

REMBRANDT BRITAIN



Figure 25, Leon Kossoff, *From Rembrandt: A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1982
Oil on board, 58.4 × 48.3 cm
Private collection



par excellence of ageing, decay and death. He is the artist to whom artists look when considering their own mortality. Henryk Gotlib began his homage to Rembrandt, *Rembrandt in Heaven* (fig.24), in 1948 when he was seriously ill and approaching death (or so he thought: the diagnosis turned out to be wrong); he said that before dying he wanted to pay homage to Rembrandt. It seems he was the natural artist to turn to in times of adversity.

In the 'Swinging Sixties', Rembrandt began to look old-fashioned – too earnest and heartfelt for the times. For the new breed of Abstract Expressionist and Pop Artist, he was a museum artist, of little relevance to their own work and lives. But abstraction and, later, conceptual art did not reign supreme. Among a hard-core group of figurative artists who emerged in the 1950s, the so-called 'School of London' group, Rembrandt was profoundly relevant. They included Lucian Freud, for whom Rembrandt was one of the undisputed giants and an artist he liked to measure himself up

to. Freud never copied Rembrandt, but fellow School of London group members Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach, who have been close friends for more than sixty years, have done so, voraciously, over many decades. Kossoff has made drawings and etchings after several paintings by Rembrandt in the National Gallery collection, including *A Woman Bathing in*

a Stream (fig.25). Like Kossoff, Auerbach has spent a lifetime scrutinising the art of the past: 'Rembrandt at the National Gallery. I went every day, for a long time. I drew from paintings then drew them as if I'd drawn them myself.'¹⁶ Works that he has copied, or made variants after, include *A Woman Bathing in a Stream*, 1654 and *Belshazzar's Feast* (fig.6).



Figure 26, Glenn Brown, *Unknown Pleasures*, 2016
Oil on panel, 164 × 105.5 cm
Courtesy the artist

Many others have borrowed from Rembrandt in recent years. John Bellamy, for example, did so in direct homages such as *Danae: Homage to Rembrandt II*, 1991 (The Bellamy Estate), and above all in self-portraits, which chart years of alcoholism, illness and recovery that echo Rembrandt.

Other, younger artists have viewed Rembrandt in a way that may seem cynical or disrespectful but which turns out to be the opposite. Glenn Brown has made painted, drawn and etched variants after Rembrandt since 1996 (fig.26). Brown tackles the surface appearance of the work, highlighting the curious relationship that exists in paintings between style and subject. The process of replication involves computer technology, and Rembrandt would surely have been interested in it had he been the same age as Brown. It is a backhanded but deeply felt homage.

Rembrandt's work is so ubiquitous in terms of reproduction, and so sanctified by talk of his profound humanity and his enormous prices, that it is good to have this all punctured now and again, so that we can look at the works afresh.