

The gloves are off

JOHN RUSKIN didn't mince words. In 1877, when reviewing James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket*, which came with a price tag of 200 guineas, he wrote: '[I] never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.' Incensed, the American painter hit back at the critic—in court. Whistler eventually won the libel lawsuit he had launched, although he only received nominal compensation and was effectively bankrupt. Ruskin didn't fare much better either, his reputation tarnished with the brush of anti-Modernism.

A little more than a century later, in 1992, another American painter, R. B. Kitaj, reimagined the clash between the two art titans



as a boxing match, loosely based on the fight between Jack Dempsey and Luis Ángel Firpo of 1923, which had been painted by George Bellows. Now with Piano Nobile, his *Whistler vs. Ruskin (Novella in Terre Verte, Yellow and Red)* (above) will be one of the highlights of the Treasure House Fair, Royal Hospital Chelsea, London SW3 (June 27–July 2; www.treasurehousefair.com).

WEIRD & WONDERFUL

ONE evening in 1912, as the curtain fell at London's Palace Theatre, ballerina Anna Pavlova marched towards her partner, Mikhail Mordkin, and slapped him. Legend has it she was furious because he had received longer applause than hers. Despite a turbulent relationship on and off stage, the dancers were a triumph whenever they appeared together. *Tatler* had gushed two years earlier: 'Anything more absolutely perfect of its kind it would not be possible to imagine.'

It was probably during the 1910 tour that artist Laura Knight, who was passionate



about ballet, first saw them dance and became an admirer, especially of Pavlova, writing in her autobiography, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*:

'I knew her every step and gesture in every dance she did.' In 1914, Knight portrayed the Russian ballerina's graceful movements and Mordkin's muscular presence in miniatures, which she enamelled with help from jeweller Ella Naper. One of these is now available through Charles Beddington, at \$18,000, as part of London Art Week (June 28–July 5; www.londonartweek.co.uk). 