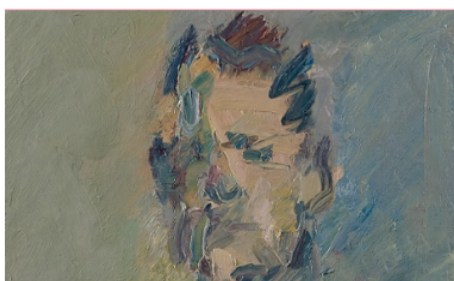


Trees that are black forks holding reservoirs of redness are scattered in a gloom punctuated by bright, white globes. This is Primrose Hill, in north London, as it looked to the painter [Frank Auerbach](#) in the winter of 1974-75. Yet it cannot actually have looked like that. Surely, the trees had bark and there would have been grass. In this turbulent painting, the grass is, on second glance, a blackening scab on the Earth's terrible wound. But it's not grass as we "know" it, because what we know about the appearance of familiar phenomena is just a cliché.

Auerbach blasts those clichés apart.



Sitting for Frank Auerbach: 'It's rather like being at the dentist'

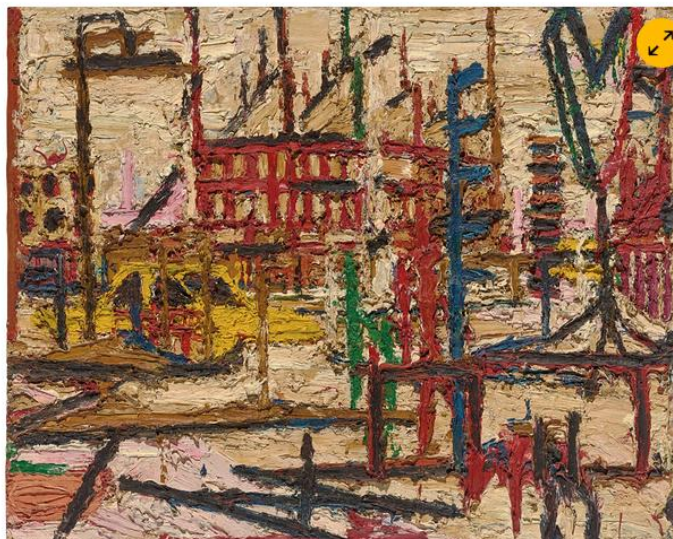
[Read more](#)

What do painters do when they look? They do not "paint what they see", not even an artist such as Auerbach who only ever paints things that can be seen - his local landscapes and the people he loves. I met one of his models viewing Auerbach's paintings at his provocative new retrospective at Tate Britain. She does not have brown smears of flesh running down her face.

For more than six decades, the 84-year-old Auerbach has been looking hard at faces and places (mostly the same faces and places, again and again), and then putting his response on canvas in crusted and caked, ridged and rippled masses of paint. Back in the 1950s, he saw very little colour in the world. Frankenstein faces loom like monsters in his early paintings. Gradually came the colours: blood red, mustard

yellow, and eventually orange, purple, blue, the lot - a rainbow slowly spreading over a London that started, for him, as a mud-brown bomb site.

Every one of Auerbach's works has the sense of someone looking intensely for a long time, then setting down what it seems to him is there. [Mornington Crescent](#), one of his regular motifs, becomes a dance of pale greens, or an orange mist, or a dazzle of skyscrapers. It morphs every time he looks at it - and that is not just a change in his own imagination. The earliest painting of Mornington Crescent in this exhibition was done in 1965, the most recent in 1997. The London he saw was convulsively, utterly changing, as it still does, from minute to minute.



The unstable nature of this monster city, which Auerbach as a painter has barely ever strayed outside of, is perhaps one way to understand his project. In a place of endless change, he seeks a rooted, natural reality. Auerbach paints with the massed forcefulness of late Constable and the desperate innocence of Van Gogh. Even in his latest works (this retrospective reveals his energy and intentness right up into this decade), he casts a child's eye on London. He perceives building sites, cars and people as visceral revelations in vistas that are like anatomical dissections of some vast twitching patient cut apart under the yellow sky. Because everything changes; nothing is forever. Primrose Hill should be permanent, but every time he gazes it is something else, suggests something else - a different slather of colours, a different emotional shudder. He himself has become different, become other.

Auerbach's series *To the Studios* is an allegory of art, a philosophical manifesto for how he paints. Every day, this indefatigable artist sets out for his studio. When he arrives, he paints the walk he took to get there. It is a subject borrowed from Van Gogh, whose self-portrait depicting him setting out for the fields, canvas under his arm as he strides along the road, was lost during the second world war. Auerbach paints the turbulent city morning, the strange rooftops, the bluff reality of it all. But reality is so hard to grasp that he has to attack it with a palette knife, rebuild it with heaps of raw colour. It slips away, and tomorrow he will try again.



From the Studios, 1987, Frank Auerbach. Photograph: Tate Britain/Marlborough Fine Art



At the heart of this ceaseless struggle to preserve a bit of reality are people - a handful of people, studied over the years. They too are ever ageing, ever growing. His paintings of people are not portraits. They have more in common with the genre known in 17th-century Holland as "tronies" - heads painted not to record individuals but to explore fantastical visages. Auerbach's heads are real (and he names individuals), but when he paints his subjects he discovers strange, contorted, shadowy intimations of something tragic and grandiose. He depicts not people as such, but the human condition. How they suffer, and how he suffers with them.

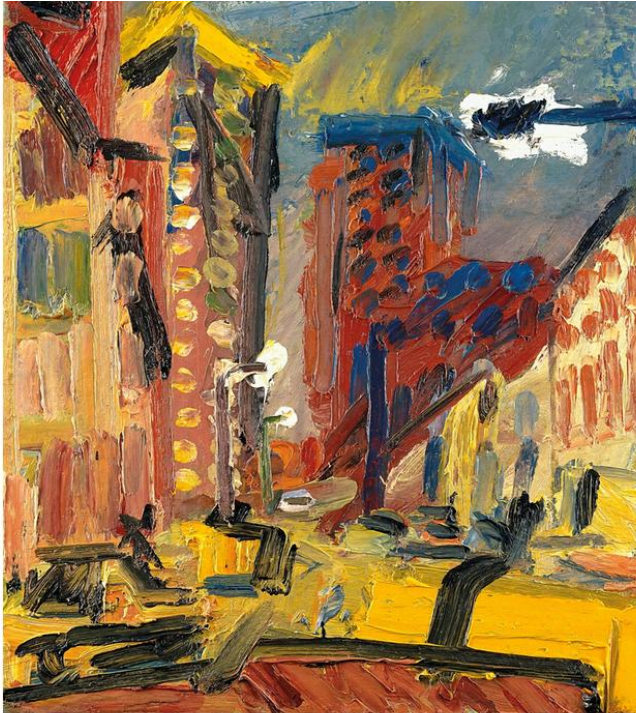


Frank Auerbach's London: the extraordinary life and loves - in pictures

[View gallery](#)

Auerbach has been closely involved in choosing the works in this retrospective - and it shows. There is something quite cussed about the way it is organised. The first room is shocking and brilliant. In the 1950s, Auerbach, whose parents were killed in the Holocaust, painted people as fly-eaten living corpses unforgivably surviving in a blasted world. These early works are some of the most uncomfortable, extreme images ever painted of the modern condition, but the exhibition tears you away from them and pushes you on, into the 60s and 70s, right up to the present. Each decade of his career gets equal billing, and the message is clear: he is a man who paints, has gone on painting, is painting still. You can see why Auerbach in his 80s might be rather insistent on this longevity and consistency. In the 90s, he was treated by some in the Saatchi-era art world as a figure from the past. The young artist Glenn Brown painted simulacra of Auerbach's style as if preserved in glossy aspic, to make a witty comment on - what, exactly? The death of authenticity, the futility of expressionism, that kind of stuff. But the joke is that while Brown was having his fun, the actual, very much living Frank Auerbach was still going to the studio, still painting, still turning things inside out to know what they are.

The shock of this show is that of seeing what it feels like to be a real painter trying to respond to the real world. It's agony, it's ecstasy. There is no security of style or trick that makes it routine to put the first bit of colour on that canvas. It never gets any easier, being Frank Auerbach.



🖼️ Mornington Crescent Looking South, 1997, by Frank Auerbach. Photograph: Marlborough Fine Art



It is precisely because he accepts the freshness and newness of the world every day, and paints it as if he'd never seen it before, that he is a true great. What will Tate Britain look like in 200 years? It may well be full of Auerbachs, alongside the works of his friends Leon Kossoff and Lucian Freud. That will be a museum worth visiting.

My generation deserve a rebuke for pretending Auerbach's genius was an outdated fashion. Instead, we get this brave and challenging lesson from the master.

It is not an easy lesson, and the refusal to explore his early work in depth is perverse. A final room contains a baffling, meandering choice of paintings that is completely anticlimactic. But the reward is to get smacked in the face by the terrifying glory of the world Auerbach is stunned by every morning. [Art](#), the master reveals, is a work that never ends and an eye that never dulls.

● At [Tate Britain](#), London, from 9 October until 13 March.