John Chilver

Bomberg after Auerbach after Brown © John Chilver

Two shows this winter embodied the unique milieu of London painting that followed from David Bomberg’s art and teaching. Offer Waterman’s exhibition *Frank Auerbach: Early Works 1954-1978* compared curiously with *London’s Post-War Art Scene: David Bomberg and the Borough Group* at London South Bank University’s Borough Road Gallery, which gave a small taste of the artists who attended Bomberg’s classes at the then Borough Polytechnic in the 1940s-50s, the classes that spawned Auerbach. He himself didn’t make it to the November opening of his early paintings at Offer Waterman. He was recovering from hip surgery. Melvyn Bragg was there sounding buoyant and looking bouffant. The quiet, frail old man with watery eyes was Leon Kossoff. I asked him what he remembered of sitting for Auerbach’s portraits. “That was a very long time ago” he said melancholically. And what a long time it was. Nearly sixty years. I came away from this carefully selected Auerbach show with a strong sense of that distance, of a generation and a unique style of London painting fading away, of time passing.

The Borough Road show was not easy to assess in individual artistic terms, if only because the emphasis, whether intentional or not, was on the shared concerns of the group. This was very much the work of Bomberg’s class as directed by Bomberg’s pre-occupations and, one imagines, Bomberg’s terms. I wonder if “The spirit in the mass”, the mildly daft but telling phrase he liked to invoke in his later years, was a touchstone of his classes. Whether said or not, its influence has lengthened its shadow over Auerbach and Kossoff whose paintings have always kept faith with some idea of the mass of pigment standing for presence, or for the membrane of an encounter between presences. With this belief in the emotional charge of the paint mass itself, the load of paint stuff acquires a more or less animistic quality. This was apparent at Offer Waterman. It’s hard not to be charmed – also in the animistic sense – by the densely compacted small portraits like the 1961 *Head of E.O.W., Sketch II*. The pigment mass in here has to be handled with tact: it has to be not exactly shallow sculptural relief; and it has to be separated from the graphic, linear elements of drawing without contradicting their logic. Sometimes Auerbach veers too close to sculptural relief, as in *E.O.W. On Her Blue Eiderdown VI*, 1963. Animism is a clue. We need to question the standard bollocks about the “hard-won image”. Or at least, ask what exactly is being hard-won in Auerbach, since clearly something is. These paintings are hell-bent on displaying effort as such. All through Auerbach’s career the work is *work* and it bespeaks effort and labour. Quantities of labour. But what is the objective of that labour? It ain’t the accumulation of Cézanne-like little sensations. In fact the great paradox of Auerbach’s approach is that it privileges the sustained act of looking, with multiple sittings and interminable revisions, yet it is not at all cumulative. Unlike, say, Freud, Auerbach never arrives at any accumulation of detail or depictive information. Hard-won-ness here may be a kind of MacGuffin. In other words, maybe it’s really about the effort itself as a subjective process. “Subjective omnipotence” is a suggestive term John Roberts uses in his book *The Intangibilities of Form.* It is meant to refer to modernist painters’ fantasy of controlling every ounce and molecule of their image production. Auerbach’s paintings stage this subjective omnipotence by proposing themselves as sites of great aesthetic difficulty. They want to persuade the viewer that something tough and resistant is being struggled with in the work, though it’s not clear really what that is in terms of depictive tasks or visual outcomes. This applies to *Head of E.O.W., Sketch II,* 1961. It has the charge of a certain existential authenticity, if you will: there is the strong feeling that two people had to sit together in private in a confined space for many hours for this image to get made. But the visual grammar of harsh shadows without mid-tones marking out eye sockets and cheekbone is more or less the same as a high contrast black-and-white photograph. In other words there’s something perverse – isn’t there? – about all that painterly effort ending up in such a rudimentary and conventionally structured image. Again, animism is a clue. What if the effort – which is real enough in Auerbach – is not at all about struggling through to a visual truth, but is more like the psychological effort of a sceptic repeating a mantra? Like uttering an incantation over and over until something happens subjectively and a kind of animistic transference happens to the utterer-artist while visually and emotionally immersed in the mutations of the worked pigment, churning it through one fugitive resemblance after another.

*Frank Auerbach: Early Works 1954-1978* was a reminder of just how peculiar the niche was that the artist occupied within the expressive-romantic branch of modernism. Though he used colour locally, emphatically and affectively, Auerbach was never a colourist. Even when there are saturated reds (*E.O.W. On Her Blue Eiderdown VI)* or intense violets (*Figure on Bed*, 1967) they always function tonally within the pictorial space. There is never any creation of colour volume as such. And strangely the whole modernist painting drama of figure and ground is largely absent from the work. To some extent that follows from Auerbach’s favoured mode being the convention of the portrait bust. Hence the dimensional container of his image is usually too claustrophobic, too spatially constricted and too compositionally monolithic to allow a figure/ground dialogue to develop. For me the comparison with de Kooning’s *Woman I* is hard to avoid*.* Famously the latter was rehearsed and revised over and over between 1950 and 1952, at the same moment when the young Auerbach and the Borough Road artists were studying with Bomberg and experimenting, merging formalized brushmarking with life-room painting. But the comparison does no favours for Auerbach. De Kooning’s brushmarks are so much more animated and allusive. They are reflexive but play depictive and cognitive games as well as the game derived from automatic writing. *Woman I* is roughly six foot by five foot. Much bigger than Auerbach’s figure paintings. Size mattered because it gave de Kooning a stage for performing the figure/ground drama even when the woman occupied most of the visual field. De Kooning grasped that the figure – and painting itself – could be approached in the spirit of myth rather than anecdote. That’s not to say that anecdotal figure painting ended with modernism. Lucian Freud and Alice Neel are surely convincing examples. But there is something anomalous and self-defeating about Auerbach’s life-long attempt to hold a kind of reflexive mark-making in an embrace with a diaristic, anecdotal drama of personal encounter.

Because of the spatial deficit in most of Auerbach’s work, his best paintings at Offer Waterman were certainly those of figures lying down. Putting aside the whole minefield of gender and the legacies of the nude, these paintings benefit immensely from the contrast between the flatness and frontality of the shapes that mark the beds compared with the oblique forshortening of the figures themselves. The drawing operation (learned from Bomberg) is a forced simplification that describes all the forms in terms of uniformly sized and paced brushmarks. With the figures lying down this becomes far more interesting and Auerbach has to be inventive, as he is in *Studio with Figure on Bed II*, 1966. He ends up with images that pitch the forshortening of the supine figures against the literal flatness and on-the-surface-ness of his homogeneous brushmarks. The results are perhaps his best work.

*London’s Post-War Art Scene: David Bomberg and the Borough Group* introduced artists that few will have heard of like Dorothy Mead and Cliff Holden and included one or two better known, like Dennis Creffield. (Oddly enough Gustav Metzger is also said to have attended Bomberg’s class, but was not in evidence here.) They mostly painted in a way that was almost indistinguishable both from early Auerbach and from each other. Quite why the class’s best-known students, (Auerbach and Kossoff) were absent from this show – and are apparently not included in the Susan Rose Collection from which the exhibition was selected – is not explained. The Dorothy Mead nudes had strong echoes of the much earlier Bomberg of *The Mud Bath* and the *Vision of Ezekiel*. And perhaps that deep connection between the products of the Borough Road class and the manner of the early cubist-influenced Bomberg was the main impression of this show. In other words, the commitment to a schematization of the human figure, and its organization into a construct of planar forms remains crucial here. However much Auerbach and Kossoff would drench that constructional scaffold in thick, encrusted paint, it would usually remain beneath the skeins as the organising principle of the image.

At this point I should come out and say that I think David Bomberg was far and away the best British painter of the twentieth century. Who else comes close? Bacon by comparison was a one trick pony and a style-monger. Freud was a brilliant anachronism. Others had their glory moments – Lanyon in the mid 50s, Hockney and Hoyland in the mid 60s, Caulfield and Riley in the early 70s. But no other British painter of the twentieth century experimented at such a consistently high level, or remained so committed to painting as inquiry, or risked such huge shifts in style or made such intense and extraordinary work in every phase of their career. Bomberg had engaged directly with cubism at the moment of its invention. His response to it in works like *The Mud Bath* and *Ju-Jitsu* was bold, ambitious and highly original. Standard art histories tell that cubism was more or less achromatic, with Leger and Delaunay the sole exceptions. But Bomberg would surely have a genuine claim to have invented a more resolved and fertile mergence of colour with the cubist armature. Later he had survived the personal and historical trauma of WW1 in large part by re-embracing his Jewish heritage and visiting Palestine in the 1920s. There he had painted superbly taut and combative topographical views of Jerusalem and its surroundings. Then in the last phase of his career he painted mostly landscapes, in an intuitive way that combined the lessons in surface geometry and planar construction of forms gleaned from his cubistic period, with the observational discipline and attention to light from his middle period. It was the latest phase that coincided with his teaching at Borough Polytechnic.

No doubt the teaching gig itself says a good deal about Bomberg’s predicament in the last years of his life (he died in 1957). In the thick of bombed out and down on its heals south London, Borough Poly was not a prestige posting, was not the Slade or the RCA or RA. And Bomberg’s paintings were not selling. At times he even had to work in the polytechnic’s kitchens to make ends meet. At the end of his life David Bomberg was a neglected and largely forgotten figure in the London art world. You might say Auerbach and Kossoff took Bomberg’s style to the bank. From another perspective, though, it was the success of his star students in the 1980s that eventually brought attention back to him, culminating in an overdue Tate retrospective in 1988.

The approaches to drawing in Auerbach and the Borough Road group link back through Bomberg to cubism and Picasso. Yet this involves a misreading of cubism, though arguably a productive one. Much as Euston Road-style painting came from a misreading of Cézanne, so the life-room teaching of Bomberg and the extended sitting approach of Auerbach’s portraits took elements of cubist drawing and placed them in a radically different context. Picasso’s drawing, after all, was forever impatient, never much concerned with the perceptual *durée*. When Picasso did want to show that he could draw a portrait with a good likeness – as in his Ingres-pastiche line drawings of Stravinksy and others in the early 1920s – he worked very much unlike a cubist and he worked fast. When he did do cubist-type or cubist-derived drawing, he was not bothered at all about sustained acts of looking or the nuances of reflected light. Cubist drawing in Picasso was anyway frequently indistinguishable from cubist designing. In other words, because it threatened constantly to return every line and shape to the literal surface of the canvas or paper, the cubist armature demanded that any drawn element of an image had to be thought and felt in terms of the overall architecture of the image in relation to its framing edges. Cubist drawing was always an architectonic drawing in this sense. With that in mind, there is something ludicrous about applying it to a painstaking and endlessly time-consuming portrait practice. As already mentioned, whereas the extenuation of the observational process in Freud’s portraits brought accumulations of detail, this is never true of Auerbach. So there is a paradox in Auerbach whereby things get revised over and again, with cancellations and removals and encrustations and palimpsests – yet the final image is always massively abbreviated. As a viewer it’s hard to know what the value of the cancelations was or why any one stage of abbreviation is preferred to another.

The abbreviation does odd things too. I suppose the sense of simplifying a face to a kind of elemental structure – or at least a worked-through trade-off between schematic line drawing and pigment mass – is meant to imply a human core separate from fleeting surface effects, a person who is more than the sum of their appearances. But the schematic drawing in Auerbach’s faces always makes me think of cartoons, of Walt Disney’s pencil drawings for Mickey or Donald. There’s something in the scaling of the marks relative to the image, and the uniformity of the brushmarks that feels like the pace and scale of a Disney figure. But this ought not to happen. The paintings aren’t supposed to carry those associations. And that wrongness, that veering off the script, is surely what Glenn Brown was reacting to in developing an entire career on the back of his *trompe l’oeil* Auerbach heads. After Brown it is now very difficult, almost impossible to engage with Auerbach’s paintings on their own terms. They point back to Bomberg and ultimately to Picasso. They also point forward to Glenn Brown. Brown’s Auerbach heads are, for me, the most complete paintings done anywhere in the world in last two decades. Brown himself will have a hard time equalling them. Last year I suggested to him that he should do more Auerbach-based paintings and I asked him why he had stopped. He said he had found limitations in working from Auerbach reproductions because the brushmarks in them were all the same size. At the time that seemed to me a surprisingly technical answer. I happen to think that Brown is right about this technical limitation, but that it is precisely the reason why it’s worth him continuing the Auerbach series. But for present discussion it provides another clue. The method of using the uniform brushstroke as a kind of unit, or common measure is key. You find it across Bomberg and his ex-students like Mead and Auerbach. It points back to the heady moment of a strident, self-assured pre-WW1 modernism when it made sense to link emancipatory politics to a technological optimism that would bless the social with the machine. The brushstrokes that measure the limbs of a nude by Dorothy Mead in the 1950s or Frank Auerbach in the 1960s have their roots in the optimistic rationalisation of the figure that Bomberg developed in the 1910s in terms of faceted geometries and grids. This is the territory he shared with Leger and the Constructivists. In this vision it was important that the human figure and the things in its environment were shown to be subjected to a common measure. This was not the vision of a Cartesian dualism of (private) mind contrasted with (public) matter. It was a vision of a public domain in which everything that occupied space, whether human figure or the gears of a mechanism, were equally present, equally material and equally engaged in the drama of constructing a world. How different Borough Road of the late 1940s, impoverished and surrounded by rubble and bomb sites, must have felt to that earlier modern dream-space. Little wonder then that this modernist human figure in painting was consigned, in Auerbach and others, to the very different private space and time of the one-to-one studio sitting. Painting will continue to attempt images of the human figure distinct from those of film or photography or the digital. Yet in a way the digital returns us to something like the Constructivist figure. Think of those contemporary digital images of crystalline bodies composed of multiple triangular facets. Don’t they have something in common with the vision of Leger, Bomberg and Lisitisky? Yes, but they lend themselves to the ideologies of the virtual and the tendency towards a simplistic division of software and hardware, a newer distribution of (im)materiality. Made with cheap tins of Stokes paint from Sheffield and paraffin for a solvent, Auerbach’s early work was also about the matter of poverty. Much as his paintings, like Bomberg’s own late paintings, evoke the debris of the exploded modernist figure of the early Bomberg, so Brown’s immaculate, surfaceless paintings portray the debris of that melancholic, material presence that Auerbach worked so hard to ritualise.

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