

## arts

# Why Auerbach is Britain's greatest living painter

**Exhibition**

Frank Auerbach  
Tate Britain, SW1  
★★★★★

In his thick layers of paint Frank Auerbach captures our fragile souls like no other working artist, writes **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

The British art world had its nose in one book this summer. *Improbability of Love*, a novel by Hannah Rothschild, the new chairman of the National Gallery's board of trustees, was more or less a roman à clef in which everyone from museum director to minister of culture were humorously pilloried.

There was only one character who slipped through Rothschild's net. This was the mysterious artist who, amid all the money-grabbing shenanigans of his venal milieu, firmly maintained his fundamental integrity. It was the character whom art world readers can all too easily recognise as a version of the painter Frank Auerbach.

For six decades Auerbach has worked in assiduous seclusion from the fads and fashions of our fast-paced contemporary art world. Walled up in his studio in Camden, north London — like “the beast in the burrow who does not wish to be invaded” as he put it in one of his rare interviews — he has obsessively pursued his hard-fought vision. He paints either the part of London in which he lives or the family members and trusted sitters who, as they model, become ever more deeply embedded in his life.

If you do one thing for long enough you will find fame in the end. That was the lesson taught by that eccentric who for decades paraded Oxford Street with a clapboard on his back enjoining us to eat less meat and so to be less bound by sexual urges. He got an obituary when he died.

Auerbach now reaps the rewards of long years at the rock face of aesthetics. With the death of his longtime friend and fellow painter, Lucian Freud, the mantle of “Britain's greatest painter” lost its incumbent. Auerbach finds himself shoved (however reluctantly) to the front of the line. Does he merit this perhaps outmoded item of clothing?

If it's the romantic image of the solitary creator, working away in determined seclusion, that appeals then there is no doubt that Auerbach — who will work on a painting for weeks before scraping the whole lot off in a fit of dissatisfaction and starting again; who (according to his wife) has two haircuts a year and wears his clothes until they disintegrate — is the real thing.

Yet there is something less easily digestible in his paintings: chaotic accumulations of clagged-up oil pigment, smeared, swiped and twisted across the canvas, swept on in great slathers and mixed and muddied about, or applied in raw dollops, squirted straight from the tube.



From top: **Head of William Feaver** (2003); **Mornington Crescent** (1965). Below: **Self-portrait** (1958)



Is that a picture of a place or a person? It's sometimes hard to tell. Auerbach feels less like Freud's figurative successor than an heir to the American abstract expressionists — a huge spatchcocked woman by Willem de Kooning meets a visceral performance by Jackson Pollock.

Tate Britain's retrospective, which opens tomorrow, is curated for the most part by the artist. He works in collaboration with Catherine Lampert, former director of the Whitechapel Gallery, who, first sitting for this painter almost 40 years ago, has returned to her hard, high-backed chair in his studio once a week ever since. Auerbach does not intend it to be explanatory.

His hang, although structured loosely by decade, spans the career



Left: *Hampstead Road, High Summer* (2010). Above: *Half-length Nude* (1958)

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that led a little boy arriving in London by Kindertransport at the age of eight (he never saw his parents again and doesn’t even know which concentration camp they were killed in) to become an artist. At first he hung his pictures on park railings but soon found recognition in the company of Freud, Michael Andrews and Francis Bacon. (It was Bacon who, the story goes, told the Marlborough gallery that there was an extremely talented artist, so poor that he lived on potatoes and yoghurt, whom they had immediately to sign up.) He became an established painter who can sell his works for millions to museums.

The show shrugs off any plodding sense of chronology. Rather, as the artist explains with typical terseness in the catalogue, he hopes, by arranging

the works in “six distinct groups of diverse images”, to encourage visitors to consider each picture as “an absolute which works (or does not work) by itself”.

Of course you can find themes and progressions. You can see, for the first time on public display, two early figurative studies, their forms swaddled in mummifying bandages of paint. You can trace a stylistic debt to his mentor, David Bomberg, especially in the landscapes. You will notice his move to brighter colours in the 1960s.

It is disappointing to find that only one of his bombed-out London cityscapes (his first sustained attempt at exploring a single theme) is included. Even though they were shown recently in a monographic Courtauld show, they should still have

been part of this wider retrospective. Yet without these more sombre canvases, you might be more surprised to discover how luminous and celebratory Auerbach’s vision can be.

Take him at his word. Try to fix on a single canvas: admire it as a hard-fought image in its own right. Let your eye follow the sweep of the strokes that describes the twist of a muscle or the bulge of a brow bone. Notice how a sense of physical heaviness and hence atmospheric presence is built up — sometimes almost literally, almost like a sculptural relief.

See the way in which dribbles or smudges, slashes, loops or dashes, intricate brush flicks of colour or great laden splodges can touch the surface of a canvas with what feels like a constantly renewed sense of life. You can almost feel the artist’s hands running over his subject, sense his fingerprints testing out a form. It is this constantly fluid movement that his brush strokes seem to capture. An intimate space is invaded by Auerbach’s painterly touch.

Oil paint is transubstantiated from merely descriptive stuff to a material that must embody feeling. You will have to work hard to discover this. You cannot let the eye slack. Auerbach draws on the depths of perception that the complex processes of looking at a painting should involve. Far from it being superficial appearance that he seeks to reflect, it is the mood or the energy, the atmosphere or spirit. You might even think of it as its soul.

At his best Auerbach is without doubt our greatest living painter because he captures the soul, still alive and struggling, floundering like a trapped fly in the claggy surfaces of his paint.

**Frank Auerbach is at Tate Britain from tomorrow until March 13**