

Teachers' Notes

Seven Portraits, 1989 - 90 Frank Auerbach (b. 1931) Etching on paper

The series began in 1989 with two prints made to accompany the 'de-luxe' edition of Robert Hughes's 1990 book on Auerbach, which partly dictated the format.

Like the earlier series (Six Etchings of Heads 1980-2), the subjects comprised family, friends and acquaintances who already sat for the artist.



Julia (19.5 x 16.5 cm)

1989

Etching, printed on Somerset white paper, artist's proof outside the published edition of 50.

The subject is Auerbach's wife, who was established as a regular weekly sitter for the artist.



David (19.3 x 16.3 cm)

1989

Etching, printed on Somerset white paper, trial proof outside the published edition of.

The subject is David Landau, editor of Print Quarterly, and a regular weekly sitter for Auerbach.



Catherine (20 x 16.5 cm)

1989

Etching, printed on Somerset white paper, artist's proof outside the published edition of 50.

The subject is Catherine Lampert, then Director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery and established as a regular weekly sitter for Auerbach.



J.Y.M. (20 x 16.5 cm)

1989

Etching, printed on Somerset white paper, artist's proof outside the published edition of 50.

The subject is Juliet Yardley Mills, a professional model who had posed for Auerbach since 1956.



Michael (20 x 16.5 cm)

1990

Etching printed from 2 plates in grey and black on Somerset white paper, artist's proof outside the published edition of 50.

The subject is Michael Podro, an art historian who had written about Auerbach.



Geoffrey (19.5 x 16.5 cm)

1990

Etching, printed on Somerset white paper, artist's proof outside the published edition of 50.

The subject is Geoffrey Parton, a Director of Marlborough Fine Art.



Jake (20 x 16.5 cm)

1990

Etching, printed on Somerset white paper, artist's proof of second state outside the published edition of 50.

Content and Ideas

What is the subject matter?

Portraits

How well do you think he knew his sitters?

Auerbach is renowned for painting the same small group of friends over and over again.

Do you think you can tell from the images that he had such a close relationship with his sitters?

Why do you think that he might have preferred to portray only people he knew very well?

Auerbach felt this was more comfortable than drawing strangers and that constant familiarity meant that the sitters lost their self-consciousness.

Would you prefer to make pictures of strangers or close friends? Explain your reasons.

Materials and Techniques

How do you think these images were made?

These images are etchings on paper

Etching

The metal plate is protected by a waxy ground to act as a resist. The artist draws through the ground with a point (in Auerbach's case usually a dart or screwdriver), revealing the bare metal. Auerbach gives the plate to the printer who immerses it in acid, which eats into the metal where it is exposed by the drawing, but is resisted by the waxy ground. The marks are then inked, and the surface of the plate cleaned. A trial impression is printed on paper in a heavy rolling press. The artist decides whether to do more work on the plate, in which case it is regrounded. The printer shows a choice of differently inked proofs to the artist before printing the edition.

Where do you think the sitter was whilst he made the work?

The sitters were always there in the room whilst he made the work.

How long do you think that Auerbach took to make each picture?

He worked fast but often re-made the image countless times before he was satisfied.

Form and composition

Use words to describe the images

e.g. free, scribbly, powerful, physical, serious

How has Auerbach used lines? What function does the mark-making have?

Auerbach's work is predominantly non visual...his lines are not used to describe features or light and dark for example. He seems to be aiming at a more emotional and physical use of line. He tries to capture a sense, an atmosphere, a state of mind perhaps or a physical essence.

How do these pictures make you feel?

Do the gestures the artist used to create the picture make you feel a certain way?

How does the picture sit within the frame?

No backgrounds. Head and small portion of shoulders – traditional format

About the Artist

Auerbach was born in 1931 in Berlin to Jewish parents; his father was a lawyer and his mother a former art student. In 1939 he was sent to England to escape Nazism. His parents, who remained behind, died in concentration camps. He spent his childhood at a progressive boarding school, Bunce Court, at Lenham near Faversham, Kent, a school for Jewish refugee children. During the war years the school was evacuated to Shropshire.

He attended St Martin's School of Art, London, from 1948 to 1952, and studied with David Bomberg in night classes at Borough Polytechnic. It was during this period that he developed a friendship with fellow student Leon Kossoff. Auerbach studied at the Royal College of Art from 1952 to 1955.

He has used three principal models throughout his career: his wife Julia, who first posed for him in 1959; Juliet Yardley Mills ('J.Y.M.'), a professional model whom he met in 1957; and his close friend Estella (Stella) West ('E.O.W.'), the model for most of his nudes and female heads prior to 1973. Rarely leaving Britain, he lives and works in London and has had the same studio since the 1950s.

Auerbach exhibited regularly at the Beaux-Arts Gallery until 1963. From 1965 he exhibited at the Marlborough Gallery. He was given an Arts Council retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1978, and had solo exhibitions at the British Pavilion in the 1986 Venice Biennale, and at the Rijksmuseum Vincent Van Gogh, Amsterdam, 1989.

Further reading:

Robert Hughes, Frank Auerbach, London 1990