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## R. B. Kitaj, 1932-2007—An Appreciation

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The world of art, of ideas and of Jewish culture lost a towering figure this past week. R. B. Kitaj died Sunday in Los Angeles at the age of 74. Heralded as one of the great figurative painters of his generation, he was also one of the most erudite and provocative Jewish intellectuals of his era. As he often admitted, Kitaj was obsessed, both in his work and life, with the "Jewish Question," a complex forged at the intersection of a seemingly timeless anti-Semitism and the uniquely creative cultural genius of Jewish intellectuals, especially that of his favored late 19th- and 20th-century Central Europeans (among them Kafka, Buber, Benjamin, Scholem, Einstein, and Freud).

As a response to this Question, Kitaj self-consciously engaged in the creation of "Jewish Art" -- not in order to recreate or celebrate traditional Jewish rituals, but rather to depict personalities and themes that embodied the marginality, iconoclasm, and inventiveness of the modern Jewish condition.

Recognized as a master draughtsman, Kitaj delighted in appending to his pictures written commentaries, learned and witty meditations that he saw as continuous with the great interpretive tradition of the Talmud. This tendency drew the scorn of some art critics, who believed that he had surrendered the integrity of the visual image to ideas and words. One critic, responding to his 1994 retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London, asserted that "no amount of exegesis will improve paintings that fail for pictorial reasons." Kitaj regarded such criticism as motivated by a thinly veiled anti-Semitism, and moreover, responsible for the untimely death of his wife Sandra Fisher a few weeks after the closing of the Tate retrospective.

Enraged at the critics, Kitaj left London in 1997 after nearly 40 years in that city. He moved to Los Angeles, where he led a largely reclusive life, dwelling in proximity to his three children and actively painting and writing until his death. His days had a highly regimented quality, beginning with an early morning walk to a Westwood café, an hour of writing, a return to his art studio to paint, a later afternoon hour to receive visitors, and finally, an evening devoted to reading before retiring for an early bedtime.

Ronald Brooks Kitaj was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1932. After growing up in Troy, New York, he sought adventure by joining the merchant marine at the age of 17. Four years later, Kitaj commenced studies, first at Cooper Union in New York, then in Vienna, Oxford, and finally in 1959, at the Royal College of Art in London. In London, he met David Hockney, who would remain one of his closest friends throughout life.

He also befriended fellow Jews Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, and Leon Kossoff, and together they gained renown as the "School of London."

Following his first major shows in the 1960s, including at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1965, Kitaj won wide acclaim for his brilliant use of color, as well as for his willingness to resist the allures of Pop Art for the weightier traditions of Degas, Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse. At the same time, Kitaj nurtured his insatiable intellectual curiosity, making the acquaintance of a vast array of friends, including Isaiah Berlin, Philip Roth, Adin Steinsaltz, Susan Sontag and Leon Wieseltier.



Those who knew him were drawn to his broad and often wild autodidactic learning, thrilling conversation, keen humor and deep compassion. He was as well-read in art history, philosophy, literary and art criticism, and intellectual history as many practicing scholars in those fields. Moreover, he loved and felt compelled to write, as in his two manifestos on "Jewish Art" -- the "First Diasporist Manifesto" (1989) and the "Second Diasporist Manifesto" (2007). The latter, written in Los Angeles in the last years of his life, expressed the hope that "Jewish Art can be new, daring, unusual and risky."

Notwithstanding his own fealty to great interpretive and artistic forebears, Kitaj possessed all of those qualities in his own work. He was a gigantic innovator, a seminal figure in modern Jewish culture, and a loyal friend.

In January 2008, a pair of exhibitions devoted to Kitaj will open in tandem in Los Angeles. The UCLA Center for Jewish Studies will sponsor an exhibition based on Kitaj's newly received papers, "Portrait of a Jewish Artist: R. B. Kitaj in Word and Image," at the Charles E. Young Research Library Department of Special Collections. In parallel, the Skirball Cultural Center will present "R. B. Kitaj: Passion and Memory -- Jewish Works from His Personal Collection."

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