



The Human Clay

by James Hyman

In 1976 the great figurative painter, writer and polemicist R B Kitaj organised a major exhibition for the Arts Council of Great Britain, entitled *The Human Clay*. The exhibition was intended to demonstrate the power of British Art and to champion the importance of drawing and of study from life, not just for the figurative painter but for all artists. Although painting and print-making was included, Kitaj's focus was drawing and a new exhibition at James Hyman Fine Art, *Beyond The Human Clay*, likewise includes work in all these media, but with a particular focus on drawing. Most famously it was in his catalogue introduction that Kitaj wrote for the first time of a School of London, an idea that would soon focus on the work of just six artists: Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Kitaj and Leon Kossoff.

To mark the 35th anniversary of Kitaj's seminal Arts Council exhibition, *The Human Clay*, and to celebrate ten years of exhibitions focused on British figurative art of the 20th century at James Hyman

Gallery, James Hyman is staging an exhibition entitled *Beyond The Human Clay*. As the title suggests, this is an exhibition that looks forward as well as back.

Beyond The Human Clay is divided into two parts: the first focuses on a selection of the artists chosen by Kitaj and the second part presents a selection of younger artists for whom drawing has been an important part of their practice. The exhibition is rooted in two important School of London works, a major Leon Kossoff *Self Portrait* from the 1950s and a manifesto painting by Kitaj, *The Bells of Hell*, from 1961. Kossoff's *Self Portrait* illustrates the importance of struggle, labour and effort. This dense image made from layer upon layer of charcoal and crayon glows with life and is a moving portrait of a battered, but resilient, survivor. Kitaj's major early painting, *The Bells of Hell*, is just as daring in its expressive, fractured figuration. A bold, direct image, it depicts an important event in American history - General Custer and the Battle of

Little Bighorn - as well as possessing the fragmented bodies of Francis Bacon. As such, the painting is not only one that Kitaj, himself, considered to be one of his most important Pop Art paintings, but is also a manifesto for the type of inventive figuration that he sought.

The original exhibition, *The Human Clay*, mainly consisted of drawings and was accompanied by a highly personalised catalogue essay, inspired in large part by Kitaj's recent return to life drawing and by his belief in the importance of this practice for both figuration and abstraction. In it Kitaj briefly wrote of a School of London, using the term loosely, as he later explained, "I meant that a School had arisen, like School of Paris and School of N.Y., where a number of world class painters and a larger number of good painters had appeared in London maybe for the first time [...] Like N.Y. and Paris, the

London School will continue until its best painters die. Ten years after *The Human Clay*, The School of London has no peer abroad [...] the artists are just plain gifted beyond the resources of other Schools. For the moment, N.Y. seems played out and Paris doesn't count."

In *The Human Clay* Kitaj did include those artists now considered to constitute the core of the School of London - namely Michael Andrews, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach. Kitaj and Leon Kossoff - but he also deliberately blurred distinctions between abstract and figurative artists and, to this end, selected over forty other artists.

Subsequently, in the 1980s, figurative painting gained a new critical prominence both through British Council exhibitions of the School of London and also following the Royal Academy's exhibition *New Spirit in Painting*

opposite: Kitaj, *The Bells of Hell*, 1961, oil on canvas

below: Lewis Chamberlain, *Solitary Aeroplane*, 2007



below: Peter Doig, Echo Lake, 2000

opposite top: Hughie O'Donoghue, Liquid Earth, 1984

opposite bottom: Ben Spiers, Camp, 2009

(1981), a wide ranging international survey that ranged from late Picasso and Guston to British artists Auerbach, Bacon, Charlton, Freud, Hockney, Hodgkin, Kitaj, McLean. This was the context in which Tony Bevan, Glenys Johnson and Hughie O'Donoghue established their reputations and *Beyond The Human Clay* includes major paintings from these artists that illustrate this important moment. Hughie O'Donoghue, for example, used thick charcoal to create portraits reminiscent of Frank Auerbach and thick, expressive paint to evoke peat bog men impressed in the ground as in his major early painting *Liquid Earth* (1984), which is being publicly exhibited for the first time in a quarter of a century in *Beyond the Human Clay*.

However, by the end of the 1980s, everything was changing. In the midst of this new internationalism came a new wave of art school graduates, who

unsurprisingly brought with them a new attitude. At the forefront were the students of Goldsmiths Art College – among them Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Anya Gallacio and Sarah Lucas – who were presented, initially at least, as the antithesis of the School of London. Whilst the School of London was essentially male, there was now a gender balance. Whilst the School had been polemically championed for its continuation of 'traditional' methods and media, young artists now took a pragmatic, rather than ideological approach to the use of any media to hand. And, most crucially, whilst subjectivity, empiricism and hermeticism had been defining characteristics, now younger artists were more detached, less referential and more ironic.

Any movement at its inception seeks to overthrow what has gone before and initially the poses struck by many of these young artists emphasised their distance from the high seriousness associated with their School of London elders. Nevertheless, the seminal works of the last twenty years do draw directly from the ways in which these artists radically rethought the potential of art to address questions of mortality. One of Rachel Whiteread's most powerful works is her commission for a *Holocaust Memorial* for the Judenplatz in Vienna. The Chapman brothers' most profound tableau *Hell* (2000) depicts the Holocaust. Anya Gallaccio's moving installation, a floor of 10,000 dying roses, entitled *Red on Green* (1992), poetically traces death on a mass scale. For all the differences in medium, Hirst's boxed and butchered animals are surely the descendants of Bacon's paintings of man as meat, and Whiteread's impassive monuments the equivalents of Giacometti's stoic figures.

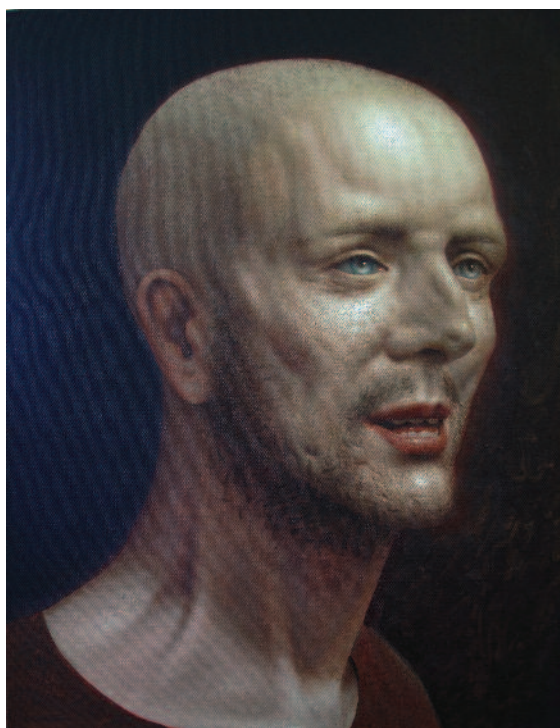
Painting has not experienced the same radicalism: perhaps the shadow cast by the School of London in this respect is just too great. Nevertheless, it is clear that the exploration of the language of paint in the creation of figurative, representational images has been at the forefront of the work of artists as diverse as Peter Doig, Gray Hume, Chris Ofili and Jenny Saville, all of whom are included in *Beyond the Human Clay*. Finally, the exhibition ends with two immensely accomplished young artists, Lewis Chamberlain and Ben Spiers, both of whom produce hyper realistic images that reference the past to expose their own artifice. Chamberlain's settings have the realism of Lucian Freud and Euan Uglow, whilst being constructed scenarios; Spiers portraits are composite images that reference anything from Roman antiquity to the pages of Vogue.

Recently a major international survey exhibition, entitled *Paint Made Flesh*, has toured American





museums and emphasised the continuing importance of art that grapples with the human-kind and our environment as a means of addressing a psychological and physical wellbeing. Focusing on work made between 1952 and 2006, *Paint Made Flesh* emphasised personal anxiety as an embodiment of societal discontent and included



Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville. Just as in the 1980s, figurative painting is assuming a new critical prominence following a period of conceptualism, so in 2011, after the dominance of the yBa's, painting has once more assumed centre stage. *Beyond The Human Clay* continues this process.

Today, when so much art has become entertainment, serving a public hungry for sensation, and when the notion of high culture is attacked so routinely, it may seem misplaced to recall the high seriousness of Kitaj's *The Human Clay*. Yet, as today's artists continue to grapple with humanity's vulnerability in a violent world, they are creating a new realism that places them as heirs to the legacy of this earlier battle. Fifty years ago it was the chimneys of Auschwitz and the atom bomb plume at Hiroshima that prescribed the artistic struggle. Now, with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the situation in Libya growing bleaker by the day, at a time of financial crisis, civil unrest and, as I write, even possible nuclear melt-down in Japan, it is appropriate that the best art should continue to reflect on the human predicament and to do so with a new seriousness.

Beyond The Human Clay runs at James Hyman Fine Art, 5 Savile Row, London, W1S 3PD. Telephone: +44 (0) 20 7494 3857. www.jameshymanfineart.com