

R.B. Kitaj: Obsessions Analyst for Our Time

Biography

Ronald Brooks Kitaj (October 29, 1932 – October 21, 2007) was born in Cleveland, Ohio and grew up in a left-wing intellectual home. He began to study art in New York, and later continued his studies in Vienna, Oxford, and London. The guiding theme in R. B. Kitaj's life and work was identity in the modern age. Out of his obsessive concern with his own 'Jewishness' and his interest in role models, including Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, and Walter Benjamin, Kitaj developed the idea and framework for a 'Jewish art'. He derived the core of that art from the experience of diasporic existence. For Kitaj, art was a medium for emotional and intellectual debate and confrontation. A passionate collector of books, he found his material and motifs in intellectual history and literature, as well as in the works of great artists, fragments of which are recontextualized in his pictures. Kitaj regarded the interpretation and annotation of his own works as an integral part of his artistic practice, and one that embedded him in the Jewish tradition of biblical exegesis.

Kitaj also collected exhibition catalogues, newspaper articles, magazines, postcards, photographs, and more, using them as a great reservoir for his work. A "self-professed bibliomaniac" who divided the world into friends and enemies, he often retreated to his authors, the true inhabitants of his intellectual 'Heimat'.

Working Method

R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007) was one of the most significant painters of the post-war period. Together with his friends David Hockney, Francis Bacon, and Frank Auerbach, he pioneered a new figurative art that defied the trend in abstraction and conceptualism. Kitaj addressed questions of identity, European politics, philosophy, and the human condition. Taking inspiration from modern literature and the history of art, Kitaj's paintings reveal a fascination with the relationship between the body, sexuality and history.



Lee Friedlander, *Photograph of Kitaj in his studio*, 1993
© Lee Friedlander, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco

The Exhibition

This exhibition surveys over forty years of the artist's work from the early 1960s onwards. Drawn from the retrospective at the Jewish Museum Berlin, this is the first major exhibition of the artist's work in this country since the artist's death and features over 70 paintings, drawings and prints from international collections including the Astrup Fearnley Museum Oslo, FOR ART Oslo, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Hamburg Kunsthalle, Museum of Modern Art New York, Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf, National Galleries Scotland, Tate, and Tel Aviv Art Museum.

Words in this pack which are underlined refer to the References and Connection sections on pages 16 and 17.

1: A Fragmented World

Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1932, RB Kitaj grew up in a left-wing intellectual home. His mother, Jeanne Brooks, was the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants; his stepfather, Walter Kitaj, came to the United States from Vienna to escape Nazi persecution. On leaving school Kitaj became a merchant seaman on a Norwegian cargo ship, subsequently studying art at the Cooper Union in New York and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, before being conscripted into the U.S. army in 1956. Under the terms of the G.I. Bill he studied at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford and from 1959 at the Royal College of Art in London, where he formed lifelong friendships with artists such as David Hockney.

Kitaj's early work was influenced by Surrealism, and often employed collage techniques to bring together seemingly random and thought-provoking conjunctions of images. Whilst studying in Oxford, Kitaj encountered the study of iconography that had been developed by the art historian Aby Warburg, and he drew extensively on the juxtapositions of imagery from different sources in the Journals of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes. Kitaj considered himself a 'literary artist' in the 1960s due to his passion for books, and his paintings and prints frequently include allusions to poetry and literature, sometimes including handwritten 'bibliographies' as guides to the ideas behind his work.

The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg, 1960

Oil and collage on canvas, 153 x 152cm

Tate: Purchased 1980

Rosa Luxemburg was a Marxist theorist and revolutionary socialist of Polish Jewish descent who together with Karl Liebknecht founded the anti-war Spartacus League, which later became the Communist Party. During the Spartacus Uprising in Berlin in 1919 she was murdered by the Freikorps, and became a martyr for the Communists. Kitaj presents the murder surrounded by vignettes of German classical monuments, in the car window a profile resembling the celebrated Prussian military strategist Count von Moltke, and collaged a hand-written report of the murder, which Kitaj later interpreted as anticipating the murder of the Jews.



In Focus: The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg

Kitaj's artistic interpretation of the moment when Luxemburg is killed is placed at the centre of this painting. Strong, gestural lines painted vertically onto the canvas suggest streaks of blood, intensifying the violence of this scene.

Collaged pieces and small images have been placed around this central story. A first-hand, eyewitness account of Luxemburg's murder is used to verify Kitaj's depiction.

Classical monuments, statues and a portrait of Count Von Maltke refer to Germany's emergence as a leading empire throughout the 19th century. This contrasts with Luxemburg's murder, the result of political and social upheaval within Germany after the First World War.

C Strong, violently painted lines intensify the sense of drama

A Collaged hand-written report of the Murder

B Classical monuments, statues and a portrait of Count Von Maltke



2: Analyst of His Time

In the 1960s Kitaj created several paintings in a style indebted to Surrealism which address his interest in modern history, politics and culture. These complex works make associative connections between historical figures, stories and events from different eras. Kitaj was strongly influenced by visiting Catalonia and had a deep interest in the revolutionary politics of the Spanish Civil War. Kitaj drew on a range of cultural sources ranging from Old Master paintings to modern literature, films by directors such as John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock, and newspaper reports. Moving beyond documenting the historical situation, his paintings often include imaginary figures, reflecting his belief that painters should be able to make up characters in the same way as novelists.

The Ohio Gang, 1964

Oil and graphite on canvas, 183 x 183cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Philip Johnson Fund, 1965

This 'Surrealist' painting was inspired in part by the 1949 Western movie *She wore a Yellow Ribbon* directed by John Ford. As in the film, the yellow ribbon signifies that the young woman has pledged herself to one of the two men, who were based on Kitaj's friends the poet Robert Creeley and actor Jack Wandell. The naked woman and her black maid reference Manet's famous painting *Olympia*, whilst the 'Maenad-Nanny' pushes a mannequin in a pram that Kitaj had brought for his second child, who died at birth as he began this painting.

In Focus: The Ohio Gang

"The Ohio Gang is an automatic painting freely associated like a depictive surreal abstraction, but now, almost 25 years later, I would like to suggest some dream, meaning. If only for myself, delving there is a half-conscious reverie, after the fact of the painting, which like a dream, carries a trace of organisation...." R.B Kitaj, 1988/89

Kitaj layers references from popular film, the media and his own life to create this large scale painting, which works as both a single narrative and a series of interconnecting stories. The central motif is concerned with the two female characters and the imbalance of their relationship, which is also present within Manet's *Olympia*. The purity of the young woman is emphasised by her yellow ribbon, a symbol of her innocence, whilst the overt sexuality of the maid is made obvious by her explicit bondage costume.



- A The naked woman and her black maid referencing Manet's famous painting *Olympia*.
- B The yellow ribbon provides a focal point and is central to the painting's narrative and meaning. Kitaj also uses yellow to strengthen the structure of his composition. The colour is carried through into the background with a bold strip and also features in the interior of the baby's pram.
- C Mannequin and pram, a reference to Kitaj's second child who died at birth as he began this painting.



3: Circle of Friends

In 1976 Kitaj organised an influential exhibition of figurative art entitled *The Human Clay* in which he made clear his belief in an art rooted deeply in human concerns. He referred to a 'School of London,' which included his painter friends such as Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, and Lucian Freud.

During the 1970s and 80s Kitaj recorded his wider social group in colourful portraits of his friends, including the movie directors Kenneth Anger and Michael Powell, the Black Mountain College poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, scholars including the Orthodox rabbi, philosopher, and Talmudist Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and the architects Colin St John Wilson and MJ Long. He also considered his 'heroes and champions of modernism' such as Walter Benjamin and Ezra Pound as his kindred spirits and role models. Some of these portraits make reference to the paintings of other artists such as Cézanne, Picasso, Van Gogh and the Old Masters.

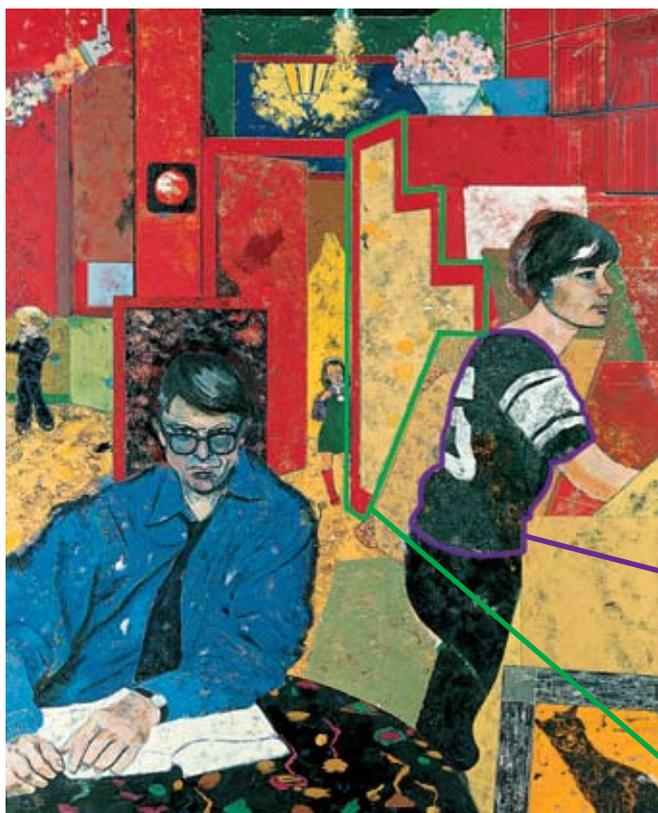
Kitaj observed that: "A lot of good and regular art gets made because of who you talk to... No one is immune to human contact, and art is not made in a vacuum. History is full of flourishing milieux in which all kinds of people act upon one another. Who is terrific and who is less terrific gets sorted out often after death."

The Architects , 1980-84

Oil on canvas, 153 x 122 cm

Pallant House Gallery (Wilson Loan 2006)

This portrait of Kitaj's great friends MJ Long and Colin St John Wilson shows the architects and their children Harry and Sal in Kitaj's London studio, which was designed by Long. The red interior was based on Van Gogh's painting *The Night Café* in the collection of Yale University. Kitaj and Wilson shared a love of books, and appropriately Wilson commissioned a tapestry based on Kitaj's iconic painting *If Not, Not* for the interior of the British Library.

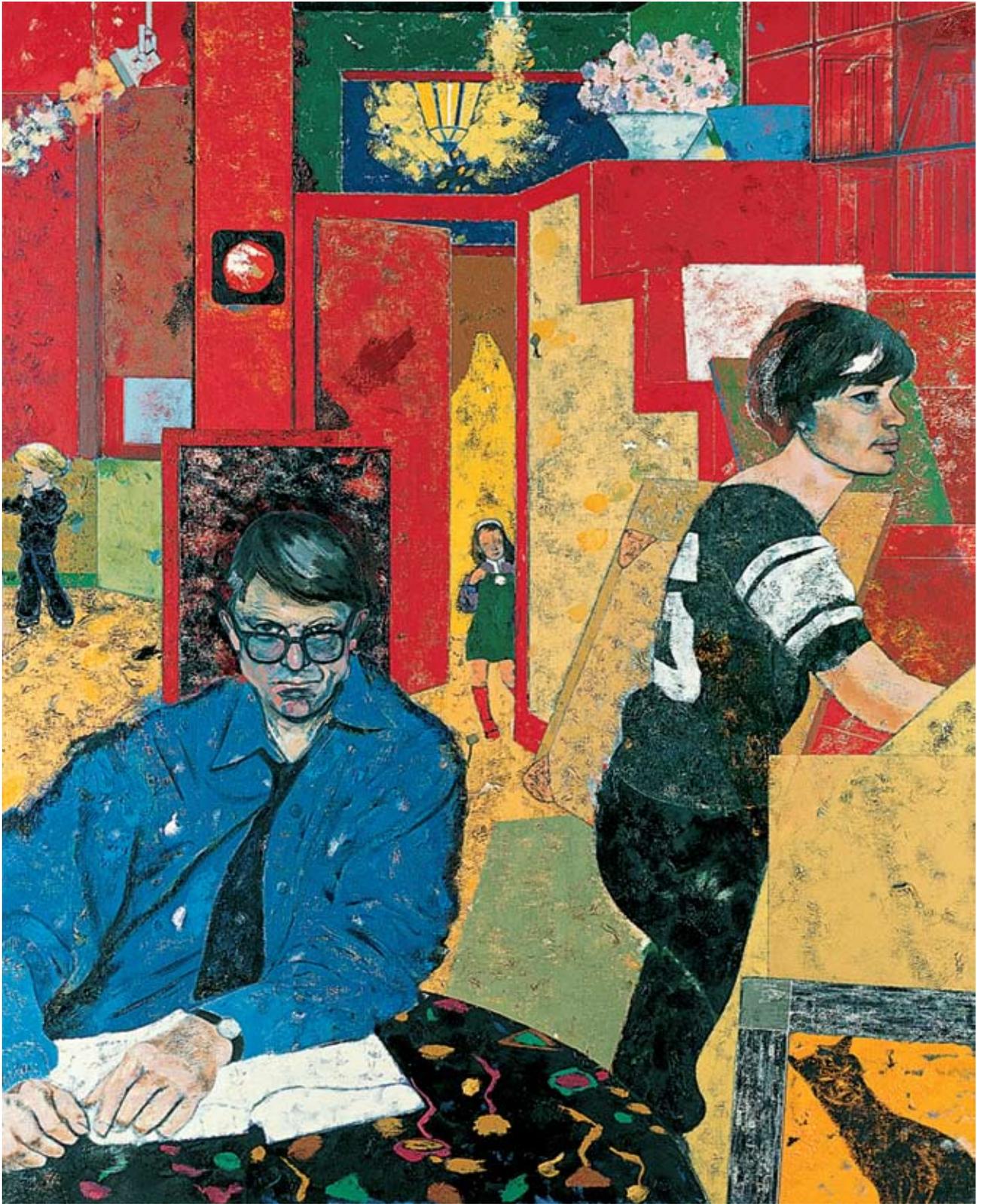


In Focus: The Architects

The title of this work *The Architects* refers to the husband and wife team - Colin St John Wilson and MJ Long, who designed the British Library and the new wing of Pallant House Gallery.

They are placed in the forefront of this image, while their children, Harry and Sal appear in the background. The artist painted this family portrait as a present to MJ Long, after she designed his studio in London. He has invented a fictional space that references the designs of MJ Long –in particular the bookcase, which she created especially for Kitaj.

- A** MJ Long's Yale University shirt references her student days and brings a familiar, personal history into this portrait. Long had originally faced outwards, but Kitaj decided to place her in profile, as it was easier to catch her in this way.
- B** The stepped bookcase designed by MJ Long.



4: Kitaj as Draughtsman

When the art critic Robert Hughes said that Kitaj “draws better than almost anyone else,” his praise applied particularly to the pastel drawings. After visiting an exhibition that included Edgar Degas’s drawings in Paris in 1974, both Kitaj and Hockney turned enthusiastically to drawing from nature. Kitaj, especially, focused on the human figure in his pastel drawings. He achieved great mastery of the medium, which was still new to him at this time. Kitaj observed how: “Pastel is quicker than oil, which is not the same thing as ‘in a hurry’. Also, drawing on paper suddenly attains colour.”

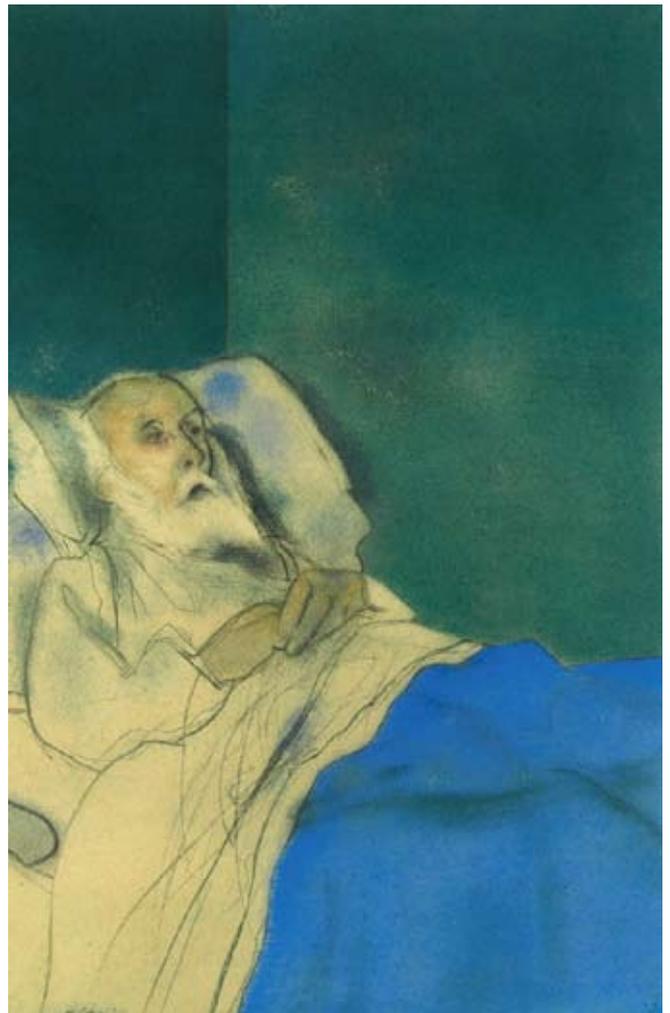
In the 1970s Kitaj painted and drew a series of bathing figures, which express his fascination with the relationship between the body, sexuality and history. He took inspiration from the Bathers painted by his hero Paul Cézanne, but his own nudes move beyond the classical motif of the bather to include images of prostitutes and distorted bodies. These bathers can be seen as political allegories of the outcast, of violence and modernity, as well as presenting his own passions and obsessions.

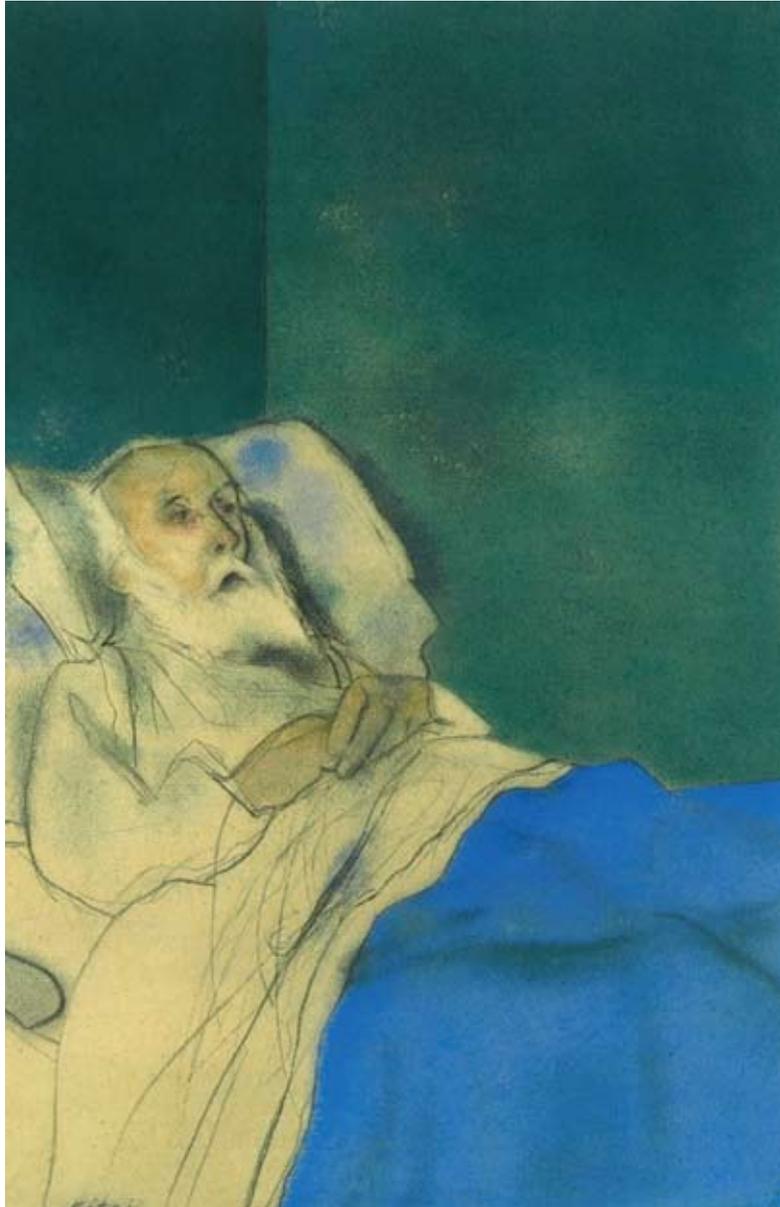
Degas on his Deathbed, 1980

Pastel and charcoal on paper, 73 x 51 cm
Collection of Halvor Astrup

In Focus: Degas on his Deathbed

During his lifetime Kitaj was widely recognised as a leading draughtsman of the twentieth century, and his drawings were often compared to those made by the realist Edgar Degas. Kitaj created this homage to Degas in 1980 over sixty years after the artist’s death and took the image from a black and white photograph. Kitaj’s medium for this work was particularly appropriate as Degas was renowned for his pastel drawings.





5: Characters and Bathers

Kitaj was intrigued by the fictional characters invented by novelists such as his friend Philip Roth. He invented his own archetypal portraits and imaginary figures, occasionally basing them in part on individuals he had known, just as a novelist might do. He observed: "My pictures are full of characters I make up. I suppose complexity in a drawn character will be remembered by being seen, so it enters the social memory like a character in Dickens or Kafka or Chekhov, but by a different path. In a painting, the character need not unfold in an instant, like a vision. It takes time to look, to unfold, to change, to repeat, to fulfil... and so on." Later he added: "If the pictured character were to last and stick in people's minds it would be a visual triumph, an achievement of the terms of painting."

The Orientalist, 1976- 77

Oil on canvas, 244 x 77cm

Tate: Purchased 1977

In Focus: The Orientalist

The Orientalist is an example of one of Kitaj's character types, a group of paintings based upon his own invented, archetypal figures. The series also included fictional protagonists such as *The Smyrna Greek*, *The Hispanist* and *The Arabist*. Together they form a universal typology of the exile that helped Kitaj explore his own position as an expatriate. The idea of displacement is visualised by the painting's long, vertical format which heightens the figure's sense of dislocation. *The Orientalist* was an invention, but for Kitaj he represents a real character. The artist has written: "Some people live out their lives in places they don't come from, assigning themselves to a strange race of men and an alien sense of land and city... The real subject here is un-at-homeness."





6: The Late Years

In 1994 Kitaj was the subject of a large retrospective at the Tate Gallery, which was popular with visitors but received abusive and personally wounding responses from some art critics. Kitaj felt that what he called his 'Tate War' confirmed his position as an outsider and linked it to the history of the avant-gardes. He also blamed the critics for his wife Sandra Fisher's sudden death shortly after the end of the show. The following year Kitaj was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for outstanding achievement, but in 1997 he decided to leave England for good to return to the USA.

In his last years in Los Angeles he created vibrantly coloured paintings that expressed his passion for a Jewish art and his love for Sandra, whose tragic early death he never overcame. Kitaj developed his earlier concept of the 'Diasporist', which was not limited to Jews but also homosexuals, women, Palestinians, Afro-Americans and many of the Modernist painters he admired. In September 2007 Kitaj's *Second Diasporist Manifesto* was published shortly before Kitaj's death: 'a new kind of poem in 615 free verses' it has been seen as both a 'poignant farewell' and a 'dazzling literary achievement.'

The Killer-Critic Assassinated By His Widower, Even, 1997

Oil and collage on canvas, 152 x 152cm
Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway

Kitaj painted this in response to the harsh criticism he received in relation to his Tate retrospective. He filled the painting with aspects of his work that had been condemned by some art critics: quoting of the work of the artists of the past, including literary references and collaged book jackets, and expressing his Jewish identity. The gunman on the left is identified as the artist himself by the Hebrew letter kuf, for K. Next to him is the painter Edouard Manet, who endured harsh criticism all his life and here appears as Kitaj's alter ego in a reference to his painting *The Execution of Maximilian*.

In Focus: The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even

This is perhaps the most autobiographical paintings in this exhibition since it deals with the personal tragedies he experienced towards the end of his life.

Kitaj's use of book-covers stuck directly onto the canvas reflects his passion for collecting books. It also demonstrates how he found his material and motifs in intellectual history and literature, which in this instance relate to the theme of power and madness.



A *Diary of a Madman and other stories* by Nikolai Gogol. *Diary of a Madman* is the only one of Gogol's works written in the first person and follows a diary-entry format. The story shows the descent of the protagonist, Poprishchin, into insanity.

B The Hebrew letter kuf for K represents the artist Kitaj, which reiterates the autobiographical nature of this piece.

C *Praise of Folly* by Erasmus. In this satirical examination of corruption in the Catholic Church Erasmus addresses the abuses of power made by people in authority.



Some Important dates in R. B. Kitaj's Life

- 1932 Born on October 29 in Chagrin Falls near Cleveland, Ohio, as Ronald Brooks-Benway; his mother, Jeanne Brooks, is the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, his father Sigmund Benway leaves the family soon after Kitaj's birth
- 1941 Jeanne Brooks marries Walter Kitaj, a Viennese Jew who emigrated to the United States in 1938
- 1949 Kitaj joins the crew of the freighter SS Corona; works as a merchant seaman for spells until 1954
- 1950 Studies at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York
- 1951 / 52 Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, with Fritz Wotruba and Albert Paris Gutersloh
- 1952 Second year of studies at Cooper Union
- 1953 Marries Elsi Roessler in New York (Protestant wedding)
Returns to Vienna; first visit to Catalonia, Spain
- 1956 / 57 Serves in the U.S. Army in Darmstadt, Germany, and Fontainebleau, near Paris
- 1957 – 59 Studies at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford
Attends lectures by art historian Edgar Wind
- 1958 Birth of a son, Lemuel (Lem)
- 1959 – 61 Studies at the Royal College of Art, London; begins lifelong friendship with David Hockney
- 1963 First solo exhibition, at Marlborough Fine Art, London
- 1964 Adopts a daughter, Dominie
- 1965 Exhibition at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York
- 1967 / 68 Teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, art department
- 1969 Death of Kitaj's first wife, Elsi Roessler
- 1970 / 71 Teaches at the University of California, Los Angeles
Meets the American artist Sandra Fisher
- 1975 Visits an exhibition including works by Edgar Degas at Petit Palais, Paris
- 1978 / 79 Artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire
Teaches at Dartmouth College
- 1981 / 82 Retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, and the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf, Germany

- 1982 Residence in Paris
- 1983 Marries Sandra Fisher in London's Spanish and Portuguese (Sephardic) Bevis Marks Synagogue, according to Orthodox rites
- 1984 Birth of a son, Max
- 1988 *Erstes Manifest des Diasporismus*, Arche Verlag, Zurich
- 1989 *First Diasporist Manifesto*, Thames & Hudson, London
- 1994 Retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Death of Sandra Fisher
- 1995 Awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale
- 1996 / 97 Exhibitions *Sandra One*, *Sandra Three* (both at the Royal Academy, London), and *Sandra Two* (FIAC international contemporary art fair 1996, Espace Eiffel Branly, Paris, organized by Marlborough Fine Art, London)
- 1997 Returns to the U.S. with son Max; settles in Westwood, Los Angeles
- 1998 Retrospective at the Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, the Jewish Museum Vienna, and the Sprengel Museum, Hannover
- 2001 Exhibition *Kitaj – In the Aura of Cézanne and other Masters*, National Gallery, London
Kitaj starts to write his autobiography *Confessions of an old Jewish Painter*
- 2003 Exhibition at the L.A. Louver Gallery, Los Angeles
- 2007 *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, Yale University Press, New Haven
R. B. Kitaj dies October 21

References and Connections

Biography

Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924) was a German-language writer of novels and short stories and was regarded by many as one of the most influential authors of the 20th century.

Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) was an Austrian neurologist who became known as the founding father of psychoanalysis.

Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) was a German literary critic, philosopher, social critic, translator, radio broadcaster and essayist. Combining elements of German idealism or Romanticism, Historical Materialism and Jewish mysticism.

Diasporic – Diaspora the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established homeland. This word has come to refer to historical mass-dispersions of people.

Biblical Exegesis – Exegesis is a critical explanation or interpretation of a text, especially a religious text. Traditionally the term was used primarily for exegesis of the Bible; however, in contemporary usage it has broadened to mean a critical explanation of any text, and the term “Biblical exegesis” is used for greater specificity.

Heimat – German word referring to the relationship between a person and a certain spatial social unit. The term forms a contrast to social alienation and usually carries positive connotations.

Working Method

David Hockney (1937 –) is a British painter, draughtsman, printmaker, photographer, and designer. In 1961 he emerged as one of the leaders of British Pop Art.

Francis Bacon (1909 – 92) was a British painter, born in Dublin of English parents. He had no formal training as a painter. He destroyed much of his early work and dropped out of sight until 1945, when his *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, painted in the previous

year, was exhibited at the Lefevre Gallery and made him overnight the most controversial painter in the country.

Frank Auerbach (1931 –) is a German born painter who came to Britain in 1939 and adopted British nationality in 1947. His work is remarkable for its use of extreme impasto, so thick that the paint at times seems modelled rather than brushed.

Abstraction – Art that does not depict recognizable scenes or objects, but instead is made up forms and colours that exist for their own expressive sake.

Conceptualism – A term that embraces various forms of art in which the initial idea is considered more important than the finished product.

Human condition – It can be described as the irreducible part of humanity that is inherent and not dependent on factors such as gender, race or class. It includes concerns such as the meaning of life, the search for gratification, the sense of curiosity, the inevitability of isolation, or anxiety regarding the inescapability of death.

1 : A Fragmented World

Surrealism – Characterized by a fascination with the bizarre, the incongruous, and the irrational, which flourished in the 1920s and 1930s.

Iconography – The identification, description, classification and interpretation of the subject-matter of the figurative arts.

Aby Warburg (1866 – 1929) Abraham Moritz Warburg was a German art historian and cultural theorist who founded a private Library for Cultural Studies.

2 : Analyst of His Time

John Ford (1894 – 1973) was an Irish-American film director. He was famous for both his Westerns such as *Stagecoach* and *The*

Searchers, and adaptations of such classic 20th-century American novels as *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Alfred Hitchcock (1899 – 1980) Sir Alfred Joseph Hitchcock was an English film director and producer.

She wore a Yellow Ribbon – A 1949 Western film directed by John Ford and starring John Wayne.

Olympia – by Édouard Manet and painted in 1863. Manet reworked the traditional theme of the female nude and when it was first exhibited at the 1865 Paris Salon it caused a shock.

3 : Circle of Friends

Kenneth Anger (1927 -) is an American experimental filmmaker, actor and author of two controversial *Hollywood Babylon* books.

Michael Powell (1905 – 1990) was an English film director. He produced a number of classic British films with Emeric Pressburger – *49th Parallel*, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

Black Mountain College poets – The Black Mountain poets were a group of mid-20th century American avant-garde or postmodern poets centred on Black Mountain College.

Robert Duncan (1919 – 1988) was an American poet, often identified with the poets of the New American Poetry and Black Mountain College.

Robert Creeley (1926 – 2005) was an American poet and author of more than sixty books. He is usually associated with the Black Mountain poets.

Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903 – 1993) was an American orthodox rabbi, Talmudist and modern Jewish philosopher.

Ezra Pound (1885 – 1972) Ezra Weston Loomis Pound was an American expatriate poet and critic of the early Modernist movement.

5 : Characters and Bathers

Philip Roth (1933 -) is an American novelist. He first gained attention with the 1959 novella *Goodbye, Columbus*, a portrait of American-Jewish life for which he received the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction. Roth is one of the most awarded U.S. writers of his generation: his books have twice received the National Book Award, twice the National Book Critics Circle award, and three times the PEN/Faulkner Award.

Paul Cézanne (1839 – 1906) was a French painter and a key figure in the development of 20th century art. Cézanne's often repetitive, exploratory brushstrokes are highly characteristic and clearly recognizable. He used planes of colour and small brushstrokes that build up to form complex fields.

6 : The Late Years

Avant-gardes – An artist who is experimental, innovative and pushing the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm.

Golden Lion – Il Leone d'Oro is the highest prize given to a film at the Venice Film Festival.

Venice Biennale – A major contemporary art exhibition that takes place once every two years in Venice.

Notes

Compiled and written by:
Katy Norris, Curatorial Assistant
Louise Bristow, Freelance Designer
Natalie Franklin, Learning Programme Coordinator
n.franklin@pallant.org.uk, 01243 770839

**PALLANT
HOUSE
GALLERY**

Telephone 01243 774557

info@pallant.org.uk

www.pallant.org.uk

9 North Pallant, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 1TJ