

# Auerbach: his models in focus

Exhibition shows works by the artist underlining the strong link with his sitters

by Gabriel Berner

The emotional connection between artist and sitter is at the root of all successful portraits. The Post-war artist Frank Auerbach (b.1931) certainly knows this.

Famed for his visceral, psychologically probing and densely impastoed portrait heads, the German-born British painter has used only a handful of dedicated models over a career spanning seven decades.

Exploring this link is the focus of a new exhibition at London gallery **Piano Nobile** in Holland Park where portraits of all the artist's major models will be on display.

"Every work in our show has an intensity borne of long sittings, sometimes lasting over a year, and we wanted to emphasise the special role played by his dedicated models – 'the sitters' – who made this art possible," says the gallery's founder and executive chairman, Robert Travers.

The show, which runs from September 23-December 16, contains over 40 paintings and drawings spanning 64 years of Auerbach's career and includes one recent painting of his wife made during the pandemic lockdowns.

Some of the works have not been seen in public for 40 years, including several last shown in Auerbach's 1986 *Venice Biennale* exhibition.

Although many are loaned from private collections, around a third of the works are for sale including etchings, drawings, and oils. Prices range from tens of thousands to seven figures.

### Refugee to Britain

Born in Berlin in 1931, Auerbach came to Britain in 1939 as a refugee escaping Nazi Germany. His parents were both killed in concentration camps.

For over half a century he has lived and worked in London, focusing on people and the urban landscapes near his studio in Camden Town.

"He is one of the great British painters of the 20th and 21st centuries, counting Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Leon Kossoff and RB Kitaj among his friends and equals," says Travers.



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*Frank Auerbach: The Sitters* at Piano Nobile includes over 40 paintings and drawings with around a third of the works for sale. Prices range from tens of thousands to seven figures.

1. *Head of Laurie Owen I* (1973) by Frank Auerbach, 2ft 8in x 18in (81 x 71cm) oil on paper, is for sale at Piano Nobile.

2. *Reclining Head of Julia* (2020) by Auerbach, a 20in (51cm) square acrylic on board for sale.

3. *Head of E.O.W.* (1956) by Auerbach, a 2ft 6in x 22in (76 x 56cm) charcoal and chalk on paper loaned for Piano Nobile's exhibition. The initials stand for his partner Stella West.

According to the gallery, the exhibition is the most significant display of Auerbach's work held in the capital since Tate Britain's major retrospective in 2015 and coincides with two new publications on the artist released by Rizzoli and the Paul Mellon Centre.

"It's seven years since Auerbach was the subject of a dedicated exhibition in London and public appreciation of his work has been growing over this time," says Travers.

In recent years, Auerbach's Post-war portraits have also grown substantially in value on the secondary market.

A watershed moment for his prices came at the David Bowie sale at Sotheby's in 2016 when a bidding war

ensued for his *Head of Gerda Boehm* (1965). The thickly painted oil on board, one of his most emotionally charged works, went on to sell for £3.25m, a dramatic increase on both the £300,000-500,000 estimate and the £48,000 Bowie had paid for it at Christie's in May 1995. (Incidentally, the picture sold again in the same rooms this summer for a new artist's record of £3.4m.)

### Lover and sitter

Back to the Holland Park show where sitters include Stella West, Auerbach's lover for many years, who sat for him most often between the 1950s and the 1970s.

Portraits of friend and professional model Julia Yardley Mills, who sat regularly between 1957-97, and his cousin Boehm between 1961-82, also feature, as does a recent portrait of art historian and curator Catherine Lampert who has sat regularly for Auerbach since 1978 when she

organised his retrospective at the Hayward Gallery.

Also on display are eight previously unpublished photographs showing the artist in his paint-encrusted studio in Mornington Crescent where he has lived and worked since 1954.

The photographs were taken by the Contemporary photographer Nicola Bensley and come in editions of 25. They are being sold as a set or individually.

A fully illustrated publication offering an overview of the artist's portraiture accompanies the exhibition and includes a comprehensive list of his sitters for the first time.

An essay by the art critic William Feaver describes the experience of sitting for Auerbach, while an interview from 2001 with Martin Gayford outlines the artist's intentions and process. ■

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