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**Kitaj**  
Archive

## Kitaj retrospective finds sanctuary in the US after cyclone of abuse at Tate

University College, Oxford, has commissioned R.B. Kitaj to paint a portrait of President Clinton (a former Rhodes Scholar) for the school's Great Hall, but the honour hardly compensates for the American expatriate's treatment at Tate

**Jason Edward Kaufman**

31 March 1995

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It is difficult to imagine what could have spurred the critical dung storm that buried the “R.B. Kitaj” exhibition as soon as it opened in London last summer. Surely it wasn't the art alone. Fortunately for the artist, whatever caused that episode seems not to have crossed the Atlantic.

Though no American critic has waxed rhapsodic about the thirty-five-year retrospective of paintings and drawings (which travelled from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to the Metropolitan, where it closes 14 May), neither has any unleashed the outright disdain still echoing through the halls of the Tate.

Then to what can the more pacific American reception be attributed? Can it be Anglophilia? Or

perhaps even American amour propre? The latter seems plausible, recalling that LACMA gave the artist his first museum show (1965), and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington his first retrospective (1981-82, which toured to Cleveland and Düsseldorf).

The mollifying factor has not been the American museums' removal of the artist's texts from the wall—where they had been the target of countless British barbs. Quite the contrary, LACMA deployed the explicatory prefaces just as did the Tate, and with the unforeseen felicitous effect of inspiring one West Coast critic (Kenneth Baker) to observe that the commentaries “invite us to see his pictures as his dreamlike idiom of response to events in twentieth-century culture and history”. Quite a foil for the British paper *The Independent's* headline, “Draw draw is better than jaw jaw”. The Metropolitan avoided any objections to the quirky verbiage, and any deflections from the strictly visual encounter, by consigning the prose to the catalogue and a free brochure.

Nonetheless, East Coast critics have tended to be less generous in their estimates of the legitimacy of Mr Kitaj's literary leanings, at least vis-à-vis his visual, as opposed to verbal, output. All have praise for Mr Kitaj's drawing, and questions about his pictorial capacity to convey complex themes. Yet, neither damning nor overly enthusiastic, Americans have treated Mr Kitaj's show evenhandedly. Attendance at both American venues is surpassing the 40,000-plus at the Tate: 50,000 visitors turned out in Los Angeles, and 30,000 have seen the show in New York with two full months left.

What the critics said

Kenneth Baker

The San Francisco Chronicle

Whereas facile quotation and pastiche typified most so-called neo-Expressionist painting of the Eighties, Kitaj's borrowings from his heroes...never appear unearned....The discontinuity of the images, casually healed by improbable harmonies of color, the figures' unreality countered by the promise of honesty a fine drawing hand always makes - these qualities cut across changes in technique and content that Kitaj has made in the past thirty-five years.

Robert Hughes

Time Magazine

The trashing he got in England was absolutely ludicrous. (I think Andrew Graham-Dixon is an intelligent young critic, but I vehemently disagree with his judgment on Kitaj.) I think it probably had to do with how some critics objected to Kitaj's own prefaces to his paintings, and it's true some of these were rather pretentious. But in the end, we have to judge the paintings rather than what the artist writes about them.

No artist with any ambition can reach the age of sixty-two without producing his or her share of failed pictures. Kitaj has, but he remains an artist of real, sometimes of remarkable interest: a restless omnivore whose way of painting, part personal confession, part syncopated history and part allusive homage to the old and Modernist masters, is quite unlike anybody else's today.

Michael Kimmelman

The New York Times

Now that the retrospective is here you may well wonder what all the fuss was about. If you go to the Met expecting another Freud exhibition, meaning one as galvanic and intense as the show of his work the museum had a year back, you'll be disappointed. This show has its inspired moments, though Mr Kitaj is a painter whose ambitions outstrip his art. He deserves credit for those ambitions, and certainly not the caning he got in the British press. But his paintings can sometimes be abstruse and pretentious, and there are too many weak recent pictures on view to come out of the Metropolitan with more than mixed feelings. A Kitaj exhibition now at Marlborough Gallery in Manhattan includes some better new work that doesn't alter the bottom line.

...He tries to blend in his work grand themes of history, literature and philosophy, along with aspects of his own biography. And in recent years especially, his art has dealt in Jewish subjects, including the Holocaust. These dignified goals have made him an intellectuals' darling. But it has also often made his paintings appear hermetic, bookish and dry. When he borrows from other artists, the borrowings can stand out as if in quotation marks. "Look how clever I am," he seems to be insisting.

Jed Perl

The New Republic

...As a painter, he has an imagination that is larger than life, so much so that there are rooms in

the retrospective where nothing that he imagines is plainly, simply alive as art. He turns his intellectual gifts into hyperbolic effects. He wants everything from his figures: he means them to hold together complicated allegories involving themes such as memory and obsession, which I can't help concluding must be painting-proof.

Deborah Solomon

The Wall Street Journal

One suspects that American audiences will react more sanely to this artist who is in fact neither genius nor fraud, but a quirky bibliophile-in-paint....Is Mr Kitaj any good? On the plus side, he draws beautifully and seeks to infuse his art with the fullness of lived experience. On the minus side, [he] can seem disappointingly British: he's a little too literary for his own good. The Metropolitan show...veers between subjects culled from books and brothels. It presents a clubby, slightly self-absorbed world where Londoners ponder weighty questions among well-connected friends, and everyone is either a Jewish intellectual, a weary streetwalker or a famous artist such as David Hockney.

Edward J. Sozanski

The Philadelphia Inquirer

...Generally, Kitaj's drawings are far less pretentious than his paintings....

Kitaj's drawn portraits...are especially fine. There's a feeling of wholeness in them that the paintings generally lack, perhaps because the drawings represent modest goals.... The wedding picture shows that Kitaj can be a stimulating artist when he's dealing with subjects he knows intimately. When the feeling of engagement is lacking, then his paintings fail to read as anything more than jazzy, enigmatic designs.

Mark Stevens

New York Magazine

...Kitaj is surely Greenberg's nightmare. There is no purity in his work. There are no clear boundaries. There is rarely the visual resolution an austere critic might wish. Nothing quite comes together. The meat often seems inadequate for the hunger.

...Kitaj is an artist whose unvarnished individuality expresses something essential about the

present. His hunger is so great - he brings so much to bear from so many different directions - that, paradoxically, his art leaves the mind filled with a powerful sense of what is now missing. He is a history painter, for example, for a period without history - or with too much history. He is a sensibility at large in its predicaments.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as *'Who will stand up for Kitaj?'*

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