

## Untitled

### Obituary RB Kitaj

Brilliant American draughtsman whose deep interest in Jewish tradition sometimes clashed with his grasp of western art  
Michael McNay  
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#### Guardian

The Tate gallery retrospective exhibition of RB Kitaj's paintings in 1994 should have been the highest peak of his illustrious career. Kitaj, who has died aged 74, had been regarded as something between a seer and an elder statesmen among artists since he began to study at the Royal College of Art in 1960, the brilliant year also graced by David Hockney (who became his best friend), Derek Boshier, Peter Phillips, Allen Jones and Patrick Caulfield (obituary, October 3 2005).

American by birth, Kitaj had adopted London as his home. He had proclaimed an artistic School of London consisting, at the core, of himself, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Michael Andrews. It was a fictional notion, but because it came from Kitaj it is still commonly held to be a truth.

He was nearly as good a draughtsman as an early hero, Degas. "Kitaj draws better than almost anyone else," Robert Hughes once wrote. He was deeply intelligent. He was strong enough to challenge the formalist orthodoxies of the time. The Tate retrospective was preceded by respectful interviews in the national press. But it was a calamity.

Kitaj fell victim to a savage, personal, and almost universal assault by the newspaper critics. Within weeks of the opening, he was called to his mother's deathbed in America. While he was away, he received news that his second wife, Sandra, had died of an aneurysm, aged 46. He blamed the critics for her death. "My enemies intended to hurt me and they got her instead," he told the Guardian. Not long afterwards, he departed in bitterness and abiding anger to live in Los Angeles, where he spent the rest of his life painting variations on Sandra and himself together again as angels (los angeles).

Kitaj's story began in Columbus, Ohio. His mother, Jeanne Brooks, was married to a Hungarian who left the family home soon after her son's birth, and Kitaj took his surname from his mother's second husband, Dr Walter Kitaj, to whom he became very close. His mother and stepfather were Jews but professed atheism; Kitaj, too, grew up an atheist, but from the time he was at the Royal College and followed reports of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, his Jewishness became increasingly central to his life and work - and to his personal catastrophe.

At the age of 17, he joined the crew of a Norwegian freighter, but before this adventure his step-grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, had arrived in New York and triggered in Kitaj a sense of his own racial heritage. After this first voyage to Mexico and Cuba, he sailed to Europe, where he studied in Vienna at the Akademie der

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### Bildenden Künste.

He did his national service with the American army in occupied Germany, and because the US was involved in the Korean war he became entitled to a grant under the GI bill of rights to study at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford (1958-59). The master of drawing there was Percy Horton, who had been taught by WR Sickert, a former pupil of Degas, whose teacher had studied under Ingres: it was exactly the sort of lineage calculated to appeal to Kitaj's sense of history. Horton encouraged him to go on to the Royal College of Art.

For a while Kitaj - known as Ron to his friends but always RB to the world at large - was linked with the pop artists at the RCA. His brilliantly assembled images and colours in the work of this period, which was one of his best, give the impression of random collages assembled from glossy magazines, and indeed he did actually work on a collage construction with one of the first artists to utilise mass culture in his work, Eduardo Paolozzi (obituary, April 23 2005).

But Kitaj's eclecticism was both more literary and more rooted in art-historical references than pop ever was. His cast of characters runs from the murdered communist Rosa Luxemburg to Virginia Woolf, from the early cultural critic Walter Benjamin to TS Eliot, and he "prefaces" his paintings with explanatory texts, sometimes edited extracts from the learned Warburg Journal. He is not easy to place, and in some desperation the organisers of the exhibition at the centre of the centenary Venice Biennale in 1995, a celebration of the figurative art of the previous 100 years, had a stab at it by describing him in the catalogue notes both as "a kind of eccentric conceptualist" and "a sort of romantic traveller of the mind" - "kind of" and "sort of" are, of course, the giveaway.

Talking to me once about modern American abstract painters and their champion, the critic Clement Greenberg, Kitaj said: "There are people I respect, enlightened people, intelligent people, who seem to get visceral reactions from the conjunction of two colours. I've never felt that, so I guess I'm not a man of taste, as Greenberg says. Of course, he's right when he says that formal qualities can make or break a picture, but there may be some other qualities that can act in the same way."

For Kitaj, this way involved drawing on surrealism's anti-rationalism, though under the control of his wide range of literary reference (in itself out of phase with the zeitgeist) and with a distinctly late 20th-century tone - he would have been the first of the postmodernists, except that his quotations from past art lacked the lite irony of postmodernism: what he brought to bear, instead, was an intense seriousness and that increasing submersion in Jewish art that was to lead to his "Tate war".

Despite his disclaimers, his colours are beautiful and various, mediated by a delicately judged application. They can vary from the colour and texture of ripe peach to the anonymity of anti-rust paint. And though when it suited his case he denied that formal qualities were necessarily important, his surrealist-inspired accidents were increasingly based on pictorial ideas suggested by the masters - from Duccio, Uccello and Titian to Manet, Degas and Cézanne, and his flattened perspective owes as much to Piero della Francesca and the early Renaissance as it

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does to modernism - but the building in the background of his double-negative masterpiece, *If Not, Not*, based on Giorgione's *The Tempest*, is the gateway to Auschwitz, rather than the classical ruins in the Venetian original.

Kitaj read as much as he painted, and his growing awareness of the Jewish tradition of verbal exegesis and the desire to explain what his paintings were doing and saying led him to append texts. In the end it seems to have been this that caused the inundation by his sea of troubles. For we English, of course, seriousness is better cloaked in lightness of being. An artist who constantly invokes his masters - Degas, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso - and who often indulges in what Adrian Searle (not one of the "Tate war" critics) later said could be perceived as cultural heavy breathing, is courting disaster. Kitaj could not have known this. As Auerbach told him, he was a victim of a gap between cultures. This seems, in retrospect, more reasonable and more likely than Hockney's support of Kitaj's view that the critics had indeed killed Sandra, though the terms in which some of the criticism was couched were not merely blinkered but beyond the pale.

In Los Angeles, Kitaj's style loosened. He regarded Cézanne as the father of the host culture of western Europe (host to the Jews, that is), and Cézanne became the centre of his attention. In 2001, when the National Gallery invited him to return to London with a show to mark the half century that had passed since he first began to haunt the collection in Trafalgar Square, he produced an exhibition with the title *Kitaj in the Aura of Cézanne and Other Masters*.

The enterprise did not draw him back to London to stay, but the experience evidently healed some wounds. He had taken to being interviewed by British journalists only through emailed questions and answers, but as the bitter years receded he dropped his guard and was rewarded with respect and admiration. He is survived by his three children, two of them by his first wife, who also died; the third his son with Sandra.

· Ronald Brooks Kitaj, artist, born October 29 1932; died October 21 2007  
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