

RIOT MATERIAL

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Presence as Abstraction, as Beguiling Obfuscation, in the Works of Leon Kossoff

MARCH 24, 2022 BY [ARABELLA HUTTER VON ARX](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Leon Kossoff: A Life in Painting, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NYC (with concurrent exhibitions at LA Louver in Los Angeles, through 9 April 2022, and Annely Juda Fine Art in London)
Reviewed by Arabella Hutter von Arx

The first painting greeting us in the Mitchell-Innes & Nash exhibition is, aptly, a self portrait. Smaller than the other pieces in the show, monochromatic, it packs the power of dynamite. The man represented closeup looks aghast, terrified even. His eyes stare down with dismay at something off canvas, an abyss? Hell? Malleable, the face is agitated by a chaos of brushstrokes. The boundaries between the head and its surroundings are unclear, as if everything was made of the same substance: mud. Mud, here, is nicely symbolic not only for its biblical intimation — Man being dipped, thrown, trampled in and yanked from the “miry mud” — but the muddiness of mind is also equally appropriate. While his portraits often halted at an opacity in the sitter, Kossoff had a pretty good idea of what he was about: uncertain about everything. He could, he tells us, hold onto nothing solid, either on the outside or the inside. “The important thing is to somehow keep going. This is ‘the straw to which we cling.’” This credo, shared [in a rare interview](#), could serve as caption for all of his mature paintings.



Leon Kossoff, *Self-portrait* (1974)

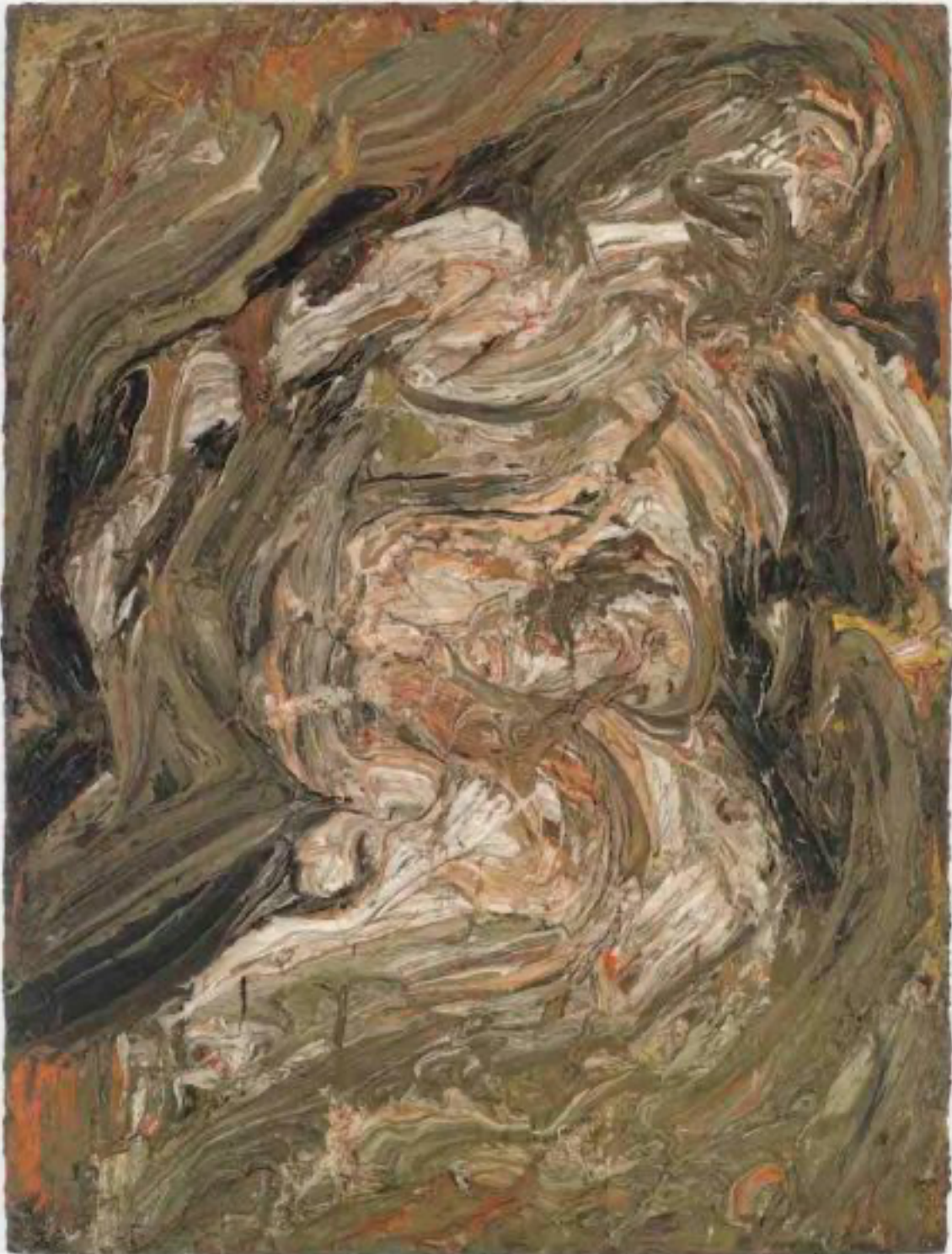
© Leon Kossoff Estate. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

The placement of a self portrait at the start of the exhibit is apt not due to any particular narcissism, but because Kossoff's expressionism focuses on the painter's own emotions. No clever wit, no flights of imagination, no elegant impressions, this is all about gut feeling.

Kossoff's portraits convey his emotional response to the sitters, their mystery even. Two of them picture his father, heavy and powerful in one, frail and dying in the other. In the first portrait, the huge skull, the oversized hands that could strangle, and the puffed up chest all picture an archetypal father. Kossoff painted him from a low angle, the point of view of a young child awed by this hypertrophied masculinity. He makes no attempt in any of the portraits at reproducing the colors of flesh, the subtle gradations, the pinks and reds and beiges. Heavily saturated, earthy tones paint the monochromatic faces, except for a stony gray when it comes to the father. Dark slashes expand the presence around his head, a convention used to depict movement or an explosion in illustrations, particularly in comic strips. While sitters in the other portraits seem to be engaged in a discussion, this monolithic man looks with diffidence at something off canvas. The facial expression could be read as tinged by sadness: being stuck inside a patriarchal cuirass might not bring all that much joy.

Just six years later, Kossoff feels very differently about his genitor. Now smaller in the frame and painted from an equal level, the old man still shows oversized hands and skull, but his body has shrunk. His eyes, closed, are sunk deep in their orbits. He might be sitting upright but he looks dead, or nearly. A small table carrying a book sits in between the sitter and the painter, the distance signaling the new objectivity.

In this painting, as in many of his other works, shapes are outlined by dark margins, as if in a woodblock print. This style was initiated by early expressionists who favored print as a means to provide affordable art to the masses. They preferred rough, simple ways of representing reality – childlike even for Paul Klee – over academic preciosity, or impressionistic representation. Kossoff resorted to this classic expressionist style in the portrait of his wife, Rosalind. To represent her emotional makeup and his response to it, he simplified his technique to the point of crudity. Coarse variations in shades mimic the effects of light and shadow that analog photos magnify. In the representation of the mouth, a single dark streak represents the upper lip, a lighter streak the lower lip. While some patches of color surround Rosalind, she is herself one muddy hue. We will never know from this picture the eye color of Leon Kossoff's wife. "It's when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, chin, and you can describe them, that you turn to others as to an object. The best way of encountering others is to not even notice the color of their eyes," wrote Emmanuel Levinas. Standing at a distance, the painter looks on, a powerless witness to what is going on inside his wife. Her expression denotes anxiety, and an intense attention to the object of her gaze. Or she concentrates on managing the pain that has her doubled over. He paints her with deep tenderness and concern, until the impassable boundary which exists between humans, whatever the intimacy, eventually stops his gaze.



Leon Kossoff, *Seated Nude no. 1* (1963)

© Leon Kossoff Estate. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

In the only nude in the exhibit, *Seated Nude No 1*, details are overlooked to stress the mass of the body that ties us by gravity to the planet, our own earthiness. This painting veers closest

to abstraction, the seated figure hardly readable. While Kossoff explored sexuality in some of his work, he seemed to distrust it in his nudes. His approach evades voyeurism, or the risk as defined above by Levinas to turn the sitter into an object — something few painters in Western culture shied from doing. All that is left visually is a presence experienced by the painter, and to us a mere immanence in the world. Kossoff put so much texture in this painting that it looks like a textile from afar. The reproductions in the catalog actually seem more naturalistic, since photography flattens the deep grooves, the smushes, the reliefs. In this nude, his impasto technique reaches a peak in terms of looseness of gesture and spontaneity. Reason does not govern his brush, if he even used a brush. We have little information about Kossoff's approach to technique, as he was protective about his privacy and gave very few interviews. He preferred to let his art speak not only for itself, but for *him* as well. We know that he painted very quickly, just a few hours for a piece, in an impasto which he probably did not modify. The painter danced with the paint as if it were a partner rather than a tool. But this is no waltz, more like a dance-macabre, where it is to be hoped the painter will come out alive.

The anguish racking Kossoff's works reaches a peak in *Demolition of YMCA Building No 3, Spring*. The painting does not picture urban development so much as the obliteration inflicted by war. It is a Man-inflicted pandemonium. The composition evokes the images of utter destruction that came out of World War II, while its clotting reds belong to a body, perhaps in the collective, now wholly ravaged. In a scene which must have been quite still, objectively, everything moves, pulsates, teems, as if it were a split open torso and its exposed viscera. The painting can be read at once as a devastated geography and a war-torn body. After World War II, artists responded to the atrocities with works that were deeply anguished, from bebop to abstract expressionism through existentialist novels. The London School gathered artists, including Kossoff, around a loose definition: most were based in London, though not all, and most painted figuratively; a number of them were Jewish. Together, their work leaned toward a stark existentialism, yet they chose not to set a common artistic dogma for themselves.

Before World War II, doctrines had reigned supreme, and their followings included artists: fascism for the Italian Futurists, classic Greek values for Picasso, communism for Léger, anarchism for Juan Gris. Leon Kossoff's approach to art is firmly grounded in the postwar era that developed existentialism with its concept of angst, and phenomenology with its distrust of dogmatism and of claims of impartiality. Though a quote by Sartre would reflect closely on Kossoff's work, Levinas has the more poetic delivery: "*his divine nudity crying its strangeness in the world, his loneliness, death, hidden in his being,*" are the words the philosopher uses to define the human condition, as does Kossoff with his visuals. However, in this painting, his "Spring" palette, with its greens and turquoises, offers tentatively a touch of optimism from the grisly rebirth.



Leon Kossoff, *A Street in Willesden, Early Summer* (1983)

© Leon Kossoff Estate. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Various iterations of turquoise appear in Kossoff's paintings. In *A street in Willesden, Early Summer*, this lovely color in a dress conveys the feminine attractiveness of the wearer, in contrast to the dull greens and grays around. Sexuality is more apparent here than in Kossoff's nudes. The body of a woman on a bench is offered to the sight of passerby, but more so to the gaze of the painter. Her breasts seem bared, a practice female Londoners tended not to engage in outdoors. Kossoff populated his scenes with people he loved, enchanting his familiar neighborhood with this fictional intimacy. It's likely the woman offered on the bench is his wife, but the other actors can't so easily be identified. A woman seems aggressed by her companion, or being somehow consumed – his mouth sucking out her substance. A man in black looks at us. Maybe. Nothing is for sure. Kossoff painted this scene several times, with slight variations in the composition. In one version, a man sits next to the woman on the bench, suggesting a different scenario. Competitor? Self portrait? While the painting's ambiguous scripts are unsettling, familiarity and affection bring an equal measure of relief to the roil of implicit anguish. The trees are not so agitated, nor are the buildings, the sky, the surface of the road. Straight lines abound for once, instead of tortured shapes, particularly in the other versions. The lines converge to a vanishing point, an unexpected reference to Renaissance perspective.

Kossoff, who was fascinated by the art of old masters from childhood, inscribed his work in the history of art. While he paid heed to precursors of expressionism, such as van Gogh and Cézanne, Kossoff went back, again and again, to two painters at the National Gallery: Rembrandt and Poussin. The saturation of his work, and the earthiness of his colors, can be linked to Rembrandt's influence. Both Kossoff and the old master painted our humanity in all its humbleness. Rembrandt and Poussin both get cataloged under Baroque, yet Poussin shares little with his Northern contemporary. A formalist who mastered the representation of space and volume as never before, Poussin has fascinated a whole string of painters – from Ingres, Delacroix, Cézanne, to Picasso.

Poussin's famed late landscapes did not hold Kossoff's attention, but his scenes in swimming pools and underground stations parallel the 17th century painter in the spatial relationship between the human figures and the setting. When Kossoff paints his responses to artworks, they concern the human figure, and never nature as such. He never represented landscapes. In the study on show, *From 'Cephalus and Aurora' by Poussin No. 2*, Kossoff explores composition for its own sake, but subverts the original baroque by killing the dazzling light favored by Poussin. He modifies the flesh tone to a pinker color than in his other works, an unrealistic hue similar to Picasso's pink period, to Cézanne's bathers. A delectable triangle of sky blue that is quite a different color from the Poussin original offsets delicately the flesh tones.

In *Christ Church, Spitalfields, Early Summer*, there is a kind of curiosity, as if Kossoff – after a life of painting expressionist scenes in working class settings – looked at this baroque building and wondered, *what were these guys thinking?* The use of grisaille for the church, when white was mostly absent from his paintings, belongs to classical representations of architecture, such as prints and ink on paper. We couldn't be further from expressionism. He painted the church repeatedly in his last years, the early versions as overbearing as his father's portrait. In this later version, a new appreciation for the building makes an appearance, as does spirituality. Some of the flesh, of the materiality of the world, so present in the earlier work, has dissolved into the sky. Yet this space of devotion lacks interaction with humans. People cross hurriedly in front of the church, not a single one looking at it. As a matter of fact, the church does not look accessible, there is no entrance.



Leon Kossoff, *Red Brick School Building, Winter* (1982)

© Leon Kossoff Estate. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

The same describes the *Red Brick School Building, Winter*. In this painting, too, people walk by, unconcerned, unaware of the painter/gazer, unaware of the looming mass. The school seems to lack doors, its reflective windows prevent us from looking in, just as Kossoff's sitters retain their opacity. There is no guarantee that inside this school, regular classrooms and corridors and staircases can be found, nor that this church would offer the usual nave and pews. They seem to look at the viewer across human agitation as much as the viewer gazes at them. In fact, his paintings of single buildings belong more with his portraits, rather than with his urban scenes.

The two buildings look nothing like each other, the church a sober baroque, the school a 1900 gothic, yet they share many features. The stance of the church, and the school even more so, bring to mind van Gogh's *The Church at Auvers* – the same powerful presence, vibrant, ominous. As in his portraits, they express Kossoff's emotional reaction to the buildings, to their immanent individuality. The school, with its red bricks and governmental architecture, belongs to a quintessential London working class environment. This is where Kossoff grew up, his father a baker. The painter never goes for picturesque: the school is plunked right in

the middle of the frame. The school's gothic details – the turrets and nooks and other embellishments – have been minimized to stress its monolithic mass. The building expands at the top as if it were slowly growing, getting even larger, more overpowering. His portraits' subjects are also weighed down by their own mass, even if their superficial materiality is tortured. The sky, the street, the school are *tormented*, as if rattled by an earthquake. Nothing is solid and reliable. This agitated world is overlaid by a filigree of the flimsiest white. In a different plane from the brushwork depicting the street scene, the artifact might have started as an accident, for Kossoff allowed the occasional drips of paint to remain uncorrected. Chance and spontaneity as opposed to intentionality were essential to Jackson Pollock, and they also played a role in Kossoff's work. He applied this filigree effect to a number of his paintings, as a tender, finishing gesture. This delicate touch creates a dialogue with the powerful impasto, adding an unexpected layer of abstraction. Kossoff might have agreed with Francesco Clemente's claim: "The concerns of a painter are always the concerns of an abstract painter. The images that I use need to be detailed enough to preserve their inherent narrative, and at the same time they have to be open enough not to be too locked into that narrative. For either the abstract or non abstract painter, the question is exactly the same: How do you hold onto detail, and openness at the same time?"



Leon Kossoff, Small Self-portrait (1978)

© Leon Kossoff Estate. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Kossoff's integrity at the easel translates in a powerful portrayal of his emotions and inner reactions to the world, and that retains all its relevance to this day. The exhibition opens with

a self portrait and ends with another, paired with the painting of Christ Church. In the small self portrait, the stylized effects of light and shade render most elegantly the volume of the head. Chin up, standoffish, this face shows more diffidence than the earlier portrait, its contours clearer. The mouth twists in an expression of distaste, the gaze is almost directed at the viewer. This man might be more in control, but he seems unsure about where he stands as a member of humankind, as a painter. Kossoff did not get significant recognition until very late in his life. His failure at a drawing test at Martin's Art School worried him throughout his career. "I'm not a natural draftsman," he still said in his 80s. And, in fact, the raw expressivity, the visceral emotions flying out of the paintings are what grabs at first. But Kossoff was more than that. A closer look shows a fine exploration of visual form: the painter devoted himself with humility and rigor to composition, texture, representation of volume, and light. And it could well be that painters in the future will go back to his body of work, and study the tricks of his trade, again and again.

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