

5 Frank Auerbach

Outside In Workshop Pack

As part of the Step Up training scheme for marginalised artists, several people took part in a research programme, to explore in detail a work in the collection at Pallant House Gallery with which they experienced some connection. Through guided and individual research, discussion groups and creating art in response to their findings, extensive materials were produced to form the basis of a series of workshop packs. These packs are a starting point for workshops delivered by Step Up artists under the umbrella of Outside In.

This pack was compiled from research by artist Stephen J. White who chose to focus on the work of Frank Auerbach.



Frank Auerbach, *Portrait of James Kirkman*, 1978–79
© The Artist, Private collection



Frank Auerbach, *Head of Sheila Fell*, 1954
© The Artist, Private collection

Frank Auerbach was born in Berlin in 1931. At the beginning of the Second World War his Jewish parents sent him to England to escape the Nazis as part of the Kindertransport programme. He was only seven years old and was never to see his parents again. Remaining behind, they died in concentration camps.

After the war Auerbach went to art school, studying at St Martin's School of Art from 1948 to 1952 and attending night classes at Borough Polytechnic under David Bomberg. During this period he made a good friend in Leon Kossoff. From 1952 to 1955, Auerbach studied at the Royal College of Art.

Auerbach lives a very reclusive life, dedicating himself to painting. He has strictly regimented visits by sitters that come on planned days of the week. He lives surrounded by paint and his paintings and has had the same North London studio since the 1950s. He has been married and has a son.

An interview with the artist

There are similarities in the art of Frank Auerbach and my work. As an exercise in exploring the ideas and techniques surrounding his art, I answered the questions asked of Auerbach in an interview by Catherine Lampert. 'A Conversation with Frank Auerbach' appeared in the Arts Council's Auerbach exhibition catalogue, published in 1978.

Have you an awareness of the racing of time?

At first I explore the subject matter and get it set in my mind, then beginning, I stand in front of the canvas and imagine the painting on it. My eyes flow around the surface, time turns to something like collections of phrases in music slowly reaching a crescendo. When I have explored the canvas with my eyes I lay my hands on it and map out the composition. In doing this time has no meaning, it has only form. Then I begin to mix the paint, thick white paint with some colour. I map out the picture once again with the paint. If there is sense of time it is combined with flowing of the brush over the painting, darting from pallet to canvas, sometimes stopping to extract paint from the tube. The picture evolves, sometimes glancing back at the subject matter, time is a blur. It suddenly comes to a point it is finished, and I stand back and look at the almost finished work. I am now aware of time and I make some finishing marks to bring the picture to life. Time is measured in motion, you could say it was the time it took to transfer the paint from pallet to canvas but it is far more complicated than that. There is the spirit of the world mixed into my creation and it is hard to say where it came from.

When you begin a painting what are you hoping to be able to put on the canvas?

This is a hard question for me, I could be flippant and say paint, but in some ways that it is my intention. I find it easier to paint from some subject matter even if it is imagined. I want to create a drama on the canvas. I want the viewer to have some understanding of what I have portrayed. I hope they can see what I have imagined, but I tell myself this is not important. I think you can see this confusion in my work. There is a finish to the work, it is strange, it suddenly comes upon me, that is it. I want people

to commune with me in the creation of the painting, but I understand people will bring their lives to my work.

Does the finishing of a picture always involve a concentrated period of anxiety and frustration?

I do suffer from the thought of peer pressure. The thought "Can people see what I have painted?" But I think I have the strength to say it is my picture and it is finished when I say it is. It is hard to say where this idea of finished comes from. You could say the ultimate finish is when the painting becomes itself, what you are portraying.

Do you have a specific feeling about oil paint, that it is direct and mentally you are handling it with your mind and fingers as much as with the brush?

As I have said before I paint the picture in my mind with my eyes before I start putting paint on the canvas. As far as using my finger to paint, it is when the brush is not doing what I want. It is often frustration that leads me to rubbing it out, hoping something will appear that pleases me. The idea of painting with one's hand is like going back to the start of art and primitive man.



Frank Auerbach, *Head of Julia II (Portrait of Julia II)* 1985
© by permission of the artist, courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art

Ways of Working for a Charcoal Portrait



Materials

- Thick white paper
- Putty rubber or coarse ink rubber
- Charcoal – a variety of sizes is most useful
- Fixative or hairspray
- Masking tape
- Drawing board.



Method

1. Select a subject for your portrait.
2. Tape a sheet of paper to a firm board. This holds the paper in place whilst you work on it.
3. Rub charcoal all over the the paper, coating the entire sheet, the thicker the better.



4. Consider the sitter or your subject and gently rub the charcoal away with a rubber where the mid-tones or greys will be.
5. Continue to remove the charcoal, working towards producing lighter tones until you reveal the highlights.



6. If you rub away too much, you can add more charcoal. Experiment in this way, moving different areas of tone to achieve your final result.



7. Use the charcoal to add definition to your portrait.
8. When complete, your portrait can be protected using a fixative or hairspray as a cheap alternative.



- As you can see it is advisable not to wear your best clothes when working with charcoal.

Reflections on Auerbach's *Reclining Head of Gerda Boehm*

When I first saw Auerbach's work I thought it was all about the tactile paint, painted with strong impasto marks. I have later learned by reading about him, that the work is very much about the portraying of the object or more importantly the sitter.

Auerbach applies the paint many times and scrapes it off until he gets the impression he wants. He says sometimes he comes back to what he had in the first place, but it is important he explores the subject matter. The paintings are made over many sittings, some over years. He knows his sitters very well and paints and draws them many times.

Frank Auerbach pulls the sitter out of the canvas, the paint seems to reach out, it is alive. There is a connection: sitter - paint, sitter - artist. The marks are inter cut with scraping off, leaving a shadow of what was there before. The paintbrush cuts through the layers, parting the waves. It clings to the surface like a viscous gel.

I have been looking at the picture *Reclining Head of Gerda Boehm* (1982). The model for this painting was Auerbach's elderly cousin and only surviving relative in England.

Speaking to people, they have varied views on the painting, ranging from "it is like the paint on my garden fence" to "very scary and reminds me of death" and "I would not have it on my wall at home". I can also see these things in the painting, but to me I can feel the man painting the picture with his bold marks and the oozing paint. I feel I can see Frank in his picture. I can see a spontaneity but I know it is formed through a reparative destroying and repainting. I feel he is a very anxious man that needs order in his life, but his pictures seem to say something different. If you did not know the process in creating it you would say it is all about freedom and spontaneity.



Stephen J. White working on a study based on Frank Auerbach's painting *Reclining Head of Gerda Boehm*, 1982

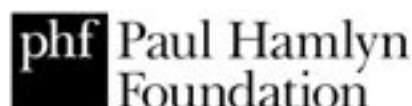


Frank Auerbach, *Reclining Head of Gerda Boehm*, 1982
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When we view a painting we also bring ourselves to it, so a painting becomes a view of our self. The painting would mean something different to me than to someone else.



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