

## **The Tate War – The Sandra Series**

**By Anne Vira Figenschou (Oslo)**

When Tate Britain invited R.B.Kitaj to hold a retrospective in 1994, they were inviting one of the most noted personalities of the art world. It was a great honour - especially to a living artist- and Kitaj was joining a very select group of artists such as Picasso, Francis Bacon, and David Hockney.

The exhibition was due to open through the summer of 1994, then travel to Los Angeles, and on to Metropolitan, New York over the coming year.

Running concurrently with the Tate exhibition, the Victoria and Albert Museum was staging a comprehensive exhibition of his prints, with a catalogue raisonné. Further, the Marlborough Gallery launched a sales exhibition of new works. So it was a broad presentation of Kitaj's work that year.

The catalogue for the Tate exhibition contained an extensive interview with Kitaj by Richard Morphet, and small essays – or what the artist calls 'prefaces'– on the exhibited works- penned by Kitaj himself. Many of these prefaces were hung as captions beside the works they discussed.

Most of the papers had been full of his praise prior to the opening. All offered insights into his life and work: as a figurative painter with a deep interest in literature, as an artist constantly exploiting the identity as a Jew and as an American in Europe. He was depicted not least as a painter of the grand tradition rubbing shoulders with Van Gogh, Picasso, Cézanne and Matisse.

When the doors opened to the exhibition on June 16, the press suddenly changed its tune. Or, rather, certain critics changed their tune. Although only a minority of the critical establishment, they were attached to some of the most influential newspapers of his generation - the same papers had been full of his praise prior to the opening.

Three of these abusive reviews came out on a Sunday, which is Britain's newspaper-reading day *par excellence*; the rest appeared within five days.

Just a few quotes:

16 June Evening Standard: ' **what he now offers us from these masters is wretched adolescent trash - a vain painter puffed with *amour propre*, unworthy of a footnote in the history of figurative art.'**

19 June The Sunday Telegraph **A navel-gazer's album of me, me, me'**

20 June, the Guardian: '. **We are in the slushy world of Teflon Ron and his non-stick pix.'**

28. June Independent: "**A little bit of fake Beckmann, a little bit of fake Picasso, but above all fake. (...) The Wandering Jew, the T.S. Eliot of painting? Kitaj turns out instead to be the Wizard of Oz: a small man with a megaphone held to his lips**

For Kitaj, as for the public, it must have felt like a bus coming out of nowhere. While few in actual number, they left a lasting impression. Kitaj was stripped of all his credentials as a figurative artist by the critics.

The reviews had a particularly devastating effect on Kitaj's wife, Sandra Fisher, who died from a cerebral haemorrhage shortly after the Tate Retrospective closed. Kitaj laid the blame for her death on the critics whose personalised vitriol was laced, in his opinion, with anti-Semitic, anti-American and anti-literary sentiments, common among the British cultural establishment

The US reviews took an entirely different approach. So did the art magazines. They were all generally sympathetic and appreciative.

From a professional point of view, the year following the exhibition was a good one for Kitaj. He was invited to paint portraits of President Clinton for the University of Oxford and Gustav Mahler for the Vienna State Opera. Further, a large tapestry based on his painting *If Not, Not* (1975,) was made for the entrance hall of the newly built British Library. He was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale. He also participated together with the School of London artists

in an exhibition at The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, where the reviews were largely encouraging –even writing that Kitaj was very unjustly mauled by the critics the previous year.

Everything could have calmed down by then.

However, when the Royal Academy summer exhibition opened, relations between Kitaj and the critics became more inflamed and personal than ever.

Kitaj's contribution to the show was a work called ***The Critic Kills***. It was a powerful testimony, this four-paneled painting with collage, also called ***Sandra One***.

Some time later, Kitaj explained why he decided to launch the *Sandra* series:

Sandra and I had always talked about doing a magazine. Now I have to do it alone, but I'll do it for the rest of my life. In part it has become a vehicle for revenge, a subject which [...] interests me more and more. But more poignantly, [...] it brings her back.

One panel contains a photo of Kitaj's late wife Sandra. Above the portrait, Kitaj has written the words 'SANDRA ONE', and to the right, a piece of paper is attached bearing the handwritten words: 'Instruction: This painting is a magazine. It is the first issue of an irregular art magazine called Sandra.'

Dominating another panel of the collage is the heart-rending statement in capitals: 'THE CRITIC KILLS'. Surrounding these words, fluid, blood-colored paint has been applied in rapid, expressive strokes. This panel contrasts strongly with the pure, light representation of Sandra on white background, at the opposite end. The work is signed 'By Ron and Sandra'.

In *Sandra One* Kitaj reverts to an approach in working he had used for a time in the Sixties where text is applied to image, a melange of painting and collage. He wanted then to explore how text and image could function together and how historical signifiers and symbols could be reused. There is nothing academic with

*Sandra One* - text, image and reality are interlocked, the image is an allusion of reality.

The message, quite simply, is an unveiled attack on the critics: 'The Critic Kills'.

And the critics lost no time in responding. The work affected deeply all who saw it at the summer exhibition. However the newspaper reviews had virtually nothing in common with the critics of two years before. Without exception, they avoided criticism of the work itself, the critics were either descriptive or explanatory.

And most importantly, they were reflecting over the role of the critic and the power he has on the artist – and the artist's power over the public.

One critic confessed that unreasonable reviews do reach the pages of the press from time to time. He offered however the artist some Scriptural advice, namely to turn the other cheek.

But Kitaj had no intention of following the Scripture. Quite the contrary!

Later that autumn, in October 1996, ***Sandra Two***, came out in connection with a solo exhibition arranged by Marlborough Fine Art in Paris. This second installment of Kitaj's 'avant-garde magazine' included a written part – an interview with Kitaj – and a visual part – the artworks. It also served as a catalogue for the exhibition

The interview addresses issues surrounding Kitaj's life following Sandra's death, the attacks of the critics and anti-Semitism in London, as well as Kitaj's interest in avant-garde and Jewish culture. The interview was entitled 'The gentle art of making enemies one hundred years later', a line taken from James McNeill Whistler, gave an idea of the direction the interview would take.

Kitaj discusses the way 'avant-garde' as a concept, is expected to be reserved for young artists, but adding that there *is* another avant-garde called *Giotto – Michelangelo – Cézanne – Degas – Matisse*, who created new art in extremely old age.' Kitaj links his own work to this tradition. It means, as far as Kitaj is concerned, an entirely personal art. He wants it to give Sandra a new lease of

life. *Sandra Two* is an example of this personal art; He cites Van Gogh: 'What lives in art and is eternally living, is first of all the painter, and then the painting' – a philosophy he knew he did not share with the British critics at the time, who were not fond of figurative - and certainly not personal - art.

In the interview Kitaj also speaks of his sense of alienation – his diaspora: Both he and his art originate elsewhere, which irritates and annoys people who refuse to take that into account. Kitaj wanted to return to his 'elsewhere', to that other culture, which for him meant the US. He maintains that anti-Semitism has always subsisted beneath the cultural and political veneer of all European nations, and that Britain is no exception. If an independent outsider like him emphasises the centrality of Jewishness to his work, it attracts derision.

He continues: "There is for me a Jewish aura which is a *personal excitement* within Modernism itself, and I intend to die re-inventing it for myself, (..). The language of hate can never be silenced, so I don't expect peace from cowards addicted to evil."

As mentioned above, throughout his career, Kitaj had exploited textual means to deepen and elaborate his visual work. In *Sandra Two* he adopts the opposite technique. Here the visual works deepens the text.

*Sandra two* rests foremost on Kitaj's deep sense of remorse at the loss of a wife and lover. A photograph of Sandra figures on the cover of the magazine, the same one Kitaj used in *Sandra One*. Another shows Sandra's gravestone.

The artworks includes Kitaj's tense relations with the critics expressed in **London Bus** (1996), a number of charcoals with erotic themes, and portraits of men of letters, politicians and artists with whom Kitaj felt a spiritual kinship, as for instance, *Clinton* (1996) and *Heine in Paris* (1996.)

This edition of the magazine also contains a pair of self-portraits, *Bad Hearing* and **Bad Teeth** (1994-96) from the humorous *Bad* series, composed in the 1990s, after he suffered a heart attack, plus a sensitive double-portrait called **I and Thou**, showing Kitaj the father, reading to his youngest son Max.

Another important work however, is *The Artist* (1996), a full-length self-portrait of the artist in the process of painting a portrait of his late wife. Sandra's body is only partly discernible, there is the one breast, her torso, a leg. Kitaj's right hand, placed close to her breast, keeps the canvas steady while his left hand carefully guides the brush over her cheek. Sandra's right leg looks as if she has already taken the step out of her own picture frame- into the space occupied by Kitaj. As if a picture is coming alive within the picture.

In 1992 Kitaj had painted *The Sculptor*. It shows a sculptor attempting to reincarnate his deceased wife by rendering her in stone. The text Kitaj attached to this painting for the 1994 Retrospective now seemed a terrible premonition of his own fate:

In his own words: "This is a painting of a sculptor I know [...] When his wife died a few years ago, he fell into utter depression. Angry, he refused to contemplate that their life together had ended just like that, because their marriage had been so very good [...] His grief was so profound that I was shocked into delight when he began to work on a larger than life sculpture in order to recall, if not to relive their marriage. It took me a while to see what he was up to...he wanted to keep the sculpture in a state of unfinish till the end of his own days.. "

Four years later, in the magazine caption for *The Artist* Kitaj wrote: "After the death of his wife, the artist tries to paint her into a kind of life."

To the extent that Kitaj was mentioned at all that autumn and winter, it was in connection with the sale of unsigned postcards for some charitable cause. Not a word was published on either the exhibition or *Sandra Two*. The general Jewish bias in *Sandra Two* may have had something to do with it. Was Kitaj right that anti-Semitism and xenophobia ran so deeply in the critical establishment that they wanted to assassinate him as an artist with their silence?

Kitaj had been contemplating a return to the US for years. Now that Sandra had died, he decided to depart from England with his son Max and resettle in California, where his other son Lem and his family lived. As a parting gesture the

Royal Academy, where Kitaj had been a member since 1985, invited him to organize a show for Gallery II

Three entire walls were filled with pictures from Kitaj's own collection from members of the School of London.

His own contribution was ***Sandra Three*** (1997,), an installation which filled the entire far wall. This edition of the magazine would not be passed over in silence by the press.

*Sandra Three* comprises a mixture of painting, collage, photos and quotes on two oblong wooden panels painted red and bright yellow. Centrally placed are two large paintings, *The Violinist with the Spirit of his Mother*, (1997,) and *The Killer-Critic assassinated by his Widower, Even*, (1997).

On either side of them, are small works by himself, a photo of Manet and a lithograph of Manet's *Execution of Maximillian* (1868) among others. Also the photo of Sandra, which appears in *Sandra One and Two* - and a piece of paper bearing the words 'the critic kills'. Thus are the two former editions of the magazine incorporated in this edition as a sort of intertext.

Additional items are book pages and quotes, one of which is Baudelaire's description of Manet: 'Monsieur: it seems you have the honour of inspiring hatred', and testimony from Manet himself: 'The attack against me broke in me the mainspring in my life', words that express fairly accurately Kitaj's sentiments on the eve of his departure from England.

The installation was supposed to be a temporary work and one which Kitaj had no intention of reconstructing at a later date. *The Violinist* was sold to a private collector in Boston, *The Killer-Critic* to the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo

These paintings are the two major elements in the installation.

***The Violinist with the Spirit of his Mother (1997)*** depicts an absorbed Max playing his violin. The dark shadow of Sandra – or her spirit – looms behind Max, enveloped in the colours of the spectrum, formed like a mandorla. It is as if this light also envelops the boy, giving him a supernatural air.

Between the almost pious rendition of the mother and child and Max's bare, green room, the contrast is stark. The attached quote, written on red paper, reads 'Painting in blood. A powerful story of love', an indication of the miserable state Kitaj must have been in at the time.

***The Killer-Critic Assassinated by his Widower, Even*** is the installation's central axis and predominating feature. From the right hand half of the picture two male figures with rifles are firing at an enormous, multi-headed monster that dominates the left half of the square canvas (152 x 152 cm). Both figures, painted red, also have erect, blood-red penises.

A yellowish substance is flowing from the penises towards the monster's mouth, from which emerges a long, insect-like proboscis – or rolled newspaper pages. It weaves its way across the canvas bearing the words in handwriting 'yellowpressyellowpress killkillkillkill the heretic always kill heresy', which leaves little doubt as to the symbolism of the monster: the entire critical establishment gathered together in a single, multi-headed monster.

Bloody hands are raised in self-defence, others pull at the monster's blood-stained jaws. Glaring eyes are blood shot. Insects are glued onto them. In large, black letters on a red background, the words 'HATE HATE', explained as a 'hack poem'.

One of the men is one-legged and carries a blood-dripping pen as though it were a revolver in a holster. The blood red paint has been applied to the canvas directly from the tube. As if the canvas itself is bleeding. The figure represents Édouard Manet.

When later asked to identify the main characters in the painting Kitaj replied:

The good guys are myself and Manet, both of us (Manet the far greater, Kitaj the lesser) among those many fools who have exposed themselves, not to art criticism but to warlike hatred and thuggery, with sometimes tragic results. So we shoot back in this painting as those attacked in war or those who encounter evil sometimes do. This picture is my little gift to Manet in heaven because he is one of my favourite artists.

The *scène* is a paraphrase of Manet's *Execution of Maximilian* (1868), which depicts Emperor of Mexico elected by the occupying French being executed by the Mexican troops. It hangs at the National Gallery and is again based on Francisco Goya's *May 3, 1808* (1814)

Substituting for Maximilian in *The Killer-Critic* is the many-headed monster, the target of Manet's and Kitaj's bullets.

Beneath the critic-monster is a sign bearing the word 'predella' in Kitaj's handwriting, a word used for a band of pictorial explanations on the lower edge of an altarpiece. But instead of an altarpiece we have the critic-monster, and the predella consists rather of Penguin paperback covers with titles like *The Murderer*, *Dialogue with Death*, *Capital Punishment*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *Men without Women*, etc. Under them Kitaj has written 'the killer-critic assassinated by his widower, even.' The inscription, a reformulation of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride stripped bare by her Bachelors, Even*. (1915–23) is also the title of the work.

Between Kitaj's legs, a torn out drawing of Pierre-Paul Prud'hon inscribed 'An eye for an eye: Head of Vengeance'. It seems as if Kitaj is soliciting support from the whole Western cultural history as he avenges himself on the critics. This support may well be what the third penis alludes to; it is placed next to Kitaj's and is constructed from the spine of a book. Like the third rifle it is aimed at the critic-monster. The quotations 'Blood will have blood', from Macbeth, 'mean men' and 'painting in blood', which also figure in *The Violinist*, are being 'fired'.

Across the top edge of the canvas a banner runs with the inscription 'art is the escape from personality', one of T.S. Eliot's aphorisms. Kitaj has changed 'from' with 'to', crossing out 'T.S. Eliot' and substituting his own name instead. This allows him to publicize his artistic program elaborated in *Sandra Two* and on which this installation is also based. It goes: 'Art is the escape *to* personality'. A razor is attached to the canvas together with a handout bearing the words 'protest and survive'. And it is in just such a spirit of protest that Kitaj is hitting back at his critics.

But the work evinces tenderness and vulnerability with the outline of a weeping angel in Sandra's profile integrated into Kitaj's body bearing a quote from Celan, 'I stand with you', together with the expression Picasso used for his lover Eva Gouel in some of his cubist works: 'Ma jolie'.

The apparently chaotic style in *Killer Critic* could stand for a man falling apart at the seams. It's as if he is shouting to the critics: 'I'm everything you've accused me of: quasi-Jewish, quasi-intellectual, a quotationmonger, hyper-sexed!'

But none of the picture's details are accidental. However chaotic and multifaceted this urge for revenge may be, the act itself is carefully planned and deliberate. More than anything else, the painting expresses revenge, revenge over the critics Kitaj which still felt had ruined his professional and private life. With this work Kitaj had reversed the situation that arose with the Tate exhibition. When, in his opinion, the critics killed his wife.

The violence of the work incensed the critics far more than the Tate exhibition ever did.

*(Between 27 May and 28 June 1997)* Within a month the major newspapers published more than twenty features – on some days there were as many as three of them in the same paper. They all commented on Kitaj's contribution to the summer exhibition. The pieces articulate in general a sense of shock over the sharp tone of the installation. One is commenting that the *Sandra* project, including its latest edition *Sandra Three*, is a mission impossible: 'It takes up an entire wall, illustrating a general theme, which is that criticism, all criticism, any criticism, is unfriendly to art, not to say life. And that Kitaj allows the public to ignore, or forget, quite how good, how interesting, how true an artist he is. Lots of eminent artists – Freud, Auerbach and, for that matter, even Picasso – have had their works torn apart by the critics without it affecting their subsequent work. It's a price you have to pay for a lively debate, rather than the boring press the USA is saddled with.'

It is interesting to note the need of critics to defend their published views. It is as if the personal tone of the *Sandra* series made people feel they had been singled out for criticism. Gone was the ironic tone of the Tate critics. Gone, too, the discussion on the role of the critic that emerged in the wake of *Sandra One*.

*The New York Times* diagnosed the conflict: "An artist is meant to create, a critic is meant to criticize and no one expects them to be happy bedfellows. But occasionally conflicts between artists and critics come to dominate the art and the criticism. [...] The war has become the event."

So what remained was a dialogue between critic and artist, which as far as the critic was concerned, was now more defensive than offensive. It is as if Kitaj now had the upper hand. What he said in the interview in *Sandra Two*, that he writes and paints better than the critics, had been vindicated. Did Kitaj deliberately plan to provoke the critics with this painting, to explore the essence of revenge?

And did he also have another agenda - was the *Sandra Series* a step further in his aim to create a Jewish identity - including the Diaspora - as he explained in the interview in *Sandra Two*?

It is interesting to note that Kitaj, at the same time as he sought to identify himself with the Diaspora, with the outsider, was so self-assured when it came to his place in contemporary art. Kitaj, it seems, needed this dual position - both as an insider and outsider to be able to define that other position he formed through his work and his remarks about his art. Thus, through the *Sandra* series, he sought to create a Diasporic 'I' which at the same time was an 'I' that happened to be one of our leading artists.

Kitaj adopted whatever working methods he felt were needed in the *Sandra* series. As in his earlier works, he was mixing freely the figurative with the non-figurative, collage and references to literature, artistic schools and styles, written and visual idioms.

So when Kitaj wanted to give a visual expression to vengeance in *Sandra Three* he found a model for his undertaking predictably enough in literature. As he wrote to Marco Livingstone at the time:

“Revenge Tragedy is a well-known tradition or genre in literature, drama and movies. Of course it attracted me because I wanted to Fight Back. (...) the concept of revenge plus Tragedy has entered into my ideas for the art of easel-painting, (...) as in my case, one can’t fight a Yellow Press on equal terms. (...) In any case, Revenge drama appeals to my various senses of what easel-painting can do now.”

He relocated historical persons to different temporal contexts and he constructed characters, inserting them into his own past or himself into theirs. Using Manet - using Duchamp. So even if it was one of Kitaj’s artistic project to tie art with life, his life, I feel he was constantly redefining who Kitaj actually was.

He filtered his own life and art through other art and literary allusions. The *Sandra* series may therefore also be seen as an example of Kitaj’s artistic program where the dividing lines between - the personal and the general, memory and history, symbols and allegories, fiction and reality, the visual and the literary - dissolve.

But one must not forget that a distinctive feature of *Sandra One*, *Sandra Two* and *Sandra Three* - and all the later *Sandra* magazines following these - is **Sandra** herself. Along with her portrait there are numerous pictorial and textual references. It is as if Sandra’s strength lived on in Kitaj, acting as a vital inner force. Her picture was the one he kissed in the morning and the last one he kissed good night until his own final farewell.