

# A New Individualism: Post-war British Painting

On a trip to Russia in the spring of 2013 I visited The State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow for the first time and found myself admiring Nikolai Ge's "*What is truth?*" (1890), Ilya Repin's *Religious Procession in Kursk Province* (1880-83), Valentin Serov's *Girl with Peaches* (1887), Vasily Surikov's *Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy* (1881) and a room full of pictures by Vasily Vereshchagin. Here was a museum containing art by master painters whose output spoke with a resonance which moved me deeply, and as a British painter whose own work focuses on socio-political subjects, I found myself feeling simultaneously ashamed that I'd never heard of these great artists, whilst at the same time being intensely captivated by their work. Most of these painters had been part of a group known as 'The Peredvizhniki' or 'Wanderers', they were artists who had decided to break away from the creative traditions and limitations of the Academy and its exacting separations between low and high art. Instead they had decided to set their own agenda. As artists they were often critical of social injustice, yet they also wanted to celebrate the simple beauty and dignity they found in peasant life. This led me to reflect on the many parallels I saw between the Peredvizhniki and post-war British painting, especially 'The School of London', as both groups defied conventional attitudes and artistic fashions in favour of pursuing their own programme which often focused on the politics of human experience.

The painting which left the greatest impression on me at the Tretyakov was Vereshchagin's *The Defeated* (1878-9) which forms part of a series of works he made that meditate on the atrocities of war. Beautifully portrayed, *The Defeated* depicts a large empty meadow in autumnal colours; on the left hand side stands an Army Officer holding a cap and book in his hands, whilst in front of him a Priest waves incense over the ground. Clearly this is a former battlefield. Both men look down, apparently humbled by thoughts of what preceded them. Only slowly do we begin to notice the dead bodies of soldiers lying hidden among the seed heads of the field. The Officer and Priest, although defined by the social positions which confer a power upon them, appear personally affected as human beings. This reminds us that what occurs in the world has an impact on us; that events generate feelings, and in turn those feelings require our attention. In this case it is the Priest who mediates both our emotions, and those of the soldier left behind, as we consider all that has been lost through conflict. Vereshchagin has achieved a remarkable accomplishment with *The Defeated*: he has created a post-war meditation that appears both personal and political.

When looking at paintings like those by Vereshchagin we come to realise that artists do not produce their work in visionary isolation, but as part of a broader social dialogue which reflects their experiences simultaneously as individuals and as members of a society. It seems to be in the nature of many of the best artists that they remain at odds with their communities, not simply accepting social

norms, but instead questioning prevailing attitudes and contesting orthodox opinion. It is perhaps this 'outsider' quality which nurtures pre-eminent artistic vision. And just as Vereshchagin challenged the wisdom of war in *The Defeated*, in the following century the London based painter Francis Bacon confronted the conventions of the Church when he produced *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953). While Bacon used Velasquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X as his starting point, we can observe many differences from the original portrait which Velázquez undertook in 1650 whilst visiting Italy from his native Spain. Velázquez's likeness of the Holy Father depicts the head of the Catholic Church clothed in the red robes of office, seated on a red cushioned chair, which is in turn set against red drapes. The Pope's face appears stern; perhaps in consideration of the matters of state, perhaps of the painter before him. Pope Innocent X was born Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, he trained as a lawyer and became head of the Catholic Church in 1644. Yet in Velázquez's portrait there is little hint of the person behind the position. Here Pope Innocent is defined clearly by his religious role; a man bequeathed the power to make decisions which affect the lives of others. It is a painting of the man as office.

For Bacon however, despite the subject being the same, everything else has changed. The Pope's red robes have been rendered purple, the draped background transformed into streaked black paint and the Holy Father's silent stare transfigured into a primal scream. Where Velázquez has rendered a man of organisational responsibility defined by his religious duty, Bacon has sought to visually tear away at the edifice of office and reveal instead the vision of a tormented subconscious. This is a painting of man first and office second. *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* was painted in the same year as Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, yet the customs which help create a sense of institutional solidity for State and Church have ceased to function effectively for Bacon. The visual cues which enabled Velázquez to define the social strength and power of the Church have been subverted here to give a very different message, one which is perhaps more post-Christian than anti-Church. Bacon's picture gives visual expression to a philosophy that we inhabit a seemingly meaningless universe which is either hostile or indifferent to us; one in which we are effectively alone. It is a vision where the individual has little or no control over external events, events which have the potential to provoke powerful human emotions. For Bacon, the clothes of office create nothing more than a façade of power and are useless against the terrors of life.

Although born in Dublin, Francis Bacon spent most of his life living and working in London and his existentialist view found further artistic voice amongst a nucleus of artists who gravitated around him and became known as the 'School of London'. They included Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, R. B. Kitaj and Leon Kossoff. Interestingly, as a group they are mainly expatriate. Whilst Michael Andrews was born in Norfolk, Frank Auerbach was born in Berlin, the son of a Jewish patent lawyer; he escaped to Britain from Nazi persecution in 1939 with almost 10,000 mainly Jewish children on the Kindertransport. R. B. Kitaj was born to Jewish parents in Ohio and moved to England in 1958 to study art at the Ruskin School, Oxford. Lucian Freud, the grandson of Sigmund Freud, was born in Berlin and also moved to England to escape the Nazis, becoming a British citizen in 1939, whilst Leon Kossoff was born in London in 1926, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants.

What we notice when we look at these post-war London painters collectively is that they identify as part of a diaspora, of being distinguished as a group of 'outsiders' to their adopted community. We also observe a distinct lack of a cohesive visual style in their collective body of work. What they have in common is a rejection of the vogue for American abstract-expressionist painting which was prevalent at the time, and instead a pre-occupation with figurative painting which was considered deeply unfashionable. The School of London were instead united in a desire to forge their own route which sought to use the medium of paint as a metaphor for the emotional, which in its turn becomes a philosophical expression of existentialism. For Bacon and his circle, painting acts as a way to meditate on human experience, but it is human experience largely reduced to individualism. For this group the role of the state and community as a subject has been set aside, something we witness in their preoccupation with painting the single human figure. Indeed they often produced paintings of each other such as Auerbach's *Portrait of Leon Kossoff* (1953), Kitaj's *Synchromy with F.B. - General of Hot Desire* (1968-69), Freud's *Portrait of Frank Auerbach* (1975-6), Kossoff's self-portrait *Leon Kossoff* (1981) and Andrews's *Self-portrait* (1988).

An important influence over many of these post-war British artists was the painter David Bomberg who taught both Auerbach and Kossoff at the Borough Polytechnic in London. Bomberg was born in Birmingham in 1890, being the seventh of eleven children of a Polish-Jewish immigrant leatherworker. He enjoyed considerable early success in the United Kingdom as an avant-garde painter and was closely allied to Wyndham Lewis and the British Vorticist movement. In this context, Bomberg embraced the work of Italian Futurism and produced a series of paintings which reduced the human figure to angular, mechanistic forms which sought to express a dynamism he saw in modern industrial life. However all this changed for him with the onset of the First World War. In 1915 Bomberg signed up to serve with the Royal Engineers, and his subsequent experiences at the Front brought about a profound shift in how he wished to continue his work as an artist.

After the Armistice of 1918 Bomberg's desire to paint man and machine in correlation totally evaporated. He now desired to negate the traumas of war, and sought to separate man and machine in his work, returning instead to nature and the pursuit of painting directly from life. In this new mission he spent long periods travelling to Palestine and Spain where he undertook a series of highly representational and intricately observed panoramas which resulted in works such as *Jerusalem looking to Mount Scopus* (1925) and *San Justo, Toledo, Spain* (1929). These paintings appear to be a desire made manifest in Bomberg to see a post-war paradise free of conflict, a place of escape from the modernity he had previously embraced. These people-less landscapes were followed by a series of highly personal studies of his own face, again drawn from direct observation, which resulted in paintings such as *Self Portrait* (1937) in the National Galleries of Scotland. Less joyful and naturalistic than his landscapes, the visual plasticity and thick application of the paint in these compositions appears to act more as a metaphor for Bomberg's own internal emotions than a straightforward rendering of surface form. And as Vereshchagin, Bomberg uses painting to meditate on his feelings about what war has done to people, but unlike Vereshchagin he uses himself as his

subject. And it is in this sense that Bomberg appears as a precursor to the figurative works of the generation of British painters who followed him.

Just as Bomberg had, several in the School of London also sought to paint from direct observation, making it a cornerstone of their practice, and like Bomberg before them, they produced paintings which largely fell into the two broad traditional categories of figure painting and landscape studies, the latter of which include Auerbach's *Primrose Hill, Spring Sunshine* (1961 – 62), Kossoff's *View of Dalston Junction* (1974) and Freud's *Two Plants* (1977-80). In this way the School of London painters sought to arrive at a personal understanding of their own place in the world. For a predominantly Jewish group living in the wake of total war and revelations of the Holocaust, the reductions to individuality seem to be a natural response to mass trauma. In this sense they also work in close parallel with Vereshchagin, as when we recall *The Defeated* we remember his Officer and Priest and notice that the latter is there to help give some form of guidance to an unstructured sense of loss. His direction is silent and designed to create a reflection which doesn't ask us to intellectualise our thoughts on war, but instead to deliberate our emotional responses to its aftermath. But where Vereshchagin considers the larger social condition and asks us to contemplate what we the viewer might feel, the post-war London painters appear to be reduced to concerns based specifically on their own experiences regardless of our thoughts.

By the mid 1980's the existentialist examinations of the post-war London painters were adopted and further cultivated in Britain in the work of a small number of artists who include Tony Bevan, Hughie O'Donoghue and the Portuguese born Paula Rego. And it is in the pictures of Rego especially that we begin to notice a desire to move from the specifically personal to a reconnection more broadly with ideas around social experience. For example, in her *Dog Women* series, we see a sequence of women depicted in a range of canine poses, whilst in works such as *Triptych* (1998) Rego presents us with stark images of young women undergoing abortions in non-medical environments. This deliberate subversion of traditionally feminine imagery, one where we might normally expect to see women painted as nude models, wives, mothers or characters from Greek tragedy, has allied Rego's work closely with feminist thinking. It acts as a precursor to the fostering of a more socio-political engagement by British artists at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, one which is more closely aligned to the *Peredvizhniki* and their interest with identifying with the lives and hardships of others. This is something we find in the work of painters such as Gillian Carnegie, Simon Carter, Nathan Eastwood, Nick Middleton, Carol Rhodes and George Shaw. These artists are both exploring the material of paint as a metaphor for the emotional in the tradition of the School of London, and simultaneously seeking to explore the politics of everyday experience in a manner analogous to the 'Wanderers' in nineteenth century Russia.

A beautiful example of this is found in Nathan Eastwood's *A Man after Ilya Repin's own Heart* (2011) which forms part of a series of black and white works focusing on observations of banal daily life in East London. Here we see a painting of a man clearing snow from the path which leads up to his front door. He stoops, brush in hand, in front of a modest home with a narrow front garden and net

curtains in the window. Eastwood has made the mundane tasks of humble domestic life his theme, and like Vereshchagin's *Officer and Priest*, Eastwood's figure is caused to look down by the task in hand. But unlike the subjects in *The Defeated*, Eastwood's citizen is not a man of high status disturbed by momentous historical events, he is merely an unassuming individual affected by the weather. His is not a profound meditation, simply a mundane undertaking so that the world might have access to his home and he to the world. I asked Nathan Eastwood about the title to this painting and why he had specifically cited Ilya Repin and he replied: "I place an emphasis on making art about the domestic space, allowing the integration of real life into my painting. Ilya Repin designed his own home and it had a political purpose to him, his house embodied his political values. What is fascinating is that Repin was wealthy enough to employ an army of servants, but chose not to. Instead he undertook all the tasks that a servant's job would cover. He would proudly shovel snow away from his porch without any help. His politics were real to him and he lived them in the habits of his daily life."<sup>i</sup>

The snow sweeper in Eastwood's *A Man after Ilya Repin's own Heart* is an ordinary citizen living an ordinary life. He is simultaneously a direct reference to Ilya Repin and the proletariat; he is an everyman, a person of dignity who takes on the trials of life whether big or small, as best he can. And perhaps this is a core concern that painters from 19<sup>th</sup> century Moscow to 21<sup>st</sup> century London share: that what is most important is the politics of being human, and that the events of the world, both big and small, have an impact on us, they generate our emotions. And although we may not be able to control the affairs of the world at large, or the emotions we might experience in their wake, we are all able to make decisions as individuals about how best we respond to them.

Robert Priseman, 2014

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<sup>i</sup> From a conversation with Nathan Eastwood on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2014