

## Appreciation

### R. B. Kitaj (1932–2007) and the Jewish Archive

David N. Myers

On October 21, 2007, the art world lost one of its most original creators, R. B. Kitaj. Kitaj, as he preferred to be known, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1932, was raised and educated in upstate New York, and left the country as a merchant marine at age seventeen. He studied in Vienna, Oxford, and London as well as New York City, and would gain renown as an expatriate American painter based in England for forty years. Working in close proximity to a coterie of friends, most prominently Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff, and David Hockney, Kitaj designated this group of figurative painters in 1976 “the School of London.” His own work, marked by the precision of a great draftsman, an explosively colorful palette, and an unrestrained intellectualism, drew wide praise throughout the world. But Kitaj was also the subject of often harsh criticism, particularly owing to his tendency to append erudite and often humorous commentaries to his paintings. This proclivity was present already in his first solo show at the Marlborough Gallery in London in 1963, entitled *Pictures with Commentary: Pictures without Commentary*. Thirty years later, a major retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1994 elicited scorn from the London art critics, many of whom held to the belief that “no amount of exegesis will improve paintings that fail for pictorial reasons.”

Gradually, Kitaj came to see his persistent commentarial practice as a decidedly Jewish act, part of the tradition of dynamic interpretation that characterized rabbinic Judaism from late antiquity to the present. The intuition present in 1963 developed into an ideological credo, stimulated by Kitaj’s voracious reading in Jewish history and philosophy. By the 1980s and 1990s, his commitment to the Jewish commentarial tradition brought him into increasing conflict with critics, whose negative view of his glosses struck Kitaj as thinly veiled antisemitism. Undaunted and even emboldened, Kitaj readily confessed not only that he was beset by “Jew-on-the-brain” but that he was embarked on a project to create a “JEWISH ART.” His inspirations in undertaking this project were not earlier Jewish artists, only a few of whom he held in high regard. Rather, they were the great Jewish intellectuals of the German cultural sphere—Benjamin, Buber, Einstein, Freud, Rosenzweig, and, of course, Kafka—whose work represented for Kitaj the essence of the agitated Jewish creative spirit. Marginality, displacement, and ceaseless innovation were the qualities of the Jewish intellectuals with which Kitaj, the American Jewish artist in England, so keenly identified—and which he often sought to convey in his art.

A good part of what made Kitaj so extraordinary was the quality of his mind. He was vastly learned and ferociously engaged in ideas. As one of the last great Jewish intellectuals

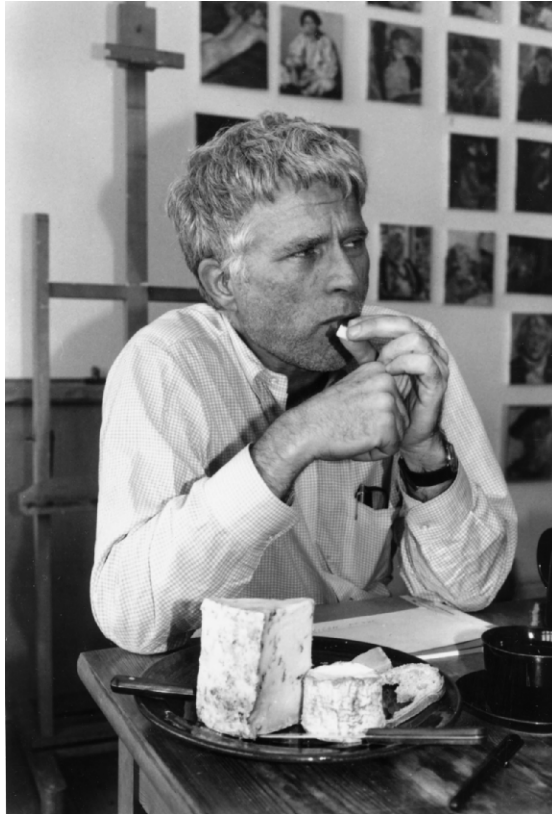
R. B. Kitaj, *Arabs and Jews (After Ensor)*, 2004. Oil, 36 x 36 in. The R. B. Kitaj Estate



of his generation, he loved to sit and talk with his many friends—fellow artists, as well as authors, philosophers, and other intellectuals and scholars. He loved to write too—not just letters to his colleagues or commentaries for his pictures, but also meditations on life, art, and the Jewish condition. I remember well the thrill of discovering sometime in the 1990s a secondhand copy of his intriguing, if rather unlinear, collection of thoughts on the relation between cultural displacement and creativity in his *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989). At the same time, I was powerfully drawn to the vitality of his painting, especially at the important Los Angeles County Museum of Art retrospective in 1995. Two years later, Kitaj would arrive in Los Angeles, having departed London in a fit of rage at the critics. He had spent a memorable year in L.A. in 1970–71 as a visiting professor at UCLA, during which time he met Sandra Fisher, whom he reencountered in London and married in 1983. Sandra’s sudden and tragic death from a brain aneurysm a few weeks after the close of Kitaj’s controversial Tate retrospective left him bitter. He blamed her death on the critics’ venom—and would remain lovesick for the rest of his life.

Still reeling from Sandra’s death, Kitaj and his young son Max settled in Westwood in 1997, a few blocks from the UCLA campus (and around the corner from his other son, Lem). Hearing of his proximity to UCLA, I invited him in June 1999 to give a lecture on the idea of Jewish art. From that evening until his death, we engaged in a wonderful

Lee Friedlander, *R. B. Kitaj*,  
*London, 1975*. Photo © Lee  
Friedlander, courtesy Fraenkel  
Gallery, San Francisco



ongoing conversation. I would call at his house at the designated late afternoon hour when, after a day of painting, he received visitors. We would discuss a wide range of topics including books, art, politics, and, if need be, baseball (Kitaj remained a lifelong fan of the Cleveland Indians). Although we lived ten minutes away from each other, Kitaj, in the tradition of his esteemed Weimar-era heroes, also wrote me letters and postcards, seeking clarification of various issues in Jewish history both ancient and modern.

One of the topics of keenest Jewish interest to him in these last years was the mystical tradition known as the Kabbalah. Guided through this esoteric tradition by the books of one of his favored Weimar Jews, Gershom Scholem, Kitaj was much taken by the license that the Kabbalah gave to the human interpreter in

deciphering the word of God. He remarked on its great allure in his *Second Diasporist Manifesto* (2007): “Infinite interpretability, infinite lights shine in every word, says Scholem on Kabbalah.” But the Kabbalah also provided him with a new theological vocabulary to express his longing and love for Sandra Fisher. She was the “Shekhinah,” the female part of the divine in the well-known imagery of the Kabbalah. By painting Sandra, Kitaj believed that he might be able to “seek communion with her in pictures.” This highly idiosyncratic belief accompanied him in the final decade of his career, during which time he rather self-consciously cultivated the persona of an “old artist.”

As he advanced in age, Kitaj became less and less enamored of living in a state of decrepitude. But he remained fastidious and precise—in painting as well as in preserving a written record of his life. He kept copies of all that he had published and much that had been written to and about him. Kitaj graciously agreed to donate this voluminous trove of materials—letters, sketches, ruminations, articles, and some books—to the Special Collections Department of the Young Research Library at UCLA. As we discussed the transfer of papers, we together began to conceive of them as the foundation of a future UCLA Archive of Jewish Culture. This archive would become, we hoped, the repository of Jewish cultural genius, as well as a stimulus to ongoing Jewish cultural creativity. Sadly, Kitaj died before the archive could formally be opened. But his exceptional life work as painter, thinker, and writer epitomizes the grand spirit of genius that stands at its core.