

Exhibitions

The first museum exhibition to explore the relationship between Leon Kossoff and Chaim Soutine is a study in affinity and difference



Soutine | Kossoff
Hastings Contemporary
1st April–24th September

by JAMES CAHILL

In 1943 – the same year that a sixteen-year-old Leon Kossoff (1926–2019) enrolled at Saint Martin’s School of Art, London – Chaim Soutine (1893–1943) died at the age of fifty. Although the two artists never met, they shared a heritage: both were Russian Jews living in Western Europe. Kossoff grew up in London as the son of Ukrainian parents, and Soutine, who was born in the small Belarusian town of Smilavičy, settled in France. They also shared an artistic sensibility – expressionist and yet realist – which is the primary focus of the exhibition under review. Curated

by James Russell, it forms a European counterpart to the exhibition *Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint* at the Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, in 2021.¹ Including some forty paintings, the present display is a study in affinity – a tracing of analogous styles and rhyming moods – and a demonstration, at the same time, of difference. There are many ways in which the two artists are not alike, Soutine’s realism tipping towards the picaresque at times, while Kossoff’s is always closer to the kitchen sink. It is perhaps on this basis – a desire to underline the distinctness of each – that the exhibition proceeds as a series of discrete presentations, focusing on one artist in each of the seven galleries.

The opening room includes the paintings that Soutine made after discovering Céret, a town in the

1. *Paysage aux cyprès*, by Chaim Soutine. c.1922. Oil on canvas, 64.8 by 83.8 cm. (Private collection; exh. Hastings Contemporary).

foothills of the Pyrenees, in 1918. The artist had left his hometown at the age of twenty to study at Vilnius Drawing School, before joining the great migration of Jewish artists to Paris in 1913. His fluid, metamorphic scenes of the southern French landscape caught the eye of Albert C. Barnes, who bought fifty-two works by Soutine in 1922, securing the artist’s reputation. Having been instructed in Vilnius to paint from life, he began to twist and distort the reality of what he saw. There is a lurching, almost drunken topsy-turvydom to the trees and houses in *Paysage aux cyprès* (Fig.1), for example, and yet the sense of a real place – witnessed and felt – persists. The buildings seem to spring from the turbulent foliage, cavorting like animate beings amid nature. In *Le mas passe-temps, Céret* (c.1920–21; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh), dark trees overrun a huddle of houses like a tidal surge. The colours are redolent of ‘rather dark semi-precious stones, peridot green and jargon brown, bloodstone and a suggestion of amethyst’, as Monroe Wheeler wrote in his text for the catalogue of Soutine’s exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1950.² Soutine’s Modernism, then as now, came with a romantic glister.

More conventional, at a glance, is *L’Arbre de Vence* (c.1929; private collection), in which an ancient ash tree looms in deep-blue silhouette against a cobalt sky, recalling the complex structures of Piet Mondrian’s trees, but striking a wilder, more emotive note. The external world provides a correlative for the artist’s interior. The private significance of the Vence paintings – Soutine made around twenty of the same tree – finds confirmation in an anecdote related by his chauffeur at the time. When an onlooker in the Riviera town approached Soutine too closely, the artist destroyed the unfinished picture. Eventually, he worked in a secluded corner of the town square, with his car parked as a barrier to keep gawkers away: ‘this tree is like a cathedral’, he confessed.³

An altogether different sense of place is established by the works of Kossoff. In the second gallery are

2. *Railway landscape near King's Cross, dark day*, by Leon Kossoff. 1967. Oil on board, 123.5 by 170 cm. (Private collection; exh. Hastings Contemporary).

three large paintings from the 1960s and 1970s that bear witness to the post-war decimation and rebuilding of London. As in Soutine's visions of France, each scene appears subject to a destabilising metamorphosis that transcends the literal subject. And yet Kossoff's paintings feel of a piece with the everyday. He excavates the disorder that lurks everywhere in the ordinary world, or rather in the workings of perception. Buildings fractured by bombing are modelled in granular impasto, but the paint – in all its furrowed, pitted physicality – has a way of assailing the image, subjecting it to a heat-ripple distortion. Kossoff discovered the work of Soutine around the same time as that of Willem De Kooning (1904–97), in the 1950s. This was also the decade in which, with Frank Auerbach (b.1931), he began to depict

bomb sites. Kossoff admired Soutine's Céret paintings and *Railway landscape near King's Cross, dark day* (Fig.2) carries an echo, incidental yet vivid, of the sky that filters through the branches of Soutine's ash tree. Both artists treated landscapes – and to some extent human subjects – as sites of visual and emotional turbulence.

But is there much more to be said? The separation of the two artists into discrete galleries may spring from a desire to avoid too-easy comparisons, demanding that viewers regard each artist on his own terms, but this has the effect, ultimately, of undoing the show's premise. The singularity of each artist, his immersion in his own place and period, begins to outweigh any deep or material sense of likeness. The strength of the exhibition, which is sensitively selected and deftly hung, is also its weakness, with each gallery

possessing a stronger logic and unity than the show overall.

One point that the show affirms is that Kossoff is a London painter. The highlight of the display, and perhaps of his career, is *Children's swimming pool, autumn afternoon* (1971; Tate), in which crowded bodies are interspersed with blue to suggest a mundane riposte to Tiepolo. The noise, light and turmoil of the pool pulse out, undimmed after five decades – intensified, if anything, by the jolt of nostalgia that the scene produces.

The exhibition provides concise yet vivid selections of each artist's portraits, which are selected from different moments in their lives. Kossoff's subjects, even more so than his urban scenery, could be described as sculpted; they are modelled and pared into schemata. In *Sally in armchair, no.1* (Fig.4), the crudeness





of the rendition imparts a cartoonish quality to the figure: eyes, nose and mouth are mere blobs of brown on a grey face. And yet there is a melancholic edge, both in the figure's downturned mouth and in the trenchancy of the paint. In his best works, Kossoff's medium achieves an elusiveness of mood – an impression of the subject's resistance to being captured. The same sombre quality characterises several of Soutine's portraits. A critic for *The Times*, when reviewing an exhibition of Soutine's works in London in 1947, remarked on their 'mood of anguish'.⁴ Tellingly, these are paintings of nameless and unknowable subjects – people who hover between types and individuals. *Le rouquin* (c.1917–19; private collection) survives from a period that Soutine largely expunged from his corpus; as Russell observes in the catalogue, 'If he considered a painting a failure he would destroy or mutilate it' (p.20). It shows a young morose man wearing a smoking jacket and sitting erect in a chair, his angular frame and elongated hand providing accents to his near-monochrome face. *Maternité (piéta)* (Fig.3), possibly Soutine's last painting, dates from c.1942, when he was in hiding in Vichy France. Again, there is a mask-like stasis to the face of the mother that

3. *Maternité (piéta)*, by Chaim Soutine. c.1942. Oil on canvas, 64.1 by 53.5 cm. (Private collection; exh. Hastings Contemporary).

4. *Sally in armchair, no. 1*, by Leon Kossoff. 1987. Oil on board, 67.5 by 61 cm. (Private collection; exh. Hastings Contemporary).

holds the force of the picture at bay, just as the baby she holds seems poised between sleep and death.

In this and many portraits by Soutine, the impression is of a plotless chronicle – of people fashioned into dramatis personae. Writing in the catalogue, Russell notes the portraits' 'distinctive balance of awkwardness and grandeur' (p.12).⁵ By contrast, Kossoff's depictions of people and city alike become windows into his life – records of his personal observations, encounters and preoccupations. Often, their impact derives not simply from the interaction, or collision, of subject and paint, but from a sense of the immediate vision subsuming time and memory into itself. The leitmotif of Kossoff's later career has been Christ Church, Spitalfields, London, which he used to walk past every day as a boy. In the late 1980s, he read about the church in Peter Ackroyd's novel *Hawksmoor* (1985) and returned repeatedly to the area to draw it. In *Christ Church, Spitalfields* (1989; private collection) the Baroque building

seems to swerve out of the frame of the picture. It is as if the world has spun off-kilter, or simply shifted in tandem with the artist's tilting head.

This show is a coup for a regional gallery of Hastings Contemporary's size, not least in the number and range of Soutine canvases, which include numerous loans from the United States. The display shies away from enacting a dialogue, but in so doing, it reveals two artists who were as different as they were alike – and showcases each at the height of his powers.

¹ S. Fraquelli and C. Bernardi, eds: exh. cat. *Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint*, Philadelphia (Barnes Foundation) and Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie) 2021–22, reviewed by Merlin James in this Magazine, 163 (2021), pp.958–61.

² M. Wheeler: exh. cat. *Soutine*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 1950, pp.31–111, at p.52.

³ Chaim Soutine, quoted in P. Courthion: *Soutine: Peintre du Déchirant*, Lausanne 1972, p.93. See A.W.G. Posèq: 'Trees and cathedrals in Soutine', *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 17 (1997), pp.25–33.

⁴ 'Soutine's paintings', *The Times* (13th May 1947), p.6.

⁵ Catalogue: *Soutine / Kossoff*. Edited by James Russell, with a contribution by Simonetta Fraquelli. 128 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (Hastings Contemporary, 2023), £20. ISBN 978-1-916066-51-9.

