

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Frank Auerbach (29th April 1931 - 11th November 2024)

Seated Figure, 1955

Charcoal on paper

55.7 x 38.5 cm (21 7/8 x 15 1/4 inches)

Signed & dated lower left: 'Auerbach March 1955'

A young German-Jewish émigré, upon his arrival in Britain during the outbreak of the Second World War, Frank Auerbach moved into a shared room on Pond Street in Hampstead, with a small allowance provided by his two uncles, Hans and Jakob, when they had returned to London after the war. Auerbach had encountered Stella West, most famously known as E.O.W, at the after party of his friend Frank Marcus' production of Ustinov's *House of Regrets*, in 1948. In which, both he and Stella had starred. This encounter began a relationship of twenty-five years, and started before he had proceeded with his artistic studies. Over this period, he would make some eighty paintings and drawings of West, the violent yet intimate depictions reveal a truthfulness and honesty, that to Auerbach embodied the love that he had felt towards her. As Auerbach focused on particular sitters over the course of his career, it makes it far more probable that our sitter is E.O.W (Estella Olive West). However, the names of his sitters, if they frequent his work, are usually denoted by Auerbach. These charcoal works could take months, or even years, to complete, with Auerbach adding distinctly characterful layers of charcoal, while erasing constantly, the works being destroyed and rebuilt in iconoclastic fashion.

This particularly early drawing (Fig.1) preceded his first one-man exhibition at the Beaux Arts Gallery in London, 1956, and was completed in the final year of his studies at the Royal College of Art. The tutelage of David Bomberg between 1948-1953, through the classes he attended at the Borough

Polytechnic had a profound effect on the young Auerbach. It had been Bomberg who had encouraged Auerbach to create large scale charcoal drawings, which were to be considered great works in their own right. Despite the fact that charcoal had historically been acknowledged as a preparatory medium, its versatility and tonal dexterity were favoured by artists such as Bomberg, and Auerbach, fascinated by the dark, bustling building sites that littered post-war London, relished the opportunity which the bold sooty medium could present.

A need, a “deep necessity...to actually get profoundly involved with the subject”, lay at the root of Auerbach’s frustrations with drawing. Classes could feel stifling, due to others’ specific direction disagreeing with the laborious manner in which he preferred to work. He would later discover that, to him, unless he had successfully gone through many stages of development, that were then removed, edited, reworked, reconstrued, he would not be able to discern the identity of the image. Through the smog of crepuscular strokes, he would eventually reveal a sense of identity he was attempting to elicit. This can be observed in the series of portraits, many of which were recently displayed at The Courtauld exhibition (Frank Auerbach, *The Charcoal Heads*, 2024). After his first one man show at the Beaux Arts Gallery in 1956, Auerbach was permeated with a sense of crisis, he was now conscious of how he, and his works, appeared to the outside world. Resultingly between 1956 – 1958 he had made only 10 of these drawings and no more than two or three paintings. At least, these were the survivors of his discerning, discriminate gaze and ensuing destructiveness. Part of Auerbach’s comfort in drawing with charcoal stemmed from this uncertainty he encountered during that period. “I felt I’d been exposed, that in public I’d put on a costume of thick paint and earthy colours, I was imitating myself”. In charcoal there was a humbleness, and lack of artifice that allowed Auerbach to not only engage with his sitters but also with himself. It freed him, as an artist, from the thick, impasto paint for which he was most notorious.

Seated Figure is an exemplary charcoal of this period, few others of which exist. Auerbach’s rapid, painterly mark-making, envelopes the figure, her arms and shoulders almost vanishing into the darkness. Her head bowed to the left, her right hand hanging limply to the ground, while her left hand rests comfortably in her lap. Her figure conjures a sort of proud dejection, resolutely committed to her portrayal. The darkness behind her form ekes out into a smoky haze, elucidating the room in which she resides. As Auerbach had gifted it to Keith and Gail Critchlow (as written verso), and it remained in their family by descent, it explains why it has not been written about or discovered before. An extremely similar *Study of a Seated Nude* (March 1955) (Fig. 2) was also given to the Critchlow’s and sold at Christie’s in 2011. Auerbach had known Keith Critchlow since their time at Central St Martins where Keith had been a student from 1954-1957. He is best known now as an artist, author, professor of art and architecture, and expert in sacred geometry. In Critchlow’s own work one can see the influence of his contemporaries, Auerbach and Kossof, as well as older artists like Bomberg. In this other example, the figure is surrounded by a darker, less erased environment. Auerbach clearly playing with different elements of light and tone to evoke a different quality in the figure. However, the composition is identical and it is likely that Auerbach believed Critchlow would appreciate both drawings for the different, and varying attributes and traits that they possessed.

Provenance

Given by the artist to Keith and Gail Critchlow as a wedding gift, to 2024