

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Letter from LONDON

by Sherman Sam

Leon Kossoff

ANNELY JUDA FINE ART | OCTOBER 18 – DECEMBER 17, 2010
THIS SHOW WILL TRAVEL TO MITCHELL INNES & NASH AND LA LOUVER IN 2011.

Caragh Thuring

THOMAS DANE GALLERY | NOVEMBER 18, 2010 – JANUARY 8, 2011

Today time seems to be moving faster. A visit to Times Square isn't necessary to experience this. Just glance at your iPhone and watch the e-mails tick by; that is, we have so many distractions that slowing down seems nearly impossible. Two shows in London offer interesting perspectives on this.



Caragh Thuring. "Two Bunch Palms," 2010. Oil and gesso on linen. 164 × 227 cm.

Leon Kossoff, like his colleague Frank Auerbach or teacher David Bomberg, seems determined to accrete time into his works. Portraits and places take hold of the gallery's white walls, while a new subject, an aged, leaning cherry tree supported by two planks, provides a new star in his constellation of imagery. It is suitable subject matter for the concerns of an octogenarian painter of Kossoff's ilk. A member of the School of London, his work, and that of his colleagues, recalls a grayer, grittier, and certainly less financially sparkling London. Like Freud, Bacon, and the

others, Kossoff's artistic concern lies in the figurative, yet his results seem closer to creating a physical, painted object rather than the representation of his subject.

Like the young Cézanne, it is as if Kossoff were trying to mold the person or thing into reality with paint. Each painting here, the result of many hours and years of labor, seems to want to make manifest his sitter or object. With each image comes a pleasant but stark clash of physical matter and drawing; in some, painterly gesture serves as a form of thick drawing. In fact, if the paint were not so thick and massed, the portraits would appear to be mere sketches or schemas. They recall cave paintings, in which prehistorical artists used drawing and the undulations of the cave walls to describe animals. In fact, it is Kossoff's drawings—the bulk of which are devoted to trees—that betray his thinking. He appears to be carving space out of paper with charcoal, while simultaneously trying to conjure his subject into life.

Despite their physical mass, there is a light and airy quality here akin to Chinese brushwork. In the paintings, color also supports the separation of image from matter. It is his subtle sense of hue that allows a softness to permeate the crusty, lava-like paint. And like the Chinese painting, they walk a tight balance between being physical objects and representations. Although the images can be grasped at a glance, the geography that he has created requires time for the eye to traverse. These are not mere representations, these are things in the world.

If the production of a Kossoff requires time, then Caragh Thuring's method conveys a sense of breathless speed. Forty-six years Kossoff's junior, Thuring offers us the opposite experience: fragmentary, stuttering, a tightrope walk. By comparison her paintings are spare and sparse. Large tracts of these pictures leave the unprimed linen exposed, its bare nature juxtaposed with the loosely painted "figural" elements. In the past her fleeting imagery included figurative elements derived from art history (e.g. Manet, Titian), as well as architecture and the industrial landscape. This group is no different, though her fleeting figuration, bar one painting, seems even more elusive.

In spirit they recall early David Salle and Francis Bacon, not just in their existential appeal and schematic application of paint. Like Bacon, Thuring is intent on dancing a line between the abstract and the representational, where gravity and chance (in the form of drips and *seemingly* accidental, painterly gesture) contribute to the imagery and atmosphere. But like Salle, the Belgian seems concerned with a certain fragmentary quality that is very much a part of our daily lives, reflected here in her picture construction. There is mystery and an ungraspable quality to Thuring's pictures, balanced by the joyfulness of her painterly technique and compositional juggling. There could be a narrative, but one we'll never know—perhaps like life itself. How little does it take to make a picture, how little information do you need to convey narrative, these paintings seem to ask.

In "Two Bunch Palms," a coat rack and light switch float forlorn in the picture between two fragments of tiled floor or wall, perhaps the same one at different times. A simple white line frames the edge of the canvas, with the linen creating an instant atmosphere. There is a '70s Hockney-esque charm here. The traces of domestic life (light switch, rack) and signs of the hand (drips from the white edge) serve to remind us of a human presence via his/her absence.

Unlike the slowness, time, and labor that a Kossoff displays, Thuring's elusive fragments keep the eye unsettled. Yet despite this difference there is a shared desire for the eye to remain close to the surface. Like Kossoff, Thuring's paintings achieve a sense of materiality, though hers is brought about with a fluidity of touch and economy of means. There is an obvious pleasure that both take from the medium. There is also a demand to turn the eye away from the Blackberry and look slowly. In that sense they both stop time.