

£2.70
Saturday 16.05.15
Published in London
and Manchester
theguardian.com

Winner of the
Pulitzer prize 2014

theguardian

'I'm still severe enough with myself that if something is not finished I'll destroy it and start again' Frank Auerbach

The painter on working seven days a week into his 80s, Soho with Bacon and Freud, and how the art price bubble will burst
Interview by Nicholas Wroe

When Frank Auerbach looks back over his nearly 70-year career as an artist he declares himself "lucky" that it was a process that moved slowly. "You're at school and you like some reproductions in books: Van Gogh, Gauguin. Then you do a bit of painting and you think it's fairly easy. When you start doing it more seriously you soon begin to have a nice time, you meet lots of girls..." And all this, he says, comes with the heady allure of a freedom from responsibilities and the ties of a nine-to-five job. So why has he adhered to a regime over much of the last 60 years that is far more restrictive than anything an employer would impose, often working seven days and five nights a week and barely leaving the small patch of north London near the studio where he both works and sleeps?

"Well, you start to realise that painting is not quite as easy as you thought. In fact what you are doing isn't really painting at all. You gradually see how much of a historical backlog there is, and if you don't take it into account you are doing nothing more than fiddling about. At first I had to struggle to find the time to work, and then when I got a bit of time it seemed absolutely bonkers not to use it for painting. Once or twice when I was young I did try to go away for a couple of days, to Brighton or Oxford, for a break, and I just didn't know what the hell to do with myself. I felt impatient and bored. But I can be alone working in London for days on end and feel completely happy."

Auerbach is best known for his depictions of London's streets and for portraits of a regular cast of friends, family and lovers who have sat for him for decades, made with paint so thick and heavy that there was sometimes a risk of sliding off the canvas after the work has been completed. His method over the years has remained pretty

constant, time-consuming and ruthless: if he isn't satisfied with a work at the end of a day, he scrapes off all the paint into a bin and starts again, which means the final version of the painting is made comparatively rapidly.

"I hope I still have what Hemingway called the 'shit detector', that I'm still severe enough with myself if something is not finished to destroy it and start again. Although I use much less paint now than when I couldn't really afford it, 95% of it still ends up in the bin. I think I'm trying to find a new way to express something. So I rehearse all the other ways until I surprise myself with something I haven't previously considered."

It wasn't until middle age that Auerbach, now 84, found commercial success, but over the last 30 years he has been ranked alongside his friends Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud as one of the most significant postwar figurative painters and his work has been exhibited in and held by museums all over the world. This year will see a major retrospective of his work in Germany, coming to Tate Britain in October, and the publication of a comprehensive monograph. The author, Catherine Lampert, is particularly well placed to examine Auerbach's work: as well as being the curator of this year's retrospectives - and several major shows in the past - she has been a sitter for Auerbach for more than 35 years.

"I am immensely grateful and somewhat astonished that they should be prepared to sit for me absolutely regularly and reliably and quietly for two hours a week for all these years," he says. "It's quite a hard job but I hope they have the slight bonus of seeing somebody working desperately, often for years on end, to get something done, which might have its own minor entertainment value. But ultimately it's not a chore. Of course it is tiring, but it is also fantastic fun. I sometimes think of doing other things, but actually it's much more interesting to paint. It is just a marvellous activity that humans have invented and now, as I get older and can't work the hours I did when I was younger, I do sometimes think about the aged Clemenceau gazing a beautiful woman in the street in Paris and saying to his companion, 'I wish I was 70 again!'"

Auerbach was born in 1931 in Berlin into an upper middle class family descended from a line of rabbis, although his father was an engineering patent agent. He has very few memories of his childhood before coming to the UK but does recall being given a colouring book and some watercolours when he was three or four and "the feeling of the wet brush going into the colour, and then on to the page".

With the situation in Germany deteriorating, in 1939 Auerbach's parents sent him to school in England, Bunce Court in Kent, founded by a German-Jewish Quaker, "that advertised on the back of the New Statesman and where leftwing people tended to send their children when they got divorced". He never saw his parents again. Their sporadic, highly censored letters delivered via the Red Cross stopped arriving in 1943 and he learned later they had both died that year in Auschwitz.

At school Auerbach was known for both acting and painting but received

► Right: *EWOW Nude* (1952); and far right, *Rebuilding the Empire Cinema, Leicester Square* (1962)

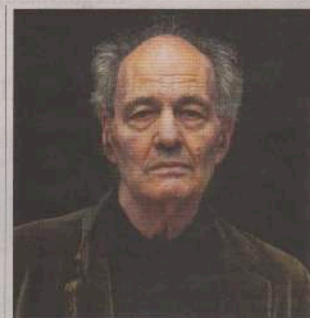


no proper tuition. "It was such a funny and marvellous school that the teachers were either too highly qualified or not qualified at all so the art master was the gardener, a man who as a pianist had been a pupil of Artur Schnabel and who was given art on the basis that he taken a sketchbook to Switzerland "when he was young."

When Auerbach left school in 1947 he had some support from his wider family but was essentially on his own in London. "I was pretty shy of talking to anybody because I had a strongish foreign accent and also - and I don't want to make too much of this - was extremely poor, so I felt I was a bit of an outsider. But people were pretty nice to me and, if you went to the cinema or to a pub, somebody would tell you about a room you could rent. There was a curious feeling that the barriers had broken down and we were all naked, bare-footed animals together, people who had survived the war."

The following year he enrolled in art school, where one of his tutors was David Bomberg, and began the process of learning to draw. "For me it was an education not in drawing the figure, but in thinking about art. I think what we call painting is basically drawing in various media. Look at Rembrandt or Ingres, drawing has changed very little, but it can go in lots of directions and is dependent on temperament and thought and the needs you have at the time. You can't lay down rules as to how it should be done."

While at art school Auerbach was also a semi-professional actor, and, when appearing in the 19-year-old Peter Istinov's debut play, *House of Regrets*, met a young widowed mother and fellow cast member, Estella Olive West, the *EWOW* of many of his portraits. "When I started painting someone whom I was physically and emotionally involved with, all my art school training helped, but I realised it was



▲ Frank Auerbach in 2014
Photograph: Antonio Zarzuela Olmos

also a completely different transaction. The business of catching her, as she felt to me to be, became far more urgent than producing a painting or drawing."

By the early 1950s, Auerbach thought his paintings of Stella represented a breakthrough, which he replicated in his pictures of postwar London. As someone living in rented rooms, he spent a lot of time out on the streets and found himself drawing the many bomb and building sites across the city. "I thought I would be modern painter doing sensational canvases with marvellous shapes and colours. Working on the streets was not what I had planned, but I realised years later that it had a certain symbolism. I had been through the war, we'd all survived. This must have in some way affected me and it seemed to be rather urgent that I try and pin this down."

In 1954 Auerbach took a studio - previously rented by his Royal College friend Leon Kossoff - near Camden Town and he has worked in the area

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ever since. But in a climate in which there were "maybe 50 artists in the country who could live by their work, and they tended to be people who painted horses", he took work in a frame moulders, and in the Kossoff family bakery on Brick Lane - "Leon would be on the expert side selling cakes, and I was on the bread side which was more straight forward" - as well as teaching in art schools.

By now Auerbach had become part of a community of artists who would meet and drink in Soho. "Iris Murdoch said the definition of a happy life is to find 13 people you find absolutely fascinating. Well, they gradually came together: there was Leon and Stella. I met Lucian and Francis and one or two poets, Patrick Kavanagh and George Barker. It was so easy to go into a pub where it was likely you would see some of your friends." In 1956 he had a successful one-man show in London, but even then, he says, "there was no prospect of success in front of us. That changed for the next generation of artists: Hockney and Kitaj leapfrogged my generation, who were still grubbing around; we didn't address the public and they did."

Even Bacon and Freud were slow to make money. Auerbach says when he first met Bacon he was "in serious debt, and when he did get money he spent it like water. He had a deeply insecure life, essentially surviving on rich people giving him money. He once said that while he never asked people for money, he made it pretty clear that he needed it. But he was also aware of his own strength and talent and perhaps foresaw, with justification, that he would become an international name. But it was only very gradually that he made more than even he could spend or gamble away."

Freud had a similar relationship with money, "but he was a gambler far more reckless than Francis. He would get into debt with people like the

Krays, which was not a healthy thing to do, and for many years he was nervous opening his door as to who might be outside. But he too must have had some sense of his own stature. Instead of selling one or two paintings cheaply, he pawned them, as Whistler had done who also spent years in debt, and so when Lucian did finally make money, he was able to get those pictures back." Auerbach recalls how, at dinner even during their darkest financial times, Freud and Bacon would be "pulling £5 notes out of their pockets and arguing over who was going to pay. But it was all done on the basis of totally bankruptcy."

Over the years, Freud became one of Auerbach's closest friends, and last year, in a development that neither man could have foreseen when they first met, 45 Auerbach paintings and drawings collected by Freud were accepted by the government in lieu of £15m inheritance tax after his death in 2011. They have now been distributed to museums across the country.

Auerbach says it wasn't until he was about 50 that he began to feel even slightly financially secure. He calls the art boom "ludicrous and overblown. It will be like the South Sea bubble and will collapse at some point", but acknowledges he has been a beneficiary and is "extremely grateful, as I think I would have been dead by now. I used to sit in my studio with an oil stove for about an hour before I could move because it was so desperately cold and damp."

Since the late 1970s, starting with a retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, he has built on his career with a successful run of major shows and shared the Golden Lion prize with Sigmar Polke at the 1986 Venice Biennale. "When I started, it was all to do with survival. So I was excited by the first show in that it felt I might survive. When I read the first good notices it felt that I might survive.

But soon my preoccupation was just to keep working. The two things I hope for now are to do more pictures and an easy death. All the rest is marginal."

The aspect of the Tate retrospective he is most looking forward to is the paintings being "sparsely hung. I recently realised that these rather bullying pictures look very much better when there is a lot of space between them." And that the show will observe only a loose chronology. "Aesthetics is more interesting than history. I wonder sometimes if people who are taught art history were asked to describe pictures, rather than put them in various sociological or historical settings of influence, how much they could say that would make somebody else see more in them. Finally what matters is whether the picture works, and that could be Giotto or Fragonard or Monet, and finally the criteria as to why it works are the same. In a way I think of a Cézanne and a Giotto being closer to each other than a Cézanne and a Pissarro."

He says the obligation to take account of the art that has gone before carries two demands: "first that you attempt to do something of a comparable scale and standard, which is impossible; second that you try and do something that has never been done before, that is also impossible. So in the face of this you can either just chuck it in, or you can spend all your energy and time and hopes in trying to cope with it. You will fail. But as Beckett very kindly said for all of us, 'try again, fail better', and painting just took me over. I started off as a superficial person who was attracted to the arts willy-nilly. The more I realised how difficult it was, the more I knew that it was a challenge, that I would feel I had wasted my life if I didn't try to grapple with it."

Francis Auerbach: Speaking and Painting by Catherine Lampert is published by Thames & Hudson on 25 May, priced £19.95. The exhibition will be at Tate Britain, London, SW1P from 9 October. tate.org.uk