

Friends and Influences

Opening 19 September 2019

Private view: 18 September 2019, 6.30-8.30 pm

BURU (the Ben Uri Research Unit) is pleased to present *Friends and Influences*, the third in our series of snapshot survey exhibitions exploring a particular aspect of the Jewish and immigrant contribution to the visual arts in Britain since 1900. This display brings together paintings, drawings, etchings and lithographs by a selected group of artists credited – both collectively and individually – with helping to reinvigorate the post-war British art scene and celebrated as among the 20th/21st century's finest exponents of the figurative tradition. All were united by ties of ethnicity, background, training, teaching and/or exhibiting platforms, as well as through their mutual and enduring friendships. Their work is examined both through this lens, and through their relationship to – and conscious engagement with – artists of an older generation, whose profound influence upon their own work they openly acknowledged. Thus a line of descent can be traced from the old masters, such as Dürer and Rembrandt, to the new – from the Ecole de Paris artists headed by Soutine, thence to 'Whitechapel Boy' David Bomberg, and finally, through him to Frank Auerbach and the late, and much missed, Leon Kossoff, who sadly passed away on 4th July 2019.

The display focuses on portraits from a close circle of sitters including friends and family, as well as a trio of female nudes, by selected so-called 'School of London' artists, represented here by Auerbach, Kossoff, Lucian Freud and R. B. Kitaj, who first coined this controversial label (disputed by the majority of its 'members') in 1976. This is only one of a number of common bonds: all the artists shared a Jewish and immigrant background – Berlin-born Auerbach and Freud both fled Nazi-Germany for Britain in the 1930s; Kossoff was born to Russian immigrant parents in Islington; and Kitaj, born in Ohio, USA, trained at art school in England, as did New York-born Sandra Fisher, who became his second wife. During the Second World War, Freud, as a nineteen-year-old, briefly served as a merchant seaman in the Atlantic convoy (1940-41). Later, the seventeen-year-old Kitaj also served as a merchant seaman with a Norwegian freighter in 1949.

Auerbach and Kossoff were both exhibited early on by the pioneering Helen Lessore at the Beaux Arts Gallery in Bruton Place (Bomberg – whose work is shown in the front lower gallery – was offered, but declined, a Beaux Arts retrospective in the same year). In 1956 Auerbach and Kossoff also both exhibited with Ben Uri for the first time and a decade later Lord Goodman, Chairman of the Arts Council, and Freud's future friend, lawyer and sitter, was

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guest of honour at Ben Uri's 50th anniversary celebratory dinner. Sandra Fisher was first shown at Ben Uri in 1993 (a year before Kitaj in 1994). After moving to London in 1971 to pursue her artistic career, she sat in on classes given by Kitaj's life-long friend David Hockney at the Slade School of Fine Art, was hired by Marlborough Gallery as Kitaj's studio assistant in 1972, and the couple were married in 1983.

Kitaj had arrived in Britain in 1956 to study at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford, then following in the footsteps of Auerbach and Kossoff, went on to the Royal College of Art in London in 1959. Like Bomberg, Kitaj was particularly inspired and influenced by the work of Cézanne. In his later years, he developed a greater awareness of his Jewish heritage, religion and the holocaust, which all became pivotal to his often largescale work. This coincided with Sandra Fisher's entry into his life at a time when, he later wrote, 'a passionate Jewishness began to form crazily inside me. She seemed like a shining Californian miracle of new-old Jewish womanhood invented in the diaspora'.

The display concludes in the lower galleries with landscapes by Bomberg, Auerbach and Kossoff in the first room; paintings and drawings by Chagall, Marevna and Soutine in the Archive; and one representative etching apiece by Dürer and Rembrandt in the Library.

Curated by Sarah MacDougall, Head of BURU and Ben Uri Collection

19 September - 18 October

Editors notes: For high res images and further information, please contact:

Evgeniya Marder on Evgeniyam@benuri.org

Address: Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, 108a Boundary Road, St John's Wood, London NW8 0RH

Opening hours: 10 a.m. – 5.30 p.m., Monday to Friday and **late until 8 p.m. every Wednesday**

Admission: Free

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