

ARTFORUM

R.B. Kitaj

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R. B. Kitaj, *Arcades (After Walter Benjamin)*, 1972–74,
oil on canvas, 60 × 60".

In 1994, the Tate Gallery in London mounted an immense survey of R. B. Kitaj's work. Intended to be the American-born painter's English apotheosis, it resulted instead in the brutal rejection of his achievement. And then Kitaj's wife, the American painter Sandra Fisher, died. For Kitaj, she incarnated the indwelling Shekinah, the Kabbalistic personification of the female nature of God. In the current exhibition, titled "The Exile at Home," she was present in works

such as *I Married an Angel*, 1990, and *Los Angeles No. 16 (Bed)*, 2001–2002. These works also reveal a folkloric mode found, say, in Judaica such as the Haggadah (the Passover book that sets the order of the service) or the decoration (rainbow-tipped angel wings, geometrical ornaments derived from six-pointed stars, and the like) on ketubot, or marriage contracts. After the Tate show, Kitaj returned home a somewhat broken figure to a final, comparatively brief, Los Angeles exile.

Cleveland-born, contrarian by nature, Kitaj's early *Wanderjahre* lead him through a patchwork of vocations until he finally was ceded a place above the salt at the London table, long a home to Americans (think Whistler or T. S. Eliot) and a hotbed of Zionist socialism. In London, Kitaj joined forces with figures such as David Hockney and Peter Blake, though he ultimately manifested greater affinities with the Central Europeans of the London School, painters such as Leon Kossoff, Frank Auerbach, even Lucian Freud—all of whom were marked by what Kitaj identified (particularly in his own work) as *diasporism*.

To be sure, Kitaj's hyper-cathexis with *Mitteleuropäisch* Jewishness would be a teetering superstructure that easily invited disputatious derision—the assertion that his work claimed too much and offered too little to see. I don't agree, but such were the views of the British critics of the day. Kitaj felt that the options open to the diasporist (at least during the *Hitlerzeit*) were incarceration or suicide—two choices available at the end of the life of Walter Benjamin, Frankfurt School philosopher and art theorist and Kitaj's avatar elect. Cornered at the French–Spanish border in 1940, Benjamin killed himself.

“The Exile at Home,” curated by *Artforum* contributor Barry Schwabsky, served as a deeply affecting career survey that, in its broad borrowings (there were thirty-two paintings) touched on Kitaj's manifold, often virtuoso, achievements. Here were paintings from the mid-1960s, when his tight, bright compositions evoked parallel efforts by Hockney, Patrick Caulfield, and Allen Jones. *The Nice Old Man and the Pretty Girl (with Huskies)*, 1964, instantly placed him in the epicenter of Brit Mod Pop. Later, *Arcades (After Walter Benjamin)*, 1972–74, revealed Kitaj's truest Central European heart. *Germania (The Tunnel)*, 1985, contrasts the architecture of Van Gogh's *Corridor in the Asylum*, 1889, with a self-portrait as an elderly man and a child both en route to the ovens of Auschwitz. Such densely emotional imagery virtually posits the necessity for the curative, aerated modesty of the paintings made in Los Angeles. These late works owe much to the watercolors of Cézanne, their curious Morse code–like dashes of light, spotty paint typified by *Los Angeles No. 1*, 2000. In the wake of the virtuosity that marked the midpoint of his career—exemplified in the vast, near-Fragonard powderiness of his *Pacific Coast Highway (Across the Pacific)*, 1973—Kitaj might also have regarded as insufficiently ambitious the works he made while exiled in La-La Land, and this could only have added to his gnostic despair. He chose to end his life there in 2007 at the age of 74.

—Robert Pincus-Witten