winter Sunshine". There is a silent but compelling dialogue between the earth's crust gradually breaking in the winter sun, the bleak groups of trees without leaves and Rembrandt's Apostle Paul.

The white turban the old painter wore as a headgear is the lightest feature. The fact that Rembrandt painted himself in the role of apostle may be interpreted as the reflection of a life that was by no means complete, a deep insight into how dependent man is on the mercy of the great, inescapable fate. With this powerful, dynamic texture, Auerbach gives this difficult subject a fissured and earthy colour surface from which the landscape only emerges gradually. It is almost like tectonic plates with eruption, petrification, and erosion. Nothing looks easy - it's more like an ongoing struggle. The work borders on abstraction, you see thick oil paint on the canvas; images look like mountains of spaghetti ice cream but when you take three paces back you see heads and faces. This painter treats the material in a rugged and almost brutal way.

And like Rembrandt, who didn't like to travel and refused when a patron wanted to send him to go to Italy – saying "what am I supposed to do there?", Auerbach only works in his own environment. In his art, as in life, he sticks to the familiar and the everyday.

It is in his life history, the early uprooting, the loss of close people, the familiar location, Berlin, the son of liberal Jewish parents in Berlin – he is incidentally the cousin of Marcel Reich-Ranitzki – came to England from Hamburg by ship in 1939 whilst his mother and father were sent to Auschwitz where they were murdered. There are now two commemorative plaques in front of the house at Wilmersdorfer Güntzelstraße 49. Frank Auerbach obtained a British passport in 1945. He performed in the theatre and studied painting. For a long time he earned his living as a frame builder. The public and the critics could not relate to his impasto style.

Together with Kossoff, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and R. B. Kitaj, he founded the famous School of London, for painting that renewed the corporeal against the dictum of abstraction. He was a reclusive type for a long time and the breakthrough only came in 1986, when his paintings appeared in the British Pavilion of the Venice Biennale and he received the Golden Lion prize with the German Sigmar

Polke. Auerbach's paintings have now been exhibited at the Tate and the Royal Academy for a long time.

Until now the 82-year-old – Rembrandt for whom he has such an affinity only lived to the age of 63 – has continuously worked by a weekly plan, painting faces and figures of his close circle of friends. Kossoff, Kitaj, Bacon and Freud have long abandoned this for a loftier sphere of art. Frank Auerbach has assiduously held the position of a radical, sensuous, corporeal painter devoted to the timeless theme of transience. This theme goes a long way – even as far as the mystery of life and death. It is a distillation of essence – again with an echo of Rembrandt.

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, open daily from 9 to 17 hrs. Until 16th March 2014.