

Leon Kossoff

Trains and Stations

19 November 2026 - 30 January 2027

Annely Juda Fine Art

16 Hanover Square London W1S 1HT
Tel +44 (0)20 7629 7578
www.annelyjudafineart.co.uk
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Exterior view of the facade of Embankment Station with flower stall on Embankment Place, 5 August 1981. Hungerford Bridge can be seen overhead on the right



Embankment Station and Hungerford Bridge, Winter, 1994, oil on board, 193 × 183 cm, Würth Collection, Künzelsau, Germany

LEON KOSSOFF - TRAINS AND STATIONS

Painters have been fascinated by the railway since steam trains first came into existence. Turner painted an engine crossing the Maidenhead Railway Bridge in the rain in 1844, all mist, spray and evaporation, its speed and energy a thing of novelty and wonder. Monet's Gare St-Lazare, by contrast, is a place of containment, the sky captured just beyond the wrought iron girders of the roof structure. It is a semi-mystical terminus swathed in vapour, a place of departure which will take not only Monet, but many of his Impressionist confrères, to the key sites west of Paris that they will paint to such lasting effect – Asnières, Giverny, Chatou, Auvers-sur-Oise.

Leon Kossoff painted stations, trains and railways throughout his life. In some of his works the architectural façades of the stations play a major role, such as King's Cross or Embankment tube station. In others, it is what is just beyond the station buildings that fascinates him – for example, the bridges and railway cuttings at Mornington Crescent and at Willesden Junction, or the tangle of rails and disused train sheds that used to run in the derelict wasteland behind St. Pancras and King's Cross stations in the 1960s and 70s, long before the area was cleaned up and modernised. In others still the components of rail travel – tracks, lighting rigs, bridges – simply appear as part of the urban landscape, notably in his paintings of Dalston, Willesden and Kilburn. At Dalston, you can follow the tracks of the North London Line that Kossoff viewed from his studio window at Dalston Junction, carrying freight trains from the docks at Poplar to Kew in West London; at Willesden you can see the deep railway cutting that ran past the bottom of his garden in Willesden Green, carrying the Jubilee and Metropolitan Line tube trains across London, and the mainline Chiltern Railway that ran between Marylebone and Aylesbury. At Kilburn, the overhead bridges at Kilburn Underground Station create vast canopies in the sky as they carry commuters across the Kilburn High Road and into town. 'Railways open up the territory', he once said, 'they give you space, and they give you light, and they give you movement.'

The first station that Kossoff drew was Liverpool Street Station, in 1943. He was a teenager then, departing and returning regularly to the station as a wartime evacuee to East Anglia. His family lived in Wentworth Street, and Liverpool Street was the closest mainline station to their home. The original station, built in the neo-Gothic style between 1874-5, featured a tall wrought iron train shed with a glass roof. It had a dramatic, cathedral-like transept which stretched over the suburban lines, and tall vaulted arches leading from the platforms to the street. Much of this was destroyed in the subsequent redevelopment of the station in the early 1990s , but when Kossoff first came to paint the station in 1955, he painted it as the cavernous, echoing space that it then was. Viewed from a bridge above the tracks, the painting shows a train edging out of the station, and people hurrying along the platforms. An astute critic commented on Kossoff's work at the time:

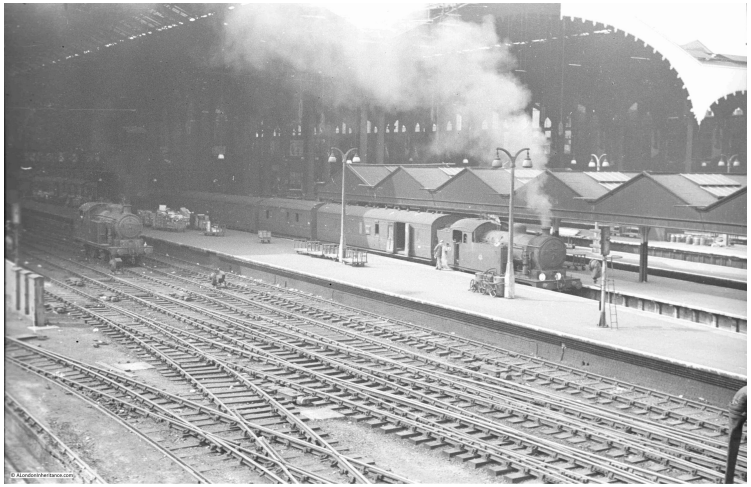
"For Leon Kossoff, there are two ways of viewing everything, and the significance, power and majesty of a railway terminus can be as profoundly felt (as Monet found it) as the discomfort of the dirt and noise..."

The holding of these tensions together, even if only fleetingly, seems to inhabit so much of Kossoff's work, whether it is balancing the experience of the individual within a commuting crowd, or the consideration of grand architectural structures and how they have to make way for redevelopment. And in his paintings of trains and stations, these tensions play out with drama and speed, and across his lifetime.

This is Kossoff's first painting of railway lines. It was his backyard, so to speak - his studio was in a small alleyway off Albert Street only a few streets away. He had taken over the studio from Gustav Metzger in 1952, and some years later Frank Auerbach took it over from Kossoff. The tracks that Kosssoff paints in *Railway Bridge, Mornington Crescent* led from Euston Station, which then consisted of a grand neo-classical hall with the Euston Arch (built in 1837) as the main entrance to the station. Prophetically, Kossoff seems to have captured the moment before the demolition of the old Victorian station. Beyond the railway bridge (one of four leading out of Euston Station) is a carriage maintenance shed, demolished in 2004 when Pendolino trains came into operation. On the left of the painting is a red-brick mansion block, Stalbridge House, which was demolished in 2019 to make way for



Liverpool Street Station, c. 1955, oil on board, 25.5 × 35 cm, Private Collection



Liverpool Street Station photographed in the 1950s

HS2. Demolition hangs over the painting like the sooty air of steam trains, which finally went out of commission during the 1960s. But in its place comes the excitement and expectation of change, and renewal.

Kossoff moved to Willesden Green in the early 1960s, and had a studio in an old shed close to the metals near Willesden Junction. The station is five miles from central London, and used to be one of the capital's largest rail interchanges when it first opened. It had two sets of high-level platforms crossing the main station, and five low-level platforms by the end of the 19th century. The complexity of tracks, bridges, gantries, platforms, signalling equipment, sidings, turntables, cooling towers and maintenance sheds, all spread over a site of approximately seventy two acres, gave rise to the nickname 'Wilderness Junction.' Kossoff seems to have relished the idea of wilderness – its potential for becoming something else as much as the losses involved as changes take place. The electrification of the railways was moving apace as he painted Willesden Junction, and by 1966 new electrification masts and overhead rigs are visible spanning the tracks, while to the left of them the three cooling towers of Acton Lane Power Station are nearing the end of their usefulness. They were decommissioned in the 1970s and finally demolished in the early 1980s.



Leon Kossoff photographed at Willesden Junction in 1995
photograph: Toby Glanville



Willesden Junction, Early Morning, 1962, oil on board, 122 × 221 cm
University of Reading Art Collection

In 1971 Kossoff took on a new studio on Dalston Lane. It was in a building overlooking the North London line, which took freight trains to and from the London docks. Kossoff's studio was on the second floor, with windows facing both east towards Hackney Downs, and west towards Canonbury. Looking west, his view took in the salmon curer's yard immediately below him, as well as Ridley Road Market receding into the distance on the right. Running through the centre of the painting is a brick wall that lines the bank of the railway cutting before it disappears into a tunnel just beneath the horizon. In the painting owned by the Tate Gallery, the tiles of the pitched roof of a Victorian cottage just below the studio are being removed, prior to the demolition of the cottage itself. Ridley Road Market was known for its ethnic mix and variety – the area was home to successive waves of immigrants into London: around the turn of the 20th century a large Jewish community had settled close by followed by newer immigrants from West India, Turkey and Greece in the 1950s and 60s. The sense of flux, of shifting ground and ever-changing populations is carried over into the views looking east, as well as what was immediately present. Beneath the studio runs Dalston Lane, with hoardings that conceal the drop to the railway cutting below. In some of these paintings the hoardings carry posters advertising the UK government's 'Clunk Click' campaign, which ran from 1920-1975 and was aimed at getting people to use seat belts in their cars (Kossoff got his first car shortly after leaving the Dalston studio). On either side of the railway cutting trees are in leaf, and men can be seen loading a truck with timber on the left. To the right of the railway cutting the spire of the Lutheran Church can be seen, a reminder that during the 1850s and 60s the largest group of immigrants into London were Germans, seeking refuge from Catholic persecution. They built the German Hospital next door to the church, originally staffed by nurses from the Kaiserswerth Institute in Düsseldorf. It is said that it was her two visits to the German Hospital that inspired Florence Nightingale to take up training as a nurse. 'The low, dark clouds, the run-down buildings, the precise physical texture of hoardings and railway lines, the blowy, greasy, dirty-spoon quality of the atmosphere – all these are seized once and for all through the temperament of a real painter', wrote the critic John Russell when he first saw these paintings. 'These are paintings in which London seems to take over and write its own autobiography.'



View of Hackney with Dalston Lane, Monday Morning, Spring, 1974 oil on board, 139.5 × 183 cm, Private Collection



View of Hackney from Kossoff's Dalston Lane studio, with the German Hospital on the right, c. 1981, Photograph by Chris Harris



Inside the booking hall of Kilburn Underground station, April 1958, showing the passimeter that was still in place when Kossoff first painted the station
Photograph by W. H. R. Godwin



Booking Hall, Kilburn Underground Station No. 4, 1978, oil on board, 122 x 152.5 cm

Perhaps in Kossoff's paintings of Kilburn Underground station – both the interior booking hall, and the exterior with its extraordinary conglomeration of bridges arching overhead – his sense of the railway as an equivalent for the stream of life (or metropolitan life certainly) comes most to the fore. By the mid 1960s, he had moved his studio into his house in Willesden Green, and would regularly walk to Kilburn Underground to take the tube into central London – very often to Embankment station, where he would alight for the National Gallery. His paintings of the street outside Kilburn Underground are full of incident, people entering and exiting between archways and columns, the ceaseless movement of figures within a complicated space, activating its depths and shallows, a modern-day equivalent of Veronese's grand pictorial compositions such as the *Family of Darius before Alexander* (National Gallery), which Kossoff was drawing at about the same time. On the left is the concave entrance into the station, its canopy of glass bricks encircling the space. Above and overhead soar the Metropolitan Viaduct, its ironwork painted light blue. To the right a bridge carrying the Chiltern Railway spans the High Road. In Kossoff's earliest paintings of this area, the undersides of this bridge were of cast-iron spans. A decade later, this bridge has been replaced by a new bridge made of straight, pre-cast concrete units. Evolution, change, the ceaseless flow of people, ideas and structures, is made implicit and explicit throughout these paintings.

Inside the station, the passage of time is also evident. In his earliest paintings of the station interior, a passimeter (an old-fashioned ticket booth) is still in evidence, even though it has been replaced by newer, pedestal-style dispensers with glass facings showing the price of each journey. The numbers represent decimal coinage - another change from the old currency of pounds, shillings and pence - which had only been introduced into Britain in 1971. In his final painting of this subject, even the ticket dispensers have been cleared away, opening up the space in the centre of the hall, the incidental architecture of London's underground network as subject to the passage of time as the individuals who use it.

Shortly after he moved into his house in Willesden Green, Kossoff painted a gouache of it. The area had once been home to a fruit orchard, but when he moved in, not much was there except for a broad cutting at the bottom of the garden with three double tracks for the Jubilee, Metropolitan and Chiltern Railway lines – a continuation of the lines at Kilburn Underground Station. In the quarter century since he moved in, the garden was planted and fenced, with a path of flagstones leading down towards the end of the garden. In his series of paintings, *Here Comes the Diesel*, painted in Spring, Early Summer and Summer, he paints the yellow snout of a diesel train making its way along the tracks closest to the garden fence. A silver-liveried Jubilee line train races past in the opposite direction, the whole scene alive with the energy of speed, the hopes of the unknown people inside, the freshness of the foliage, and the quiver of the air as the trains rush past. Robert Hughes compared these paintings to late Constable 'with their flickering impasto, their palpable joy in light, and freshness embodied in substance.' For Kossoff, there was the added optimism of his young grandson, who was playing in his garden as the trains rushed past. 'Here comes the Diesel' he shouted to his grandfather, giving rise to the title of this series of paintings, and to the spirit of almost childhood abandon that infects the paintings. The speed with which Kossoff is painting is captured in the skeins of paint that fall from his loaded brush as he paints - speed, paint and image merging in paintings of extraordinary dynamism.

As summer turned to autumn, Kossoff painted the trains at the bottom of his garden again – this time, the sky darkening, the foliage turning from bright and luminous green to lime and ochre, the lights on in the houses opposite. Passengers can be glimpsed in the carriages – the idea of trains as containers, carrying commuters to and from home, each of them an individual but each merging to become part of a crowd - becomes more apparent, as does the idea of trains not only making connections between people and places, but as the ubiquitous image of modern, democratic metropolitan life. And in the quartet of paintings entitled 'From Willesden Green' Kossoff's awareness of time passing becomes increasingly woven into the fabric of the works, the sky dominating the stonework of Willesden Green tube station, seen just over the railway bridge on Walm Lane. Early Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter arrive in sequence, the trains continuing their passage through the city, the earth turning as it always does, the painter watching and drawing, racing in a way to get it all down, to record the here and now as it moves on inexorably.



Here Comes the Diesel, Summer, 1987, oil on board, 137 × 122 cm, Private Collection



Between Kilburn and Willesden Green, Winter Evening, 1991, oil on board, 76.5 x 117 cm, Private Collection

From his student days onwards, Kossoff was an inveterate visitor to the National Gallery. He first visited on a school trip when he was ten, and was struck forcibly by Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in a Stream*. It was a painting he was to draw and to paint from himself in later life, and which he claimed to be one of the spurs to his life in painting. In some ways, one can see his paintings of Embankment Station as an extension of his love of Rembrandt, travelling as he did by tube to the National Gallery, then walking down Villiers Street towards Embankment Gardens and Embankment tube station to take the tube home. For a short period in the mid 1990s he took a studio on the second floor of a building opposite the station, looking out from his window across to the tripartite stone façade of the station, the Thames beyond, with its familiar plane trees lining Victoria Embankment. The ebb and flow of the river matched the ebb and flow of the crowds who swirled around the entrance to the station, its fruit and flower stalls doing a brisk business, the steel-truss latticework of Hungerford Bridge on the right pulsating with the noise of the trains as they cross the river taking to and from Charing Cross station.

Kossoff had first painted the area around King's Cross and St Pancras in the mid 1960s. Thirty years later, he returned to the area, taking a studio in the then derelict Midland Grand Hotel (now reborn as the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel). As with so many of his paintings, the area was on the cusp of change. Within a few years, it would be redeveloped as a major new cultural quarter for London, St Pancras upgraded to become the home of Eurostar by 2007, the rest of the area remodelled by 2012 in time for the London Olympics. In Kossoff's paintings, the bold design of Lewis Cubitt's 1852 façade for King's Cross is compromised by a 'temporary' extension that was tacked onto the building in 1972 but remained in situ until 2012. Commuters rush



King's Cross, Spring No. 1, 1998, oil on board, 134 x 142 cm



Exterior view of King's Cross station, 1980/90s

across the forecourt, making their way towards the entrance to King's Cross tube station on the left, identified by the Underground roundel at the top of the entrance archway. Kossoff uses multiple perspectives to catch and hold the chaos of the street, jump-cutting between closeness and distance, the rush for trains somehow always in the air as people stream in and out of our view. Again, Rembrandt seems to be in the picture. In his painting after Rembrandt's *Ecce Homo* (National Gallery), Pontius Pilate stands in judgement of Jesus before a crowd of people. The processional archway with its central roundel seems to be echoed in Cubitt's façade. And balancing the claims of individual experience with the that of belonging to a crowd (or community, or family) is central to Kossoff's understanding of the world.

In his late 70s, Kossoff began painting his back garden again – specifically an aged cherry tree, planted before Kossoff moved into the house in the 1960s, and now supported on stakes. Beyond the tree the trains continue to run in the deep cutting at the bottom of the garden. In one of these cherry tree paintings, Kossoff's brother, Philip, appears. Philip Kossoff was ill at the time, and Kossoff finished the painting the day after his death. In another, a granddaughter appears between the stakes of the old tree - life and death, old age and renewal, the continuous passage of the seasons as the aged painter tries to capture its evanescence. The Jubilee Line, oblivious of the aged painter watching it speed past the bare branches of the tree, continues its own passage, ferrying the great throng of Londoners between one stop and another, ignorant of the seasons - passing between the stakes of the tree as the Jubilee Line continues its silvery passage beyond the bare branches of the old tree. 'Stoical and sombre, these works are suffused with energy and the rapture of the moment', one critic wrote. 'Their subject is not just shifting seasons and different light; in their ridges of layered paint, scraped down, reapplied, built up, they record accumulated memories, the artist's changing responses and attempts to fix time as it passes.'

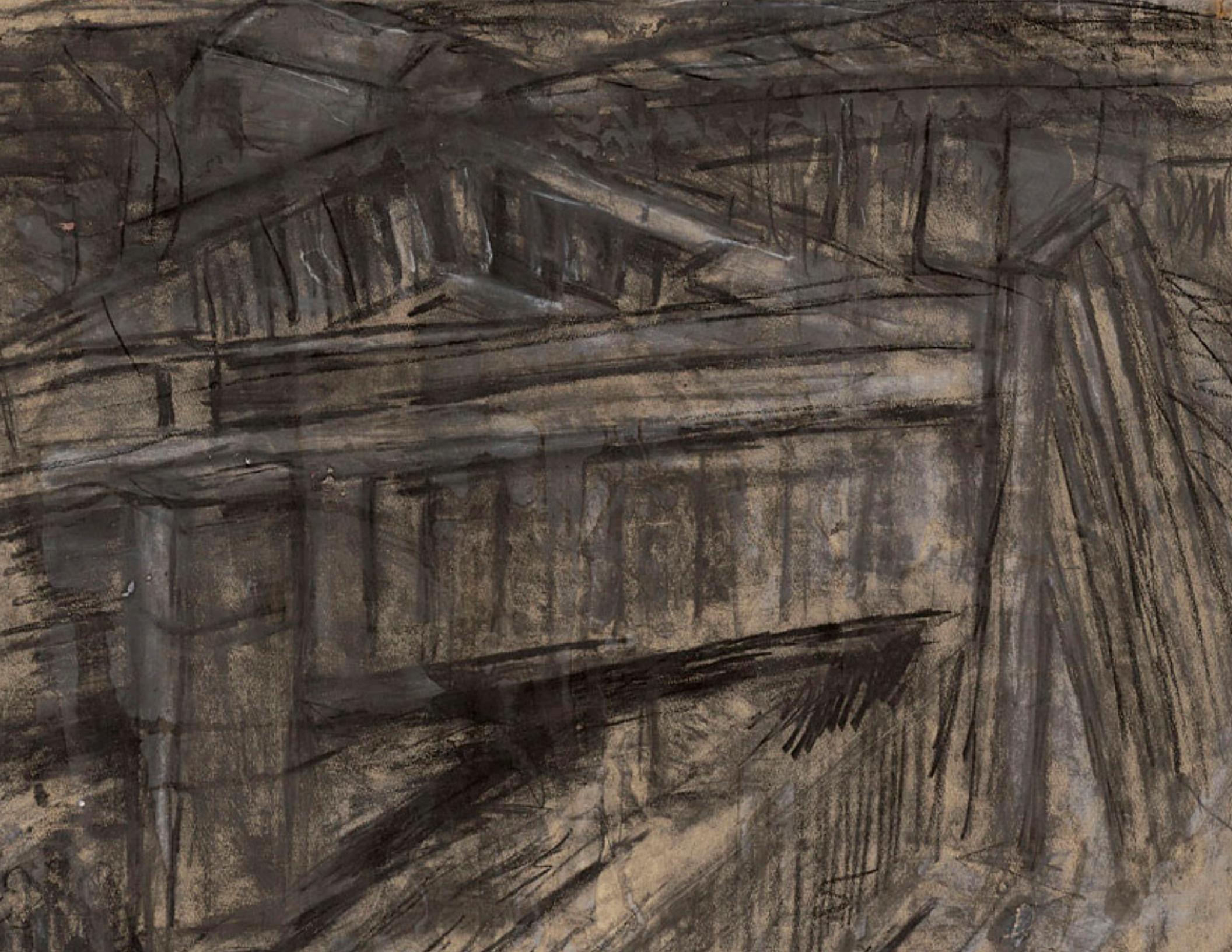
Andrea Rose



Cherry Tree, Early January, 2005, oil on board, 142.5 x 122.5 cm



Leon Kossoff in his garden in 2013, photograph by Toby Glanville





Railway Bridge Mornington Crescent, 1952
charcoal and pastel on paper, 55.2 x 73 cm



Railway Bridge, Mornington Crescent, 1952
oil on board, 21.5 × 26 cm
Private collection



Embankment Underground Station, 1955
charcoal on paper, 56 x 61 cm



Willesden Junction, 1962
charcoal and pastel on paper, 72.5 x 129 cm
Private Collection



Willesden Junction, 1962
charcoal on paper, 30.2 x 52 cm



Small View of Hackney, Dalston Lane, Evening, 1975
oil on board, 98.5 x 122.5 cm
Private Collection



Outside Kilburn Underground Station, November, 1984
oil on board, 197 x 213 cm



Outside Kilburn Underground, 1976
charcoal and crayon on paper, 44.7 x 67.3 cm



Kilburn Underground Station, exterior, 1976
charcoal on paper, 42 x 65 cm



Kilburn Underground Station, exterior, 1976
charcoal on paper, 42 x 65 cm





Booking Hall, Kilburn Underground Station No. 4, 1978
oil on board, 122 x 152.5 cm



Train by Night no. 2, 1990
charcoal and pastel on paper, 59.5 x 41.9 cm



Train by Night no. 5, 1990
charcoal and pastel on paper, 59.5 x 41.9 cm



Between Kilburn and Willesden Green, Winter Evening, 1991
oil on board, 76.5 x 117 cm
Private Collection





Between Kilburn and Willesden Green, Spring Afternoon, 1991
oil on board, 44.5 x 55.5 cm



Here comes the Diesel, 1987
charcoal and pastel on paper, 58 x 56.5 cm
Private Collection



From Willesden Green, Winter, 1991
oil on board, 108 x 78 cm

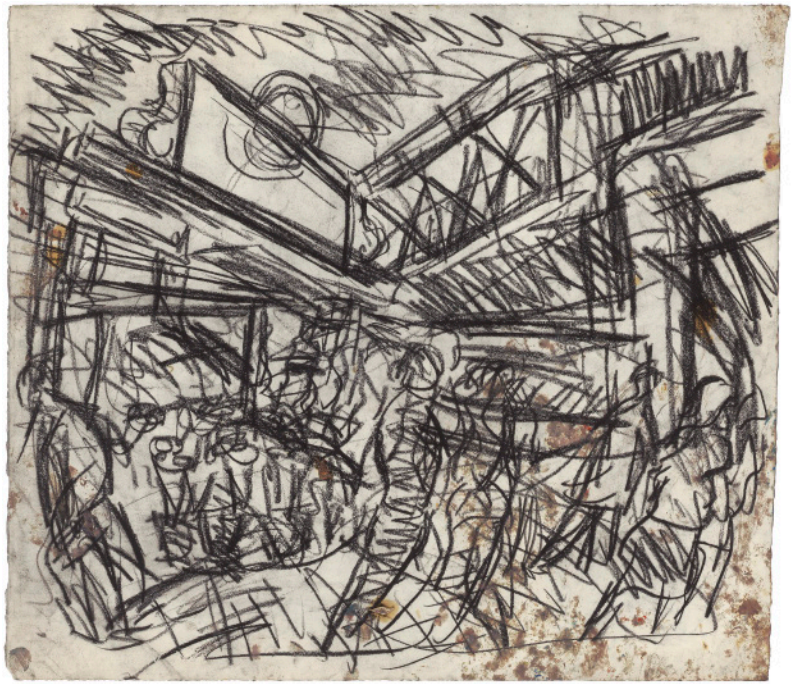


From Willesden Green No. 1, 1991
oil on board, 76 x 61 cm





Embankment Underground Station
charcoal on paper, 56 x 65 cm



The Flower Stall, Embankment Underground Station, 1994
charcoal and oil on paper, 55.5 x 63.8 cm



King's Cross, Spring No. 1, 1998
oil on board, 134 x 142 cm





King's Cross Stormy Day no. 3, 2004
charcoal and pastel on paper, 41.8 x 29.7 cm



King's Cross, 1999
charcoal on paper, 41.9 x 58.4 cm



King's Cross Building Site Early Days, 2003
charcoal on paper, 57 x 56.2 cm



King's Cross Building Site, Early Morning, 2006
oil on board, 129 x 142 cm

