

Art in America

OCTOBER 2003

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS



R.B. Kitaj: *Los Angeles No. 11 (Bathtub)*, 2002-03, oil on canvas, 36 inches square; at L.A. Louver.

VENICE, CAL.

R.B. Kitaj at L.A. Louver

R.B. Kitaj's "Los Angeles Pictures," made since the artist returned to L.A. from London in 1997, are full of brooding, philosophical kneading, syrupy longing, informed commentary and amusing jokes. They're akin, that is, to the work he's been making for decades—rich, troubling, highly personal. In the new paintings, Kitaj enacts encounters with his late wife, Sandra Fisher, whom he met in L.A. in

1970. Fisher died suddenly in 1994, and since Kitaj moved back to southern California, he attests to reconnecting with her, his "angel."

Los Angeles No. 18 (2002) is among his most naked acts of yearning. Kitaj paints himself in bed, an image of Sandra standing beside him, not ghostlike but lithe and alive. He reaches his arm up under her simple shift, to the warm comfort between her legs. A grieving angel adorns her breast, another cries out from under the covers. It's a scene of tragic distance, painted in an insistently vital palette of crimson, gold, emerald and cobalt. Again and again, Kitaj paints scenes of contact: he and Sandra in the bathtub, dancing together or reaching across the inky divide that separates his fully chromatic world from the spare, sketchy realm she inhabits.

Sandra is the direct object of Kitaj's attention here, but these paintings also continue his running dialogue with what he regards as his loyal friends—the artists, texts and ideas he has

absorbed over his 71 years. Matisse is one of his most abiding mentors, Cézanne another. There are also borrowings here from film, Yiddish theater, Giotto, Rembrandt and more. Kitaj revels in the disorientation generated by this abrasive mix of sources. In one piece, he draws himself in the guise of one of Weegee's distortion photographs, as an armed gangster with an unnaturally broad chest, but also with his own older man's beard. In another image, he paints himself as a Mondrian abstraction, the hints of his profile enough to jar the harmonious verticals and horizontals out of alignment. And in yet another self-portrait, his face seems trapped between the diagonal crossbars of the Roman numerals signifying the current century. It's a funny image, but what these deeply interesting works attest to is just the opposite, that Kitaj doesn't observe the constrictions of time. He acts the diasporic wanderer, outside of any given era and looking in, assimilating its offerings but setting down no deep roots. Kitaj's exultant palette and restless stroke define him as a painter, but the complications in his work mimic those of mediums that unfold over time, like cinema and fiction. His is a relentlessly energetic, deliciously sentimental, powerfully intelligent art.

—Loah Oilman