

visual art

RB Kitaj — the painter the critics loved to loathe


'UNMISSABLE MUSICAL THEATRE'
THE TIMES

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SUNDAY TIMES, DAILY TELEGRAPH, THE TIMES,
DAILY MAIL, FINANCIAL TIMES,
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'MAGNIFICENT SLICK, SEXY SOPHISTICATED'
THE I

'A STELLAR, ECSTATICALLY AFFIRMING, CELEBRATION OF LOVE, LIFE AND CREATIVITY. GRIT AND WIT - PURE CLASS'
SUNDAY TIMES

'IT'S THE MUSICAL THEATRE EQUIVALENT OF THE SUPERHERO TEAM-UP'
DAILY TELEGRAPH

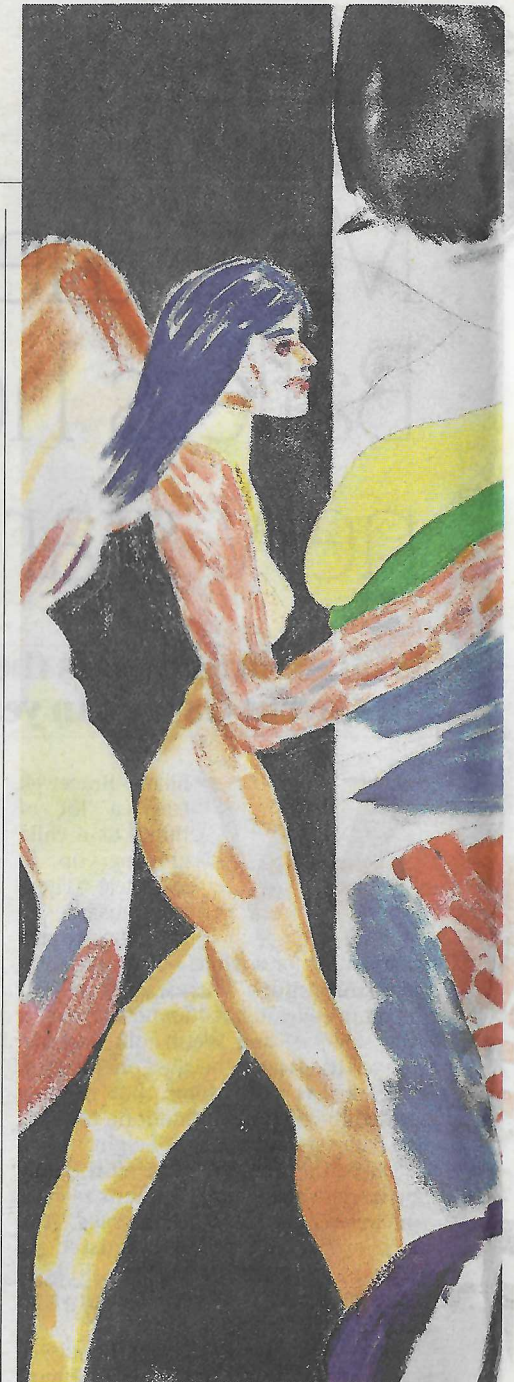


The artist's son tells Rachel Campbell-Johnston about his father's war with the critics, passion for women and suicide

It's an image to make an art critic blench. *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even* puts all those who follow my profession in front of a firing squad.

The American-born RB Kitaj painted this canvas in 1997. It was an outraged response to the critical savaging that his Tate retrospective had received. Riffing on Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*, he paints the goggle-eyed critic exploding. You can still feel the fury. It's there in a collage of splenetic slogans, in the violent clash of the colours, in the frenzied scrawl of the line.

Some argue that Kitaj had cause to be enraged. With hindsight it might look like a lynch mob assembled to trash him. He was "unworthy of a footnote in the history of figurative art", the Evening Standard said. His art was "constantly collapsing under the enormous weight of its creator's ambitions", The Independent declared.



GRIT AND WIT - PURE CLASS

SUNDAY TIMES

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DAILY TELEGRAPH



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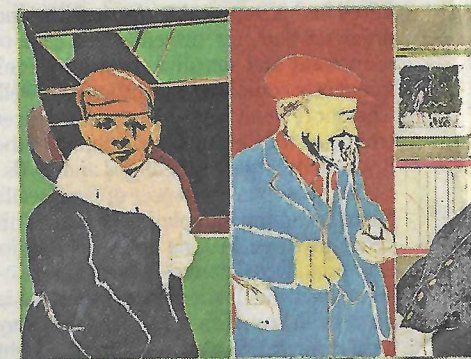
In the wake of the onslaught Kitaj's wife, Sandra Fisher, died, aged 47, of an aneurysm. The artist blamed the stress that was caused by critical cruelty. "My enemies intended to hurt me, and they got her instead," he declared and, retreating into self-imposed exile from his adoptive London, he returned to America, to a studio in Los Angeles, to nurture an obsessive loathing for British critics. Kitaj died by suicide in 2007 at the age of 74.

Given this backstory, it's hardly surprising that I felt nervous at the prospect of having a conversation with Kitaj's son. But the understated American whom I met over Zoom appeared far more disconcerted by technology than talking to me.

Kitaj's son enjoys a successful career as a Hollywood producer and screenwriter. He works under the assumed name of Lem Dobbs, a surname taken from a character in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. It was a film that he and his father loved.

"You could say that the name change was to distance myself from a well-known father," Dobbs says, but that wasn't his main reason. "It's a difficult name. I was used my whole life to seeing articles about my father and then they had to spell it out phonetically afterwards: Kit-eye."

This month Piano Nobile will be showing *RB Kitaj: London to Los Angeles*, the first retrospective of Kitaj's work to be held for ten years in London, the city that he made his home from 1959 until 1997.



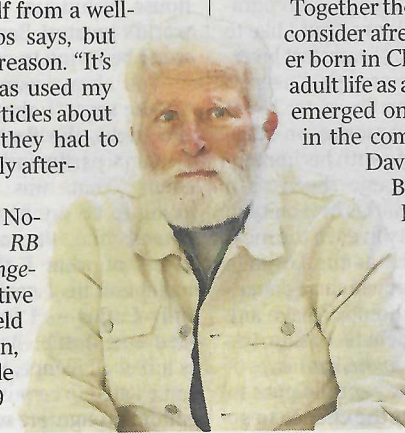
It will include rarely seen work from the Fifties; groundbreaking collage pieces from the Sixties when he emerged as part of the British pop movement; sketches of family and friends and bright canvases packed with his obscure references from the Seventies; as well as works from the Eighties and the increasingly expressionistic style of his final period in LA.

Together they will offer a chance to consider afresh the talent of a painter born in Cleveland who began his adult life as a merchant seaman and emerged on the postwar art scene in the company of such peers as

David Hockney, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach. "I wish I had appreciated it more at the time,"

Dobbs says. "But to me, then, they were just dad's friends. I

always remember my father saying that whenever he





mind”) although he suggests that the whoring — “it wasn’t hidden at all... there wasn’t the political correctness of our time and I suppose it was seen as the male prerogative” — may have led to unhappiness.

Kitaj met Fisher soon afterwards. They married and had another son. Fisher, Dobbs suggests, was “more indulgent” of the womanising. “She let him have his life.”

However, Dobbs also describes his father as a “quiet, restrained man”. He didn’t smoke or drink or take drugs and he didn’t like parties. “As far as I was concerned, he was just an ordinary dad who arranged dinner or brought us takeaway hamburgers and fries and loved movies.”

He kept his energy for his art. He was always working “productively and prolifically”, as Dobbs says, his ambition to revive a tradition of history painting. “Degas said that making a picture is like the perpetration of a crime,” Kitaj said in the Auerbach interview. “And it’s so true, because you take things from everywhere.”

Kitaj is particularly known for his fascination with his Jewish roots, an obsession that Dobbs believes has been overplayed. “It was one among many subjects that interested him. But I think it has become exaggerated to some extent.”

It is a pity, Dobbs thinks, that what his father called “the Tate war” should have come to define him in so “outsized” a way. “Of course it’s hard to deny it and it’s hard to dismiss it... it became such a big thing. And of course my father was as much responsible for it becoming a big thing as any of his detractors.” The critical onslaught and the death of his wife became inextricably linked in Kitaj’s mind, Dobbs suggests.

“So he became very interested in the concept of revenge. He would retreat quietly and read [Thomas Middleton’s play] *The*

invited Francis to tea or dinner, he was always ready to come at a moment’s notice... that gives a sense of his loneliness, I suppose.”

Kitaj shied away from interviews. As he told the film-maker Jake Auerbach (son of his lifelong friend Frank) in 1994, he refused because he was “the least spontaneous of men”. But in this (carefully scripted) interview, he offered a glimpse into his private life — and not least into a “lifelong addiction to whoredom” discovered while a merchant seaman plying what was apparently known as “the romance run”.

“I’m not out to shock anyone,” Kitaj insisted. “Everyone does sex, everyone is attracted to sex, and we all know that the urge keeps repeating itself and so one’s sensations lead one by the hand.” He enjoyed erotic art and erotic situations, he told his interviewer. “Women and men as a subject in painting can help bring beauty and good cheer and erotic pleasure.”

Elsi, Kitaj’s first wife and Dobbs’s mother, killed herself in 1969. Dobbs does not blame his father (“it never crossed my

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NARRATED BY DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

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Los Angeles No. 16 (Bed), 2001. Below left, from top: Junta, 1962; RB Kitaj

RB Kitaj: London to Los Angeles is at Piano Nobile, London W11, Oct 25-Jan 26

Revenger's Tragedy. It became an inspiration. "It's a cliché of artists that they are ruthless at using anything as fuel, anything that will make you sit down and attack another canvas or another piece of writing... however unhappy it makes you."

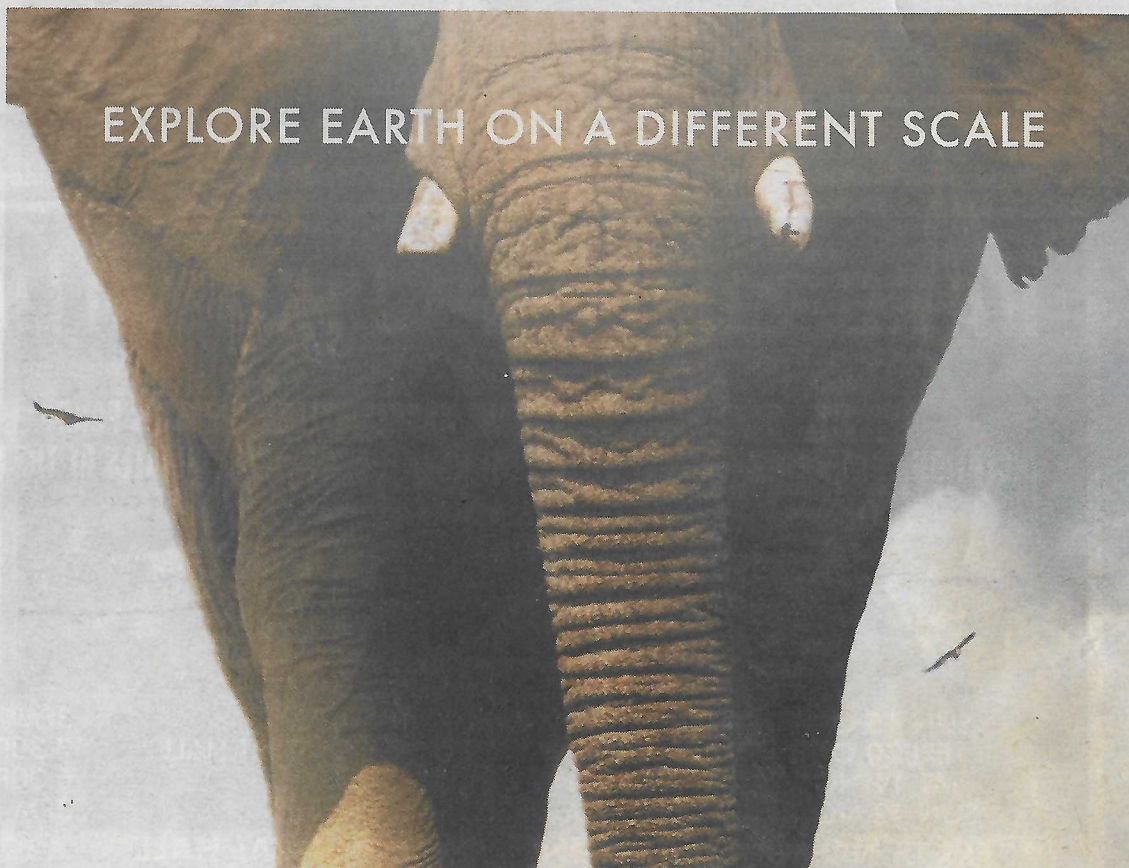
"That Tate war period was awful," Dobbs says. "That show was meant to be a summation of his career, a victory lap. And it did seem that that particular lynch mob of critics had launched an unwarranted and shamefully vitriolic attack."

Yet Dobbs would like to emphasise that his father had a great sense of humour. "If

only he could have just laughed it off," Dobbs says. But he had a history of depression, and Parkinson's in older age exacerbated this. Kitaj worked until he feared that, before long, he would no longer be able to, and took his own life. "I think that life without painting was something that he couldn't envision," Dobbs says.

By the time of his death his rage at the critics had blown over. "I think he would be very pleased to have this show," Dobbs says, "to find that his work was still of continuing interest, that his name was still something to conjure with."

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