Frank Auerbach's reiterative development

Magnetism in perpetual motion

MARK PRINCE

Catherine Lampert

FRANK AUERBACH
Speaking and painting
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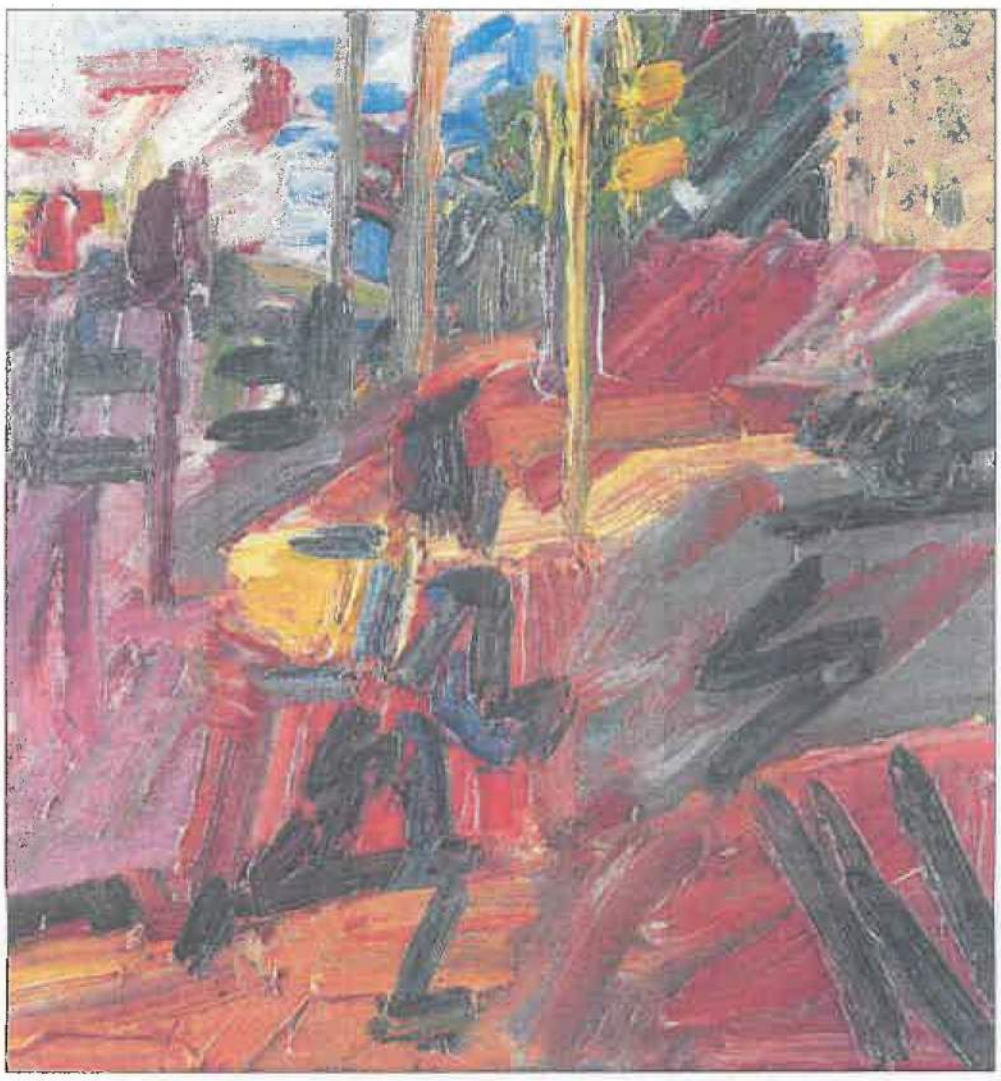

"Hampstead Road, High Summer", 2016

Born in Berlin in 1931 to Jewish parents and forced to emigrate to England, alone, at the age of seven, Frank Auerbach has always emphasized the positive results of his deracination. Describing his war years at Bunce Court, a genial boarding school in Kent run by eccentric German refugees and British conscientious objectors, he told Catherine Lampert: "we were enrolled as Wolf Cubs or Brownies and did country dancing in the hall. And so, without any conscious effort we were anglicized". Any sense of loss lurking in that last sentence is thoroughly concealed. In *Frank Auerbach: Speaking and painting*, we hear him talk of his background twice: "I don't keep anything. It may be due to my background. I absolutely believe that you keep forging on, forwards, and that if you look back you turn into a pillar of salt". Then later: "I was always aware of death because of my background. And in some curious way the practice of art and the awareness of the imminence of death are connected. Otherwise we would not find it necessary to do the work art finally does – to pin down something and take it out of time".

This paradox – of relinquishing the past while striving to capture it – also defines his relation to his subjects: fiercely holding onto them over decades in order to substitute their image and presence for painterly configurations that are close to abstractions. Transformed by paint, Juliet Yardley Mills (JYM) – perhaps Auerbach's primary model – does not look any older in 2000 than she does in 1970. A portrait may take years to complete, which makes the process a kind of relationship. Lampert, who has been sitting for Auerbach since 1978, recalls: "There is one painting from 1986 where my tears and scrunched face coincided with the last minutes when the picture emerged". Auerbach's reiterative method is based on the conviction that his deepening perception of a subject corresponds to there being more for him to paint.

It is difficult to resist the obvious implication that a need to hoard the familiar goes back to losing it in its entirety so early on. Lampert scrupulously reconstructs the events which led to Auerbach's arrival in Southampton in the spring of 1939, an evacuation organized by members of his extended family, independent of the *Kindertransport*. After boarding the *SS Washington* in Hamburg he never saw his parents again. They were deported to Auschwitz in March 1943. Lampert takes us through the cosseted Berlin childhood and the happy accidents of Auerbach's English assimilation, through to his entry into the small, incestuous London art world of the 1950s. Her accumulation of data implies a biographical approach, but once Auerbach has settled into the Camden Town studio he still occupies, the chronological thrust fragments into a series of themed sections on essential aspects of his world. From then on, he is in the studio painting – and the book becomes more abstract accordingly.

There was a period in the early 1960s when the appealing myth of belonging to a circle of artistic peers sharing beliefs and purposes – as glamorously realized by John Deakin's famous (but staged) photograph of Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Auerbach, Michael Andrews and Tim Behrens being convivial at Wheeler's restaurant in Soho – might have been a reality; but Auerbach has always resisted attempts to claim him for Englishness, Jewishness, a "School of London": "I think of painting as something that happens to a man working in a room, alone with his actions, his ideas, and perhaps his model". And indeed, among the artists in Deakin's photograph, it is only the Bacon of the 1960s, with his desire to remake a person's appearance out of what he called "non-illustrational marks", whose method is more than superficially related to Auerbach's.

Since the 70s, Auerbach has increasingly avoided society, at least outside that of his subjects, and therefore in the remit of his work. Winningly, he shrugs off any imputation of misanthropy with the claim, "I'm just having fun in the studio". But although the paucity of event justifies it, Lampert's relinquishing of biography to an art historian's anti-biographical discretion can seem close-fisted at times, especially given that Auerbach's process blurs distinctions between art-making and personal relationships. The end of chapter one covers his marriage to Julia Wolstenholme with these curt sentences and their abysses of elision: "The two became involved and married not long before their son Jacob was born in March 1958 in Sheffield. Mother and son lived on Vincent Terrace in Islington, and working there one night a week Frank finished two drawings of Julia in 1960. However, shortly after that they were no longer in regular contact, until they got together again in 1976".

The structural glue binding this book, once the drama of emigration and assimilation succumbs to the dailiness of work, is the strings of quotes which Lampert has accumulated over decades of listening to Auerbach talk while he works, which she freely supplements with quotations from him from other sources. During a conversation with William Feaver at the Royal Drawing School in 2007, he suggested that conversing with his subjects had leavened his style and softened its angular structures, as though the solemnity and stasis of the earlier portraits were contingent on their subjects maintaining their silence: "For many years . . . I didn't talk at all, and it produced a certain sort of painting of which I'm not ashamed. But . . . it seemed to me that there was something about people and their movement . . . that perhaps had slightly slipped away in these hieratic heads, and . . . I gradually found myself talking".

That he is a natural raconteur with an idiosyncratic vocabulary makes Lampert's submission to his voice work, but it has produced an "artist in his own words" kind of book. His remarks are so telling that one hardly notices that Lampert as critic rather than recorder is mostly absent. This is a pity, because when she does tackle the paintings her language is vital. She finds in Picasso's "Femme en vert (Dora)" (1943) "a moment of lightness that sometimes guides much later work by Auerbach, as well as the triangular or loopy cipher inserted into a portrait and the skewed posture that is factual". Her sinuous critical style might be an attempt to linguistically enact Auerbach's metaphor for his own process as inhabiting the subject's "three-dimensional entity. . . . in the way that an actor would don a character". (He did some serious amateur acting as a student.)

The retrospective which Lampert has curated is also in thrall to the artist's will. Six of the seven rooms at Tate Britain have been selected by Auerbach, and labelled by decade – from the 1950s to the 2000s. The seventh room, an achronological coda, is Lampert's choice. As in Cézanne or Pollock – painters whose awkward early work is barely comparable to their mature fluency – there is a bracing contrast between Auerbach's early, laborious accretion of materials, and his work after a breakthrough in the late 1960s when his paint thinned and accelerated, and lines became gestures. The leap is manifested on a wall majestically hung only with "Primrose Hill, Summer" (1968) and "Reclining Head of JYM" (1975). In the latter, absent paint mass has left an ochre-coloured shadow in the shape of the head, that is then defined in deft, fluid strokes. By scraping away the residue of solutions he deemed inadequate, Auerbach removed the burred crusts which ploughed lines through his earlier work. Gestures dart and flick unimpeded over a smoother surface.

The liberation is exhilarating. It enables Auerbach to improvise radically non-literal equivalences to his subjects' appearance. Although the heads and nude figures of the 1950s and early 60s have contours that seem permeable to the darkness surrounding them, their modelled forms and the shadowy spaces they occupy remain naturalistic. Auerbach painted kneeling in front of the model with his

canvas propped on a chair. A proximity between artist and subject is heightened by the mounds of oil which raise the subject in shallow relief. The effect is hyper-illusionistic, like looking through a fish-eye lens. But the swell of the subject beyond its physical parameters is held in check by Auerbach's formal structures. He emphazises the otherness of dense oil paint from what it represents by letting its tracks form internal patternings. The mazy, primary-coloured geometries of "Mornington Crescent" (1965) tack into a picture that is not quite naive but brilliantly innocent – with that cartoonishly boxy yellow car straddling the middle distance; while the roughness of its tan ground colour, into which the primary-coloured lines are scored, evokes the seamy urban decay of the modern city. Occasionally, abstract geometries clash with their naturalistic setting. The red lines that streak across "Primrose Hill Spring Sunshine" (1961/2/4) read as tears in the pictorial fabric. Tangles of dark strokes scribbled into a field of pale ochre represent trees on a sunlit hill, their naturalism rejecting the diagrammatic ley-lines with which Auerbach has attempted to abstract the scene.

In a essay from 1969, the critic Michael Podro – also one of Auerbach's long-term models – sought to find a compromise between these clashing modes:

> ["Primrose Hill, Autumn Morning", 1968] both at first sight and as we return to it, presents us with a violent zig-zag pattern of brushstrokes. This surface pattern and the landscape are perceptually incompatible, and we have to adjust to the point where the pattern can be "seen past" and accommodated within the configuration of trees and hills. There seems a hair's breadth between keeping the perceptual adjustment and losing it.

He concluded that the zig-zags should be absorbed into a painting's representation: "The strong paint marks considered as marks on the surface were never something with their own interest".

What Podro couldn't see in 1969 but the present exhibition reveals is that the paintings of the 60s were transitional works. Auerbach was seeking to invest in his painting's internal patterning while jettisoning its naturalism. This is the difference between offering us an image of the world in paint and inventing a pictorial equivalent which concedes its otherness from a painting's subject. The Tate exhibition triumphantly demonstrates that this tangential means of picturing can make paintings which are blatantly, emotionally direct, as if we were only able to picture something clearly by fully acknowledging that its representation is an artifice. The necessary caveat is that this transformation – like Cézanne's rendering of the Provençal landscape as a collection of hewn blocks of colour – never loses touch with the subject's specific appearance, and produces a result which is precisely contingent on it. Auerbach demands that a portrait manifests a form of likeness; in his own words, that it be "like nothing on earth, but like" its subject.

Drawing is the seed and armature of Auerbach's painting – in a sense, his paintings are always bodied-out drawings, complicated by the unpredictability of paint – and the charcoal and pencil drawings in the Tate exhibition are keys to how he represents objects without literally describing them. "Reclining Head of Julia" (1994) suspends the bone structure of his wife's head in a network of brisk, jagged pencil lines which never seem to touch the contours they imply. From the mid-70s onwards, this slight remove, both formal and chromatic, between picture and subject is consistent. Geometric notations, such as the line which zig-zags between brow, temple, cheek and jaw of "Reclining Head of JYM", no longer clash with the naturalistic forms they structure. They are part of the same metaphorical pictorial architecture. And yet their self-avowing artifice does not make the paintings abstruse or opaque. The head and shoulders of "Catherine Lampert – Profile" (1997) are bracketed by symmetrical wing-shaped strokes, a heraldic configuration that succeeds in conveying an insistent, inquisitive personality.

Auerbach has spoken of wanting to get more of the world into his paintings, and there are occasional forays into a greater inclusiveness of setting, such as the paintings of figures in suburban sitting rooms and gardens and some of the more elaborate Mornington Crescent cityscapes. But what his paintings picture for us – innocent, fabulous, but worldly – has always been defined by what it leaves out. In the early portraits of Estelle Olive West, the build-up of paint seems to pull the subject through the picture plane, paring context down to a measured distance between a young man and his lover, crested by the shine of a brow or the point of a nose. More recently, the solemnity of the isolated subject, spotlit by attention, eases up, admitting loose ends. In her own selection for the last room of the exhibition, Lampert has concentrated on the past five years. The thrusting geometries of the 1970s have ceded, in the 2000s, to something more self-effacing. Whereas the paintings of the 70s and 80s click into resolution, the late style sidles towards an image, reluctant to allow it to set. The front of an SUV crashes into "Albert Street" (2009–10) in contravention of conventional compositional logic. "In the Studio IV" (2013–14) renounces its itemization of studio paraphernalia in favour of squares of pure cobalt blue and burnt orange, at angles to one another. "Hampstead Road, Summer Haze" (2010) negotiates its way through what appears to be a foreground of an uneventfulness unimaginable in the earlier cityscapes – crammed with grids and angles – until a scatter of disparate gestures diffidently constellates into a jogger. Loops, ellipses and serpentine notations testify to the city as a place of lush vegetation as well as stacked facades. Peripheral observations and colours appear as afterthoughts, challenges to a picture's prevailing rules.

What the exhibition's heterogeneous hang doesn't quite capture is how Auerbach's serial development of a limited number of motifs, abstracted through a spectrum of versions, implies that reality lies in the gaps between paintings. It is suggested in the last room, where Lampert has hung three versions of "JYM Seated in the Studio" next to each other, all from 1988 and of an almost identical size and composition. In one, a concertinaed scribble of cadmium yellow, straight out of the tube, makes light off the floor, offsetting the figure. In another, a symmetrical ideogram is pitched in place of a torso and surmounted by a horizontal hyphen of chromium green connecting slashes for eyes. These singular notations, specific to a painting's particular pictorial solution before they are specific to the subject, tell us that none of the three is a categorical representation; reality is what their simultaneous presence can only imply, fugitive as the daylight reflecting off that linoleum floor.

The charged space between related compositions corresponds to that between the brushstrokes which compose them. The black lines incised into the yellow body of "Portrait of Catherine Lampert" (1981–2) reach out to one another, their taut magnetism in a state of perpetual motion which is both that of an internally coherent artwork and of a nervous woman on the edge of her seat. This relay of gestures forms a metaphor for Lampert's presence that is so subjective it seems that if the motion between its components ceased, it would lapse into the solipsism of abstraction. In Auerbach's words (paraphrasing Robert Frost), "Painting is like ice on a stove. It is a shape riding its own melting into matter and space; it never stops moving backwards and forwards".