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Life and Culture

The Jewish artist who worshipped his wife

How R B Kitaj explored his Jewishness in his work, and made his spouse the Shechinah

BY ANTHEA GERRIE
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ART

Kitaj in his studio in 1973 (Photo: Sandra Fisher)

For a man who grew up without religion, RB Kitaj was obsessed with his Jewish identity. It started in London, where despite huge success as an artist he always felt like an outsider battling underlying antisemitism. When critics disapproved of his habit of writing commentary on his paintings, he saw it as an attack on the Talmudic tradition of seeking new meaning through interpretation.

In 1983 Kitaj married Sandra Fisher, his second wife, at London's Bevis Marks synagogue, committing the occasion to canvas. That included painting the chupah and famous fellow artists in kippot. It remains one of the most beloved pictures on display at the Tate. Six years later he summed up his sense of displacement and rediscovered Jewishness in what he called his "First Diasporist Manifesto".

But when he moved to Los Angeles in 1997 soon after Sandra's death, Judaism took centre stage for the artist. Here, in the last decade of his life, he embraced Shabbat rituals, attended seders with his children and machatanim and took a deep dive into Kabbalah which saw him re-casting his late wife as the Shechinah, or female presence of God.

"Deifying Sandra was chutzpah of the highest order for someone with no notion of God that would be familiar to Jewish believers," says Kitaj's close friend, the American academic Professor David Myers. "But he identified deeply with the modern Jewish condition and embraced it as his own."

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The Wedding by RB Kitaj (Photo: RB Kita estate)

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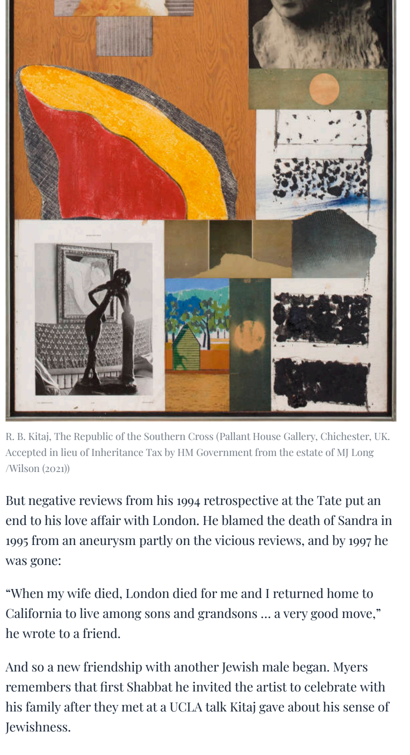
Now Sandra as an angel-winged Shekinhah and other Jewish subjects, including the Baal Shem Tov who founded Chasidism and journalist Hannah Arendt, famous for her coverage of the Eichmann trial, are on show in the first major UK Kitaj retrospective in a decade. The painter — who had film-star good looks in his youth — re-cast himself too, in the Los Angeles paintings of his later career, as a stereotypical aged Jew with a long white beard: "He had the tendency to take an idea and exaggerate it," says Myers, who believed Kitaj revelled in giving a performance.

In London, the performance element came out in those long texts he revelled in composing which were so disliked by everyone from critics to many of his colleagues. "But he came to understand that being uncomfortable was part of his condition, what it meant to be Jewish, a view that you had to live with estrangement," adds Myers, who is chair of Jewish History at the University of California in Los Angeles.

Ronald Brooks Kitaj, known only by his surname to most of his circle including Sandra, was the son of a secular Jewish teacher mother who married a refugee Viennese chemist after a divorce from her son's father; it was his stepfather who gave him his surname. Born in 1932 in Ohio, educated in New York, Vienna and England , he started his working life as a merchant seaman, and then settled in London in the 1960s, forming close friendships with David Hockney and Francis Bacon as well as Jewish artists Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. Kossoff attended his wedding and Hockney, Kitaj's former room-mate, was best man. The term The School of London was coined for the diverse group.

Kitaj's talent for draughtsmanship saw him compared with Degas — "he draws better than almost anyone else alive," said the art critic Robert Hughes — and from the 1960s onwards his work was collected by many of the world's major museums.



R. B. Kitaj, The Republic of the Southern Cross (Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, UK. Accepted in lieu of Inheritance Tax by HM Government from the estate of MJ Long /Wilson (2021))

But negative reviews from his 1994 retrospective at the Tate put an end to his love affair with London. He blamed the death of Sandra in 1995 from an aneurysm partly on the vicious reviews, and by 1997 he was gone:

"When my wife died, London died for me and I returned home to California to live among sons and grandsons … a very good move," he wrote to a friend.

And so a new friendship with another Jewish male began. Myers remembers that first Shabbat he invited the artist to celebrate with his family after they met at a UCLA talk Kitaj gave about his sense of Jewishness.

"First we exchanged correspondence about Jewish ideas, and then I invited him to Shabbos dinner. He loved the energy of it, the fast-moving conversation, the multi-generational dynamic which he hadn't had much exposure to outside his own family. The ceremonial aspect, the rituals, were part of what he liked; it was both educational and another way of stitching himself in the fabric of Jewish life."

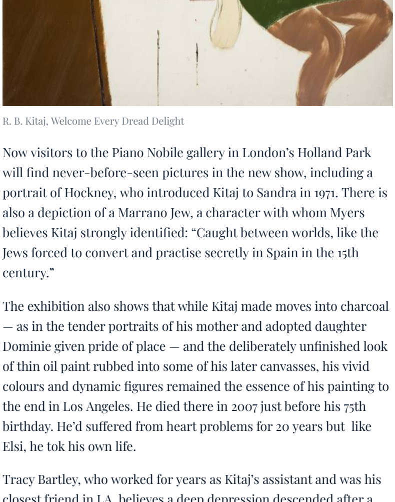
Kitaj in his Los Angeles studio in 2000 (Photo: Ethel Fischer)

Although Kitaj's first wife, Elsi, was not Jewish, their son, the screenwriter Lem Dobbs, married into a Jewish family, and the artist enjoyed seders with his in-laws. He may even have gone to shul once or twice."I know how struck he was by Bevis Marks and I sense he made his way there more than once, and as he was very friendly with Albert Friedlander, I wouldn't be surprised if he went to his synagogues as well," says Myers, referring to the former rabbi of Wembley Liberal and the Westminster Synagogue.

What Kitaj was even more hungry for in LA than challah, Kabbalah and conversation about big ideas was advice from Myers on how to fill out the ever-expanding shelves of the Jewish library which was a high point of his new home.

"He revered great Jewish intellectuals from Martin Buber to Walter Benjamin and Kafka, seeing them as capturing the tensions and conundrums of modernity," explains Myers.

Kitaj himself told the New York Times: "My mother was a lifetime atheist, and I went off to sea when I was 16, so I was not exposed to my own religion until middle life. The so-called 'Jewish question' began to obsess me some 20 years ago. Why these people are always in trouble interests me —t hey're always in trouble, and I'm always in trouble."



R. B. Kitaj, Welcome Every Dread Delight

Now visitors to the Piano Nobile gallery in London's Holland Park will find never-before-seen pictures in the new show, including a portrait of Hockney, who introduced Kitaj to Sandra in 1971. There is also a depiction of a Marrano Jew, a character with whom Myers believes Kitaj strongly identified: "Caught between worlds, like the Jews forced to convert and practise secretly in Spain in the 15th century."

The exhibition also shows that while Kitaj made moves into charcoal — as in the tender portraits of his mother and adopted daughter Dominie given pride of place — and the deliberately unfinished look of thin oil paint rubbed into some of his later canvasses, his vivid colours and dynamic figures remained the essence of his painting to the end in Los Angeles. He died there in 2007 just before his 75th birthday. He'd suffered from heart problems for 20 years but like Elsi, he tok his own life.

Tracy Bartley, who worked for years as Kitaj's assistant and was his closest friend in LA, believes a deep depression descended after a diagnosis of Parkinson's forced a change in the lifestyle of a man who had formerly started every day in the city walking to and from his favourite cafe. "He suffered terrible back pain and began to carry a cane, fearful his shuffle might cause another fall…Visits from curators, fans and friends became visits to various doctors." Of his depression she adds: "I now realise its magnitude was greater than I could imagine."

Kitaj left no instructions for the funeral attended only by his family. However Bartley believes it is telling that he had been searching for his birth father, Sigmund Benway, who was buried in one of the city's Jewish cemeteries: "There was this searching right at the end which came out of the mysticism."

RB Kitaj — London to Los Angeles is at Piano Nobile (piano-nobile.com) until January 26, 2024.

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