

R.B. Kitaj, *Annabel on Her Back*, 1980, Private Collection © R.B. Kitaj Estate, courtesy of Piano Nobile, London

## Kitaj in London

In 1958, a conspicuously American painter arrived in Britain. R. B. Kitaj was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and came to Europe with the aid of the G.I. Bill. He first settled amongst the dreaming spires of Oxford, attending the Ruskin School of Drawing for a year, before moving to London where he won instant recognition among painters, dealers and critics alike. For one so young and still studying at art school, it was an enviable start.

The philosopher Richard Wollheim, a life-long friend, remembered being impressed on a first visit to meet him in January 1963: 'Kitaj spoke emphatically, and with great seriousness. When he disagreed, he said nothing, but his silence was so intense that it changed the subject.'

London quickly became Kitaj's adopted home and one centre of his eclectic social milieu. As an American expatriate and a descendant of Eastern European Jews, he was acutely sensitive to issues of identity and belonging. In 1983, he wrote: 'I've never settled well anywhere, really,

just spent a lot of years in London.' He reiterated the point saying: 'I'm always leaving cities, every few years.' Later, he went on: 'I also seem to belong, now, to England and to London after all these years ... but I can say without hesitation that I don't fit in here and never will in any profound way.'

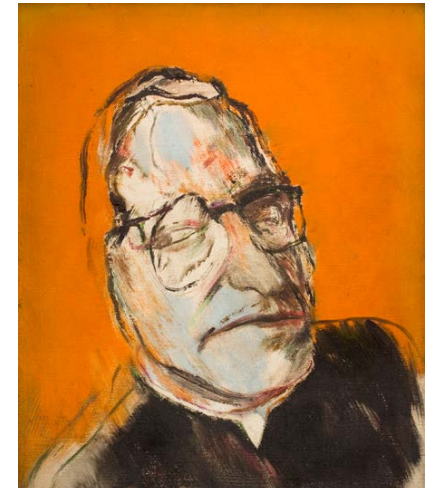
Despite his equivocating, Kitaj spent much of his life in London between 1959 and 1997. He travelled widely in that period, paying extended visits to Catalonia, Paris, New York and California, but he always returned to the home he made for him and his family at 62 Elm Park Gardens, Chelsea. He developed strong emotional bonds with people and places in London, forming a life-long friendship with David Hockney on their first day at the Royal College of Art in 1959, marrying his wife Sandra Fisher at the Bevis Marks synagogue in 1983, and coming to identify closely with the figure painting practised his London-based friends and contemporaries Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud and Leon Kossoff.

Following Sandra's tragic premature death in 1994, Kitaj sought to re-establish his life in Los Angeles, where he moved in 1997. He settled quickly in the agreeable anonymity of the suburbs, creating there a quiet working space at the heart of his family. (His eldest son Lem still works as a Hollywood screenwriter.) Kitaj's pictures came to be suffused with the sun-drenched atmosphere of the West Coast, and he used thinly applied layers of saturated colour to create hallucinatory figure subjects in a high key. The subtext to these pictures was frequently the profound feelings of grief and mortality that afflicted Kitaj in his final decade, as well as his recurring obsessions with Kafka, Cézanne's bathers, and the self-portraits of artists including Rembrandt and David Bomberg.

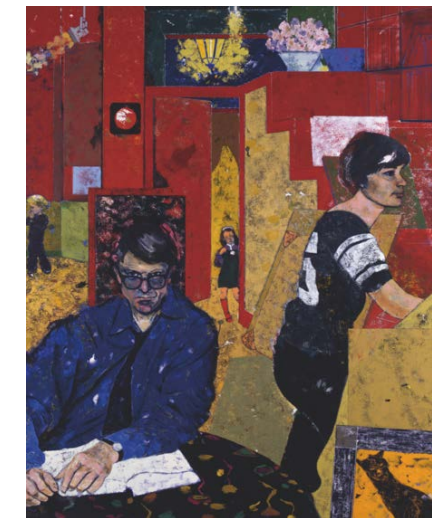
Driven by his omnivorous appetite for reading and a wide range of interests that spanned literature, history and politics, Kitaj's work underwent several radical changes of direction in the course of his lifetime. He established his reputation in the sixties as a 'collagist', bringing together found and original imagery in grand, multi-figure compositions that fused pop art methodology with literary allusions. He later disowned this approach, producing in the seventies post-impressionist pastels inflected with his admiration for Degas and Cézanne. From the early eighties, Kitaj began to use autobiography as a vital source for his pictures, ranging from early memories of his 'first time' in a Havana brothel to his personal struggles with melancholy.

This autumn, a retrospective of Kitaj's work will be held at Piano Nobile, London (25 October 2023 to 26 January 2024) – the first for a decade. R.B. Kitaj: London to L.A. will explore the artist's deep-seated connection to the places where he lived, focusing on London and Los Angeles as fixed points from which he ventured out into the world. For Kitaj, any sense of connection was tempered by his developed ideas about Jewishness, antisemitism and the fear of otherness. He lived in England for nearly four decades, yet he never assimilated – his American accent never wavered, he read the daily newspapers from New York and Los Angeles, and he was throughout his life a keen fan of baseball. These tensions are central to understanding his personality and his art.

The exhibition will include work from each phase of Kitaj's life, including several important large-scale paintings from the sixties on loan from Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, which was bequeathed a significant collection of Kitaj's work by his friends Colin St John Wilson and M.J. Long. Kitaj's portrait of them, *The Architects*, is included in the exhibition. Several rarely seen pastels from the late seventies and early eighties will form a further key section of the display, exploring Kitaj's discovery of life drawing and his personally distinctive handling of the nude. Among them is *Annabel on Her Back*, a palpable evocation of a female body redolent of Schiele in its frank sexuality. Many works in the exhibition will be available to purchase for the first time in a generation.



R.B. Kitaj, *Monsignor Ungar*, circa 1951-52, Piano Nobile, London © R.B. Kitaj Estate, courtesy of Piano Nobile, London



R.B. Kitaj, *The Architects*, 1981, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester © R.B. Kitaj Estate, courtesy of Piano Nobile, London