



Jewish Museum Berlin

2012

Background Information

: “R. B. Kitaj (1932-2007) Obsessions”

**A retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin from
21 September 2012 – 27 January 2013**

The first comprehensive retrospective of the American artist R. B. Kitaj since his death five years ago will be opened in Berlin this fall. It shows his oeuvre in ten rooms which reflect the close ties between his art and his life. The spectrum of his artistic topics ranges from his relationship with his friends and intellectual role-models, to questions of Jewish identity and reflections on politics and history to the egomaniacal exploration of women in his works.

The exhibition brings together loans of leading museums and private collections from around the world, including the MoMA in New York, the Tate in London and the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in Madrid. One hundred thirty paintings, prints and drawings from all periods of his oeuvre are shown together.

1. A Fragmented World

While studying in Oxford, Kitaj encountered Aby Warburg’s art historical Mnemosyne project, which addressed the survival of classical motifs of movement in the Renaissance and their changing meanings. Kitaj’s own artistic work was especially inspired by Warburg’s extensive collections of visual material, covering series of motifs from many different sources.

2. Catalonia and Diaspora

Kitaj was deeply influenced by visiting Catalonia and meeting José Vicente Roma, an enthusiastic proponent of Catalonian independence. The experience



was his first confrontation with the question of identity and life as an outsider. He would later develop a concept of Diaspora as “internal exile.”

3. An Analyst of His Era

For this group of large paintings in a surreal style, Kitaj composed complex pictures around contemporary issues of politics, morality, and culture. The sources of these rich collages range from Old Masters’ paintings, to media reports, to the films of great directors such as John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock.

4. A Circle of Friends I

Among Kitaj’s friends were fellow painters including Lucian Freud, David Hockney, and Frank Auerbach, movie directors, and poets, as well as scholars like the Orthodox rabbi, philosopher, and Talmudist Joseph B. Soloveitchik. He also counted as part of his “circle” his intellectual friends and role models: Walter Benjamin, Ezra Pound, and many more. Kitaj portrayed these “heroes and champions of modernism” as his kindred spirits.

5. Gallery of Character Types

Intrigued by fictional characters like those in Philip Roth’s novels, Kitaj invented his own archetypal figures. *The Orientalist*, *Smyrna Greek*, *The Hispanist*, and others form a universal typology of the exile. The portraits are composed in a striking and ennobling vertical format.

6. The Secret and the Public Jew

For Kitaj, the “Jewish question” was the core of an obsessive, lifelong search for identity—“my neurosis, my war, my pleasure-principle,” as he wrote in 2004. As a “tribal remembrancer” wrestling with his “Diasporic angel,” the artist created a spectrum of complex and sometimes paradoxical images of



Jews: as outsiders and dissidents, as transvestites and mask-wearers, and the “Eternal Jew” as a confident, elegantly dressed traveler.

7. Distorted Bodies

The pictures of bathers and other nude figures that Kitaj painted in the 1970s are linked by an interest in questions of the body, sexuality, and history, each set in a different key. For his female nudes, Kitaj drew inspiration from his hero Cézanne, whose “Bathers” compositions he studied in all their variations. His own nudes go far beyond the classical motif of bathers and include the image of the prostitute. Hinting at the oppression and marginalization of women, Kitaj’s bathers are also political allegories of the outcast, of violence, of modernity—as well as presenting his own passions and obsessions.

8. Obsessions

In the early 1970s, after Hannah Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Kitaj began to focus on his own “Jewishness.” His “Jewish obsession” became a key dimension of his art, also prompting him to redefine his older works. A “Jewish or Diasporist art” was to give shape to the experience of exile and dissidence and contribute to a distinctly Jewish iconography. Kitaj sought inspiration in traditional Jewish literature, scholarly and journalistic texts, and novels and poetry by both Jewish and gentile authors. He saw his extensive commentaries on his own works as part of the tradition of *midrashim*, the interpretation of biblical texts in Rabbinic Judaism. Recurrent themes were the concepts of sin, guilt, prostitution, and forgiveness.

9. The Library as a Diasporic Home

One of Kitaj’s greatest pleasures was buying books. But he 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*.

10. **Tate War**

The abusive and personally wounding criticism of the large Kitaj retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1994, curated by the artist himself, was a traumatic experience. Kitaj’s response went beyond a deep feeling of hurt: he also blamed the critics for his wife’s sudden death shortly after the end of the show. Kitaj left England and never returned. For him, the “Tate War” was further confirmation of his position as an outsider.

11. **Retreat**

After leaving Europe in 1997 and settling in Los Angeles, Kitaj renewed his interest in Franz Kafka and Sigmund Freud. He regarded them as outstanding thinkers on the condition of humankind in an uprooted, modern world. Alongside his passion for a Jewish art, a further theme of his Los Angeles works was his love for his second wife, Sandra Fisher, whose tragic early death he never overcame.

12. **A Circle of Friends II**

All his life, Kitaj had painted portraits of his close friends, heroes, and kindred spirits. These drawings and smaller paintings record his personal and intellectual encounters during the last years of his life.

13. **Self-Portraits**

Kitaj often portrayed himself in his pictures, especially in the large-scale “Diasporist” paintings. He continued this habit in his late works, now also addressing the process of aging and his increasing physical deterioration.



Commentaries composed of various texts written by the artist have been recorded and are available on audioguide, so that visitors will have the chance to hear Kitaj himself speak about his work.

The exhibition "R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007) Obsessions" is an exhibition of the Jewish Museum Berlin in cooperation with the Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH. The catalog to the exhibition will be published by Kerber Verlag in both German and in English. It contains approximately 200 pictures, illustrations and five fold-out panels. It will be 256 pages long.

On the occasion of R.B. Kitaj's 80th birthday this year, the Jewish Museum Berlin is holding a symposium in cooperation with the Akademie der Künste on October 25/26 with speakers from Germany, Great Britain and the USA.

Duration:

Berlin: 2 September 2012 - 27 January 2013

London and Chichester: 3 March - 9 June 2013

Hamburg: 26 July to 3 November 2013.

Kitaj Press Pictures for the theme rooms can be found on

www.jmberlin.de/fotodownload > Sonderausstellungen

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