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## R. B. Kitaj: The Tate Fiasco and Some Key History Paintings

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R. B. Kitaj, who had been one of the major figures in the European painting scene since 1960, was given a retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1994. This tribute, a great honor for any artist whether living or deceased, resulted in a disastrous reception by the London press. His critics' vitriolic opinions and the painter's responses are summarized in this article. Kitaj, the Diasporist, a term he coined for those like himself whom he sees as marginalized, is too "literary" and too Jewish for British taste. Painting, for Kitaj, who was an American expatriate for forty years, is a personal voyage, and a select sampling of his history canvases reveals his deep attachment and concern for the plights of family members and close friends during the Holocaust. These paintings, as interpreted in this article, indicate how Kitaj belongs to the tradition of the learned painter in an oeuvre devoted to historical remembrance.

The intellectually demanding art of R. B. Kitaj (b. 1932), who has been referred to by the noted art critic of *Time* Robert Hughes as "the best history painter of our times,"<sup>1</sup> clearly reveals that the Holocaust fascinates and haunts him. Kitaj, an American who lived in London for nearly four decades, repatriated to this country in 1997 and now lives in Los Angeles. While the English art scene since 1960 cannot be understood without mention of his strong pres-

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Hughes, "Singular and Grand Britons," *Time* 6 (April 1987): 83.

ence, Kitaj was hailed in 1987 by the late William Lieberman, former curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as “the greatest living American artist.”<sup>2</sup> Kitaj’s greatest preoccupations are his Jewish identity and his compassion for victims of the Nazis. He developed an extensive treatment of the Holocaust through paintings, drawings, prints, and a book, all of which reveal his deep bond to his Jewish roots.<sup>3</sup> Powerful statements indicate his commitment:

[A] central condition for me has been the murder of the European Jews. Winston Churchill wrote, “This is probably the greatest crime in the whole history of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

His Holocaust art, one of the most moving bodies of work on this topic, shows both attachment to family history and physical reminders of the horrors he saw while living and traveling in Europe. Several examples will be discussed here to illustrate his empathy. The works will provide a sampling of the erudition with which he feels compelled to treat the atrocities of the Holocaust as a painter and as a Jew with close associations to Nazi persecution. His stepfather, Dr. Walter Kitaj, was forced to flee his native Vienna during the Third Reich. His paternal grandmother, Helene Kitaj, whose family was

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<sup>2</sup>William S. Lieberman, quoted in Sylvia Hochfield, “Thoroughly Modern Met,” *Art News* 86 (February 1987):117.

<sup>3</sup>Marco Livingstone, *R. B. Kitaj*, rev. ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992). The following plates from this book reveal the artist’s interest in the Holocaust (its perpetrators, its victims, and its aftermath in the modern world): 30, 44, 57, 91, 94, 113, 114, 143, 146, 155, 161, 164. Also see my article, “R. B. Kitaj’s *Go and Get Killed Comrade—We Need a Byron in the Movement*,” *Schatzkammer der deutschen Sprache, Dichtung und Geschichte*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (1991): 21–29. Also see my chapter, “R. B. Kitaj: Painting as Personal Voyage,” in Laura Fattal and Carol Salus, eds., *Out of Context: American Artists Abroad* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Inc., 2004), pp. 145–160. Also in Richard Morphet, ed., *R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (Millbank, London: The Tate Gallery, 1994), figs. 75, 76. See also the artist’s *First Diasporist Manifesto*, which contains numerous discussions of his thoughts on the Holocaust and how he has translated them into his work. The text also includes many illustrations of his work on this historic epoch, including a photograph he took in 1972 in Warsaw of a Gestapo prison, p. 52. See also text by Anne Atik and R. B. Kitaj, *Drancy* (London: Victoria Miro, 1989). This collaborative effort was the result of their visit to the camp that served as a transit station for those deported to Auschwitz and camps farther east. The book, which has illustrations and text, was published in a limited edition of 300 signed copies.

<sup>4</sup>R. B. Kitaj, quoted in “A Return to London: R. B. Kitaj Replies to Some Questions Put to Him by Timothy Hyman,” *London Magazine* 19 (February 1980): 21.

exterminated, found refuge in Sweden and could only join the Kitaj family in America after World War II.<sup>5</sup> The artist grew up among family friends, many of whom were refugees from Nazi Europe. His mother, Jeanne Brooks, was an American-born daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants. His art, as will be demonstrated in this study, indicates his strong feelings for those who experienced these tragic circumstances during the Holocaust of uprootedness, terror, and death.

Before discussion of some of his Holocaust works, it is important to acknowledge the painter's complex identity. Kitaj is certainly well established among Jewish literary circles, but he also belongs to a distinguished tradition of American artists and writers, including James McNeil Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Jacob Epstein, Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, who chose to live in England. The self-imposed exile expressed his connection to them when he stated, "London is home in the sense that it was for Henry James, Eliot, Whistler, and Sargent."<sup>6</sup> He once said he moved to England not only to study at the Ruskin School in Oxford but also "because James and Eliot and Pound had gone there 50 years before. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Kitaj's art, which draws on history, film, poetry, novels, sex, and philosophy, as well as on social and political figures and issues, is in the collections of many major European and American museums, and his work is frequently featured in important exhibitions. The inheritors of many traditions and identities, Kitaj's art during the past thirty years has constituted one of the most distinctive bodies of work within the British art world, where it has been correspondingly influential. Moreover, he has remained one of the most visible figures in the European painting scene since the mid-1960s.

Among notable tributes from his adopted country has been Kitaj's election in 1985 to the Royal Academy of Arts; the only American since Benjamin West in the eighteenth century and John Singer Sargent in the nineteenth century to have achieved this recognition. He is, in fact, among only nine Americans to ever have been elected to the Royal Academy of Arts. In

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<sup>5</sup>For information on Helene Kitaj's plight, see my article, "R. B. Kitaj's *Murder of Rosa Luxemburg*: A Personal Metaphor," *Jewish Art* (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, Hebrew University, 1990–1991), Volumes 16–17, pp. 130–138.

<sup>6</sup>R. B. Kitaj, quoted in Jerome Tarshis, "The Fugitive Passions of R. B. Kitaj," *Art News*, Vol. 75, No. 8 (Oct. 1976): 42. See also Dan Hofstadter, "Annals of Art: Dungeon Masters (on the School of London)," *The New Yorker* (November 12, 1990): 54.

<sup>7</sup>Kitaj, quoted in Tarshis, "The Fugitive Passions," p. 42.

1995 he received the Golden Lion Painting Award, one of the most prestigious international awards in painting, at the XLVI Venice Biennale where he was a British representative. In addition to honorary doctorates and numerous awards, he became a Chevalier des Arts et Lettres in Paris, bestowed by President Chirac in 1996. Kitaj's commissions include: in 1995 an invitation to the White House to draw a portrait of President Clinton, for which he was selected by University College, Oxford, where his pastel portrait of the American president now hangs alongside the faces of other notable alumni. The artist in 1997 executed a pastel portrait of Gustav Mahler for the State Opera in Vienna.

His transnational vision reflects his education and travels. Kitaj studied at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York in 1950 and at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna, where he was registered from 1951 to 1954, and he graduated from the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford in 1959 and the Royal College of Art, London in 1962.

A Tate retrospective, one of the highest honors any artist living or dead can receive, was, for Kitaj, a disaster. His career in England up until this 1994 show had been without question very successful. He had been criticized in the past for being "bookish" and "literary" by some,<sup>8</sup> and defensive comments in an interview in the 1994 Tate catalogue attest to his awareness.<sup>9</sup> But there was always a fundamental respect for his work, as seen in his exhibition record, honors, and the invitation for a Tate retrospective. This tribute from his adopted country in June 1994, which over 36,000 people attended during the two months of the exhibition, was reviled by London art critics and left Kitaj furious and depressed. The damning reviews were multiple and vicious.<sup>10</sup>

Kitaj has never been one to fear defying modernist guidelines. Since the 1960s he has written texts to accompany paintings. These Prefaces, as he calls

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<sup>8</sup>Janet Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder: Diasporist Art and Its Critical Response," in James Aulich and John Lynch, eds., *Critical Kitaj* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>Kitaj, quoted in *Kitaj Retrospective*, p. 47. "My problem is that I already regret not having given in to still more foolish temptations and wayward adventures than I did in my life and art. And so I may be less stringent than my fellows about observing sacred dogmas like art for art's sake, painterly painting, truth to materials and especially the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment: Show, don't tell! I find this special need for impersonality in art interesting and oppressive and against my nature."

<sup>10</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," pp. 31–32.

them, sometimes were printed in his exhibition catalogues, occasionally appeared as wall texts next to the canvases, and two are actually collaged on the painted surface.<sup>11</sup> These literary components, which vary from short to extensive commentary, were one of the most problematic elements of his work at the infamous exhibition which he dubbed the Tate War.<sup>12</sup> Kitaj traces this appending of notes to his love of T. S. Eliot's great poem and his Warburg training.<sup>13</sup> His texts are often intellectual and at times contain personal remarks; plus the combination of visual and verbal elements adds to the complexity of his aesthetic. The press complained of a real arrogance, a brashness in his work with its excess of literary references and personal reflections.

Kitaj attributed the brutal critical response to his London show to anti-American and anti-Jewish sentiments. His supporters agreed and also cited small-mindedness on the part of his critics.<sup>14</sup> His accusations, in turn, provoked consistently angry replies in the British press.<sup>15</sup> He referred to this criticism as a form of low-octane English antisemitism.<sup>16</sup> Janet Wolff speculates that the negative reaction to the Tate retrospective is a combination of several contributing factors: an anti-literary prejudice in art criticism, a lingering anti-American feeling, and a qualified but latent antisemitism. She feels that the hostile reception may not be so much Kitaj's dependence on *words*, but what he speaks *about*.<sup>17</sup> She astutely points out that Kitaj does not hide difference. She writes, "Kitaj articulated in an explicit (American?) way his assertions about Jewish identity in a silent gentile culture."<sup>18</sup> He boldly reinforces the visual image with *words*, thus compounding the lack of politeness.

These subtle social nuances need further clarification. The English art critic David Cohen as quoted in the progressive *Forward* writes of Kitaj: He has never acquired the English art of understatement. . . . They don't like the

<sup>11</sup>The Prefaces are all reproduced in Morphet, ed., *Kitaj Retrospective*.

<sup>12</sup>Arthur Lubow, "The Painter's Life is Cracking," *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 13, 1994: 60–65. This is a good coverage of the debacle, including praise for the retrospective when it was shown in Los Angeles.

<sup>13</sup>Kitaj, quoted in Morphet, *Kitaj Retrospective*, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 32. See Nina Darnton, "An American Artist Displeases the English Cousins," *The New York Times*, section C, October 24, 1994: 11–12.

<sup>15</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 33.

<sup>16</sup>Kitaj, quoted in Lubow, "The Painter's Life is Cracking," p. 61.

<sup>17</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 32.

<sup>18</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 37.

fact that he is a brash American name-dropper. But that doesn't mean they don't like Americans or Jews."<sup>19</sup> Wolff further provides fascinating material confirming that the expectation in England that Jews will keep quiet about their Jewishness persists today.<sup>20</sup> For example, Lesley Hazelton, an English Jewish writer who lives in the United States, has written about the English imperative to be discreet about Jewishness (how it is important not to "go on so about it.") "Being Jewish was something to be played down, not written about." She points out [that] there has been no English Malamud, no Roth, no Bellow or Potok, no Jews who wrote about Jewish life.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Jews in England have been accustomed to keeping a much lower profile than Jews in the United States.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising then that the Tate show was much better received in the United States. Although some negative press still appeared, his work was regarded seriously and with respect and in many cases finding a new maturity and development.<sup>23</sup> Such well-known Jewish painters in London as Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, and Leon Kossoff receive great reviews. They also do not proclaim their Jewish identity as a visible subject matter and thus blend into the British cultural scene. In the final analysis it appears that the presence of wall texts, particularly in the 1994 retrospective, the complexity of layered meanings of visual and verbal bombardment of his work, and his blatant Jewish repertoire led to the extremely negative reaction of the critics.

While Kitaj had been both inspired by the cosmopolitan nature of his life in London and able to travel easily to other European capitals and further develop his broad interests, he had a growing sense of himself as an outsider, a Jew. He coined the term Diasporism to describe the exilic condition he felt in spite of his successful career and wrote his *First Diasporist Manifesto*, a short text on the subject published in 1989. Here Kitaj extended the historical definition of Diaspora, a Greek word meaning scattering or dispersion of the Jews

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<sup>19</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 37.

<sup>20</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," pp. 36–37.

<sup>21</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 37.

<sup>22</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 36. Fascinating material is presented here about twentieth-century antisemitism in England and the need to assimilate.

<sup>23</sup>Lubow, "The Painter's Life is Cracking," p. 65, for thoughts on the Los Angeles viewing of the retrospective. See also Michael Kimmelman, "The Kitaj Show Crosses the Atlantic," *The New York Times*, sec. C, pp. 26–27. The famed art critic writes, "The 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."

after the fall of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., and felt it encompassed far more than the question of Jewish experience. For him, the Diasporist feels both a part of his society and alienated from it at the same time. Diasporism, Kitaj believes, is a common plight not only of the Jews. He also applies this thesis to all classes outside the mainstream of power in their society, including women, foreigners, homosexuals, and those of non-Caucasian racial origins. In his text, the Diasporist, over and beyond the diversity of concrete situations, shares a single unequivocal character, a similar and unchanging trait—as marginalized, as outsider from the dominant culture. The artist shows understanding for those who feel uncomfortable, mistrusted, or perhaps only tolerated by parts of the community at large.

In his text he refers to himself as a Diasporist and discusses in depth the Jewish experience as one of dislocation, fragmentation, and rootlessness.<sup>24</sup> The American expatriate identified with the plight of the Jews as a people repeatedly forced to flee by historical circumstances. Set on foreign soil, whether in England or America, Kitaj bonds with the Wandering Jew whose sense of isolation and nomadic existence is secured by his past as seen in *The Jew* (Fig.1) in which the modern train passenger is often viewed as an emblematic self-portrait.

Kitaj's painting and his writing indicate how the Holocaust and the subsequent experience of suffering, loss, and dispersal have come to mean for him a sense of apartness in the modern world. By living and studying in Europe, Kitaj, the artist, the self-imposed exile, the Diasporist, discovered first-hand the realities of the Holocaust—conversations with those who lived during this era and sites he saw profoundly affected him. His exposures to the realities of the fate of the Jews were particularly traumatic for him. From his experiences, he came to realize that even a non-practicing, agnostic Jew like himself was conditioned and defined by the fate of other Jews in the twentieth century. He saw locations where Jews had been rounded up for deportation and met survivors. Some of his experiences, particularly in Paris and Vienna, became moments he would never forget. While studying at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna in 1951, Kitaj was reminded of the horrors that took place there only six years earlier. Aware of how the Nazis operated, he recalled in a 1990 interview, "Even in my Vienna days, I shuddered to think of my kind in those very streets a few years before."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>R. B. Kitaj, *First Diasporist Manifesto* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

<sup>25</sup>Kitaj, quoted in David Cohen, "The Viennese Inspiration: In Search of Self" *Royal Academy Magazine* 29 (Winter 1990): 34–36.

Kitaj, who also visited concentration camps in Poland and France, revealed similar emotional responses to being in Paris only a couple of years after the war. During a year-long stay in Paris in 1982–83, he explained some of his motivation in expatriation and the feelings he experienced when he first passed through the city for a few days as a 19-year-old student in the autumn of 1951 on his way to Vienna. David Plante, a writer, recounted his conversation with Kitaj,

He told me he wanted to come to Europe because of writers he'd read who had found Europe a revelation of creativity, and one of those writers was of course Hemingway. He knew that a great creative flowering, equal to that of fifth century Greece or Renaissance Florence, had occurred in Paris over a period of, say, a hundred years, and he wanted to go where so many of his compatriots had gone and, there, produced amazing works. When he got here he found something else: Paris only seven years removed from German occupation. And imagine what it felt like, he said, to walk down a street and know that people there had been pulled out by the Gestapo and sent off to concentration camps. It was, really, my first awareness of being a Jew.<sup>26</sup>

His work explores his identity and his heritage; he feels compelled to confront the Holocaust as evidenced in his art and words. He often paints on life-size canvases and takes the role of second generation, secondary witness, a role clearly vital for him. Critics and historians have for years discussed the iconographical richness of his extensive Holocaust-related oeuvre, the full significance of the various sources embedded in the six works selected here need to be thoroughly analyzed. These are but a sampling among his many works which record the sufferings of those horrendous years.

Although the Holocaust already appears as a major theme in a few of Kitaj's works as early as the 1960s, the main thrust appears in his 1980s paintings. Each of these canvases provides an ever-widening historical portrayal of this era. Kitaj in his struggle for powerful imagery chose a specific icon, a chimney, as his Jewish version of the Passion, as he calls it, his equivalent of the symbolic cross. As will be seen, the chimney sometimes is smoking as in Nazi crematoria. In other paintings it functions as coffin or cage in which vulnerable persons are trapped—a metaphor for the horrifying deaths in concentration camps. He has written:

It was the Passion of Rouault which inspired him to embark on his Jewish Passion. I made a startling discovery. There seems to be no representation of the

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<sup>26</sup>Kitaj, quoted in David Plante, "Paris 1983" (interview), *Sulfur: A Literary Tri-Quarterly of the Whole Art*, Vol. 9 (Los Angeles, 1984): 104.

Crucifixion itself in art for hundreds of years after the event. The earliest known one may be on the wooden doors of S. Sabina in Rome, which date from the fifth century. I thought—why wait 400 years after our (Jewish) Passion? The chimney form is my own very primitive attempt at an equivalent symbol, like the cross, both after all, having contained the human remains in death.<sup>27</sup>

One of his many Holocaust-related paintings shows both the compassion and importance these years of persecution held for him. In *Self-Portrait as a Woman* (1984) (Fig. 2) Kitaj depicted one of the punishments forced upon women who did not comply with the regime's racial laws forbidding Aryan women to have relations with Jewish men. The painting is based on an actual event Kitaj learned about in 1951 from his landlady in Vienna. Kitaj's text accompanying the painting is written in the first person as if narrated by the Austrian woman who had endured this humiliation from the Nazis.<sup>28</sup> She told Kitaj, who was then a 19-year-old student at the art academy, that she had been caught in bed with a Jewish man. The Nazis had forced her to parade naked through the streets of her suburb wearing a placard that announced her "crime" and shouting the same message. Kitaj, who became her lover, went with her to the actual streets where they had marched her, and made some drawings in his sketchbook of the buildings and the church in this section of Vienna.

Kitaj's title reveals his empathy with the predicament of women who were subjected to this public mockery. The artist depicted a naked female figure set against a night sky in a charming European town. She appears from the back, her hands rest somewhat defiantly on her hips, with a sinister placard hanging on her neck, her face in profile, and she wears green high heels and red socks. She is stripped of human identity. Kitaj used historically accurate props. Archival photographs (Fig. 3) he must have looked at show German women who violated the *Rassenmischung* (statutes of racial purity) by virtue of their relations with Jewish men being forced to display such signs in public stating, "*Ich bin am Ort das grösste Schwein, ich lass mich nur mit Juden ein.*" (I'm the biggest pig in town, I only have sexual relations with Jews.) In his textual Preface for

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<sup>27</sup>Kitaj, introduction to *R. B. Kitaj*, exhibition catalogue (London: Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., November–December 1985 and New York: Marlborough Gallery Inc., March 1986), p. III. See also Peter Fuller, "Kitaj at Christmas," *Art Monthly*, Vol. 92 (December–January 1986), pp. 11–14. The critic, in an extensive discussion of Kitaj's works, points out that representations of the crucifixion pervaded Christian culture long before the fifth century.

<sup>28</sup>Kitaj, in Morphet, ed., *R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 144.

the painting, writing in his Viennese landlady's voice, he includes how she saw this painting of his in a book forty years after the event and wrote to him in London saying she had "no idea he felt close enough to my humiliation to have put himself in my place as it were, to have put himself in the picture."<sup>29</sup>

Smoke is coming from her mouth, as it is from a nearby church spire which has a tiny cross floating above it; with the two symbols blatantly juxtaposed he alludes to the death-camp chimney motif and perhaps the silent role of the Church, whether Protestant or Catholic. Beyond the blatant victimization, Kitaj refers to actual death; schematic female profiles are embedded in the ground upon which the female figure stands. Kitaj presents here one of his many forms of personal assimilation into this era.

Set in the modern world, *Germania (The Tunnel)* (1985) (Fig. 4) can be interpreted as a history lesson for Kitaj's young son Max. The painting is from a series titled *Germania*, based on Hitler's projected name for Berlin, which was to be the capital of his empire when he won the war. Kitaj, who was 62 at the time of the painting, shows himself as an old man; to emphasize his future role he is supported by a stick because he is lame and misshapen. Kitaj leads his then toddler through a personal journal into history. His sense of identification with the Holocaust experience is clearly expressed: he wears a vest and trousers splattered with blood and black arrows; one of his legs is caught in a chimney-like structure. The child points toward the text of a book; perhaps a history lesson about the Third Reich or a reference to the Jews' respect for scholarship. (Significantly, four of the six paintings discussed here contain images of the book and further this bond Kitaj finds important.)

The elderly Kitaj seems to teach Max about the extermination camps as indicated by his appropriations; the two walk past heavy-handed symbols. Behind them stretches a plunging arched hallway quoted true to color from Van Gogh's *Hospital Corridor at St. Rémy*, a renowned image connoting insanity and death. Vincent was hospitalized here a year prior to his suicide; Kitaj's borrowing fuses madness and death with the tortures of Nazi concentration camps. The artist and son approach the image of naked woman with a child looking over her shoulder ensnared within a death-camp chimney shape. The female figure, based on Matisse's sculpted series of *Backs* in the Pompidou, clearly represents those who entered the gas chambers.

In Kitaj's carefully constructed painting there are also other recognizable, potent works of art quoted. The oven-form which the mother with her child

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<sup>29</sup>Kitaj, in Morphet, ed., *R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 144.

faces is inspired by the *Monument aux Martyrs de la Déportation* (1962) by Georges-Henri Pinguisson (Fig. 5). Located beneath Notre Dame Cathedral on the easternmost tip of the Île de la Cité, the monument is a memorial crypt for the thousands of French Jews who were deported to Nazi extermination camps during the German occupation of France between 1940 and 1945. Kitaj recreates the oppressive prison environment of this underground crypt with its barred door, grating, and walls of rough cement. Inspired by the painting, sculpture and architecture Kitaj saw, he developed a modern history painting.

*The Jewish Rider* (1984–1985) (Fig. 6) is a portrait of Kitaj's friend Michael Podro, the English art historian, who is shown on what is probably a personal pilgrimage in a train as past and present are brought together. With a book at his side, he is alone in the compartment. Kitaj's immediate art historical source of inspiration is Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*. Both his pose, with his wrist turned inward and balanced lightly on his thigh, plus the head and tail of an imaginary horse, which figures just at his side in the picture, are quotations of the Dutch master. The well dressed passenger, who wears a yellow V-neck sweater, complemented by a white sport coat and shoes and red-orange pants, seems lost in thought. His relaxed pose is in sharp contrast to the steeply rising red corridor with the uniformed guard with his whip in hand high in the air. This menacing figure brings to mind the Gestapo guards on the deportation trains and the power of life and death that lay behind their tap on the shoulder. Through the window on the left-hand side of the picture there is a rocky landscape in which the leitmotif of the chimney smoking is conspicuously present. Significantly, the fatal silvery gray smoke blows in the direction of a tiny cross perched on a cliff. Furthermore, the direction of the angle of the whip the guard wields intentionally parallels that of the smoke emanating from the chimney.

The silence of the scene brings to mind the deportation rides. The quiet of the crucifix on the mountaintop only adds to the implied horror. But even more interesting is the pensive train rider; he is juxtaposed with images which call to mind the cattle cars bound to concentration camps. Kitaj has long been fascinated by the scenery on the way to the camps, as stated in a Preface to his famous *If Not, Not*:

My journal for this painting reports a train journal someone took from Budapest to Auschwitz to get a sense of what the doomed could see through the slats of their cattle cars "beautiful, simply beautiful countryside." I don't know who said

it. Since then I've read that Buchenwald was constructed on the very hill where Goethe often walked with Eckermann.<sup>30</sup>

Podro is more than the well dressed Jewish passenger in his railway carriage functioning as a simple image of the Holocaust. Interestingly, his father, Joshua Podro, was a German historian who wrote *Nuremburg*, a detailed account of the horrible discriminatory decrees which affected countless Jewish lives.<sup>31</sup> The younger Podro is depicted as if he is taking the railroad route to Auschwitz that was taken forty years ago or so by senior members of his family.

Podro embodies on an allegorical level the medieval legend of the Wandering Jew updated, the doomed sinner of Christian folklore. He is the Diasporist, the eternal Jew as wanderer, as in transit on the move. Andrew Benjamin, quoting Edmond Jabès, put it like this in his discussion of *The Jewish Rider*:

This absence of place, as it were, I claim. It confirms that the book is my only habitat, the first and also the final place of a vaster non-place where I live. Jabès alluded in these lines to the legend of the Wandering Jew. With his book he is still in an uncertain place, he is designated without destination or fixity.<sup>32</sup>

*The Jewish School (Drawing a Golem)* (Fig. 7), with Kitaj's recurrent use of learned allusions, bears witness in emblematic form to the pathos and anxiety experienced by Jewish teachers and students during the Holocaust. The scene in the classroom of the Jewish religious school is "an allegory of the last days of such schoolrooms,"<sup>33</sup> Kitaj's own term of identification for his painting. On the upper left section of the composition, an anxious-looking teacher appears at his desk. His students are each involved in a separate activity. Beneath him, one student on the left, positioned at an extreme angle, beats his head against a brick wall. In the center, another student, who leans over a table, his head supported by both hands, seems to be deeply engaged in reading. A third boy, on the far right, draws on the blackboard.

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<sup>30</sup>Kitaj, in Morphet, ed., *R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, p. 120. This Preface is particularly interesting in that Kitaj identifies various artistic and literary sources for this famous painting.

<sup>31</sup>Joshua Podro, *Nuremburg, the Unholy City: A Chapter in Jewish Martyrology* (London: Anscombe, 1937).

<sup>32</sup>Andrew Benjamin, "Kitaj and the Question of Jewish Identity," in *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 89–90.

<sup>33</sup>Kitaj, quoted in Israel Shenker, "Always Against the Grain," *Art News*, Vol. 85 (March 1986): 83.

Important details are included in the narrative. Significantly, the latter child is trying to create in chalk a golem, an artificially developed human being, which according to its sources in Kabbalistic legend, is brought to life by supernatural means. Gershom Scholem, who has critically evaluated the numerous traditions and beliefs concerning the golem, defined the phenomenon as follows:

A creature, particularly a human being, made in an artificial way by virtue of a magic act, through the use of holy names. The idea that it is possible to create living beings in this manner is widespread in the magic of many peoples. Especially well known are the idols and images to which the ancients claimed to have given the power of speech. Among the Greeks and the Arabs these activities are sometimes connected with astrological speculations relating to the lower beings. The development of the idea in Judaism, however, is remote from astrology; it is connected, rather, with the magical exegesis of the *Sefer Yezirah* (Book of Creation) and with the ideas of the creative power of speech and of the letters.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of the golem evolves from a late magico-mystical ceremony described in the *Sefir Yezirah* to its status as living legend starting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>35</sup> The lower half of the figure does begin to come to life; the golem, whose tales have inspired novelists, poets, dramatists, composers, artists, and filmmakers is incomplete.<sup>36</sup> Kitaj's method of golem creation, through the use of drawing the artificial superman with chalk on a blackboard, reflects his knowledge and modernization of a learned tradition. The formula for golem-making, which varies over the centuries and different regions, involves both materials and rituals. Unlike the golem of the *Maharal*, Kitaj's

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<sup>34</sup>Gershom Scholem, "Golem," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, second edition, Vol. 6, p. 754.

<sup>35</sup>For the most comprehensive treatment of the whole range of material dealing with the creation of the golem beginning with late antiquity and ending with our era, see Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); see also G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 158–204. Scholem's comprehensive historical discussion of the golem idea traces its origins from biblical and Kabbalistic passages to its appearance in the nineteenth century.

<sup>36</sup>The most thorough analysis of the golem image in the fine arts, film, theater productions is presented in the following exhibition catalogue: Emily Bilski and Moshe Idel, *Golem: Danger, Deliverance, and Art* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1988), pp. 44–110. For discussion of the golem theme in literature, poetry, and even comic books, see also A. Goldsmith, *The Golem Remembered 1909–1980: Variations of a Jewish Legend* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press). For text and stills of Paul Wegner's classic German silent film *Der Golem* (1920), see *Masterworks of the German Cinema* (New York: Icon Editions, 1973), pp. 11–51.

creature does not reach full incarnation to save the teacher and the children. The golem, traditionally utilized for the protection of persecuted Jews at such junctures when mere human strength and wisdom are no longer effectual, does not come to life. Kitaj has left his head and torso unpainted to indicate that the magical homunculus will not materialize soon enough to rescue them from their fate. Other portentous signs appear, as will be discussed.

Examination of Kitaj's sources in the development of this painting offers insights into his creative process and his intended meaning. The derivation of this historic allusion to the plight of such Jewish classrooms is established by reference to *Die Judenschule* (Fig. 8), a nineteenth-century antisemitic German watercolor by Georg Emanuel Opitz (1775–1841). The watercolor mockingly evokes a Jewish classroom in chaos. In the scene the children are shown to be distracted, devoid of seriousness of purpose. Each of the students ignores his teacher by reading or mischievous behavior. Lacking any kind of discipline, the students on the left half of the composition are depicted as noisy and unruly, while on the far right, one boy sketches on the board. A turned over inkpot at the teacher's desk further conveys the raucous environment of the classroom. These characterizations present the widely-held, defamed notion of the *cheder* as a setting antithetical to intellectual development.<sup>37</sup>

In Kitaj's allegory the students are reduced in number and their behavior is tempered by their symbolic roles. In particular, the artist converted a portion of Opitz's composition into a highly charged vignette in which the boys are deeply immersed in serious activities. In the watercolor the boy draws on the blackboard a bearded Jew kneeling behind a pig, a reference to the *Judensau*, a well established antisemitic motif.<sup>38</sup> Kitaj has transformed this episode of antisemitic mockery into a new context. Now the boy, as discussed above, draws an incompletely materialized golem, this creature of superhuman powers called upon in times of trouble and need.

The poignancy of the scene is further developed by the artist's other crucial alteration to the original source. The teacher, who is unable to control the students in the watercolor, looks worried in Kitaj's painting; his expression reveals he knows what will happen. The inkpot at his desk, which has been mischievously turned over in Opitz's scene, is transformed to a pot of blood. The spilled blood serves as both a sign of the tortures and deaths all four

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<sup>37</sup>Marco Livingstone, *R. B. Kitaj*, rev. ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 35. The author mistakenly identifies Kitaj's nineteenth-century source as an engraving.

<sup>38</sup>Isaiah Schacher, *The Judensau, Warburg Institute Surveys*, V, 1974, pp. 62–64, plate 58C.

potentially faced during these years of Nazi oppression and also the blood accusation traditionally leveled against the Jews. The pairing of the golem and the blood libel is based on well-documented legend.<sup>39</sup>

Analysis of the meaning of other images in the painting reveals further symbolic intent. The importance of Kitaj's gesture for the student who beats his head against the brick wall is adapted from the helmeted and cuirassed man involved in the same activity in the left foreground of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *The Netherlandish Proverbs*. The Brueghel painting depicts, by means of meticulously painted illustrations, an inventory of peasant sayings and proverbs which draw upon literary sources dating to the fifteenth, sixteenth, and early seventeenth centuries. The expressions have, by their very nature, a moralizing purpose.<sup>40</sup>

From Brueghel's encyclopedic scene, Kitaj has appropriated the helmeted figure beating his head against a brick wall in futility in order to represent the potential fate of the boy. This action of frustration comes from the Dutch proverb "*met het hoofd tegen de muur lopen*," a saying which means "to bang (or knock) one's head against the wall: to do battle with those stronger than one self; to receive a blunt refusal."<sup>41</sup> His gesture thus indicates that he may well perish.

Kitaj, in an interview, confirmed that the boy who thrusts his head against a brick wall is the rebel figure who may or may not survive, whereas the others will certainly die in the Holocaust.<sup>42</sup> *The Jewish School (Drawing a Golem)*, with its fusion of modern Jewish history and ancient Jewish legend, serves as further testament to the magnitude of the fate of the Jews in Nazi Europe.

In *Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)* (1983–1984) (Fig. 9) Kitaj is surrounded by figures and symbols appropriate to retrospective assessment in his fantasy version of this pedestrian alleyway of rare and second-hand books and fine art prints, many of which have provided sources for imagery in his art over the years. The artist who reclines on his own LeCorbusier chaise lounge

<sup>39</sup>For an actual blood libel accusation leveled against the Jews in the late nineteenth century, an event paired with the famous Golem legend of Prague, see Bilski, *Golem: Danger, Deliverance, and Art*, pp. 12, 14; Goldsmith, *The Golem Remembered*, No. 12, pp. 55–60.

<sup>40</sup>I would like to thank my colleague Diane Scillia who brought to my attention the didactic purposes of Bruegel's parables.

<sup>41</sup>Wilhelm Fraenger, *Der Bauer Brueghel und das Deutsche Sprichwort* (Leipzig: Eugen Rantsch Verlag), p. 146.

<sup>42</sup>Kitaj, quoted in Frederic Tuten, "Neither Fool, Nor Naive, Nor Poseur-Saint: Fragments on R. B. Kitaj," *Artforum*, Vol. XX. No. 5 (January 1982): 66.

conjures up the dream-like setting, filled with imaginative and real figures. While he seems to be reading a book, with another book lying on the pavement, Kitaj is in deep concentration, as if mentally traveling. While working on *Cecil Court* in 1983, Kitaj married Sandra Fisher in London's oldest synagogue in Bevis Marks. In the painting he wears his wedding outfit.

Kitaj's imagination for *Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)* drew upon various literary, artistic, and personal sources. Identification of the major figures in the foreground reveals that *Cecil Court* is a gathering of significant people. On the right, Kitaj's then-recently deceased stepfather Dr. Walter Kitaj, a research chemist from Vienna, who, as mentioned above, fled his homeland when Hitler took power in Austria, looks back at him as if in a memory. On the left, the late Mr. Seligmann, whose name appears behind him, written in script on his shop's window shade, holds a bouquet of flowers. The bookshop owner, who over the years had sold Kitaj many art books and prints, was, like the artist's stepfather, also a refugee from the Nazis.

The art-historical sources of *Cecil Court* are fascinating. The painting, Kitaj's first major work upon his return to London after seeing the 1983–1984 Balthus retrospective during his brief honeymoon in Paris, is a direct response to the master's *La Rue* (1929) with a later version of this painting, which has been in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York since his youth.<sup>43</sup> Kitaj transformed the French painter's haunting mood into a state of bustling activity. Two of his other colorful characterizations are adapted from two Venetian Renaissance paintings he saw in a major exhibition at the Royal Academy.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>The two versions of Balthus' *La Rue*, dated 1928 and 1933, had been known to Kitaj "all my life," particularly as the later was on display at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, during his years of growing up. They are reproduced in Sabine Rewald, *Balthus*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: H. N. Abrams, 1984); see cat. nos. 2 and 8 respectively. Exhibition traveled from Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne (November 15, 1983–January 23, 1984) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>44</sup>While working on *Cecil Court* Kitaj made repeated visits to the exhibition *The Genius of Venice: 1500–1600*, which was on view during the winter of 1983–1984 at the Royal Academy, London. Pinned to his wall were reproductions of two paintings from the exhibition, Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* and Tintoretto's *Washing of the Feet*. The position of Titian's character informed the legs of the woman with green hair spread out in the street. The figure at the far left of Tintoretto's painting was appropriated for the head of Seligmann. See Jane Martineau and Charles Hope, eds. *The Genius of Venice: 1500–1600*, exhibition catalogue (London: Royal Academy of Art in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), cat. nos. 132 and 101, respectively.

Analysis of other figures depicted in *Cecil Court WC2 London (The Refugees)* reveals that a number of the other characters share with Kitaj an identification with the outsider, the marginalized man, the Jew. The street sweeper is appropriated from a character in the same body position in an advertisement for *The Green Millionaire* (Fig. 10), a 1915 play in New York City's Yiddish theater that told of another expatriate, a greenhorn, in his new land, America.<sup>45</sup> Kitaj has given his character a new costume and a broom as he cleans the alleyway.

The spirit of Kitaj's lively figures, Gordin, Löwy, and Kalb, who are designated as shop owners, as well as some of his shop signs, stem from his reading of Kafka's *Diaries*, in which the great Czech novelist wrote over one hundred pages about his fascination with the troupes of traveling Jewish theater companies, Central European characters, who performed in Prague from 1911 to 1913.<sup>46</sup> Joe Singer, another bookshop owner whose name appears on the right, is a fictive character that appears in a number of his Holocaust paintings and functions as a survivor, an expatriate because of historical circumstance.<sup>47</sup> Just like Mr. Seligmann, this novelistic figure is significant because, as a Holocaust refugee, he forms a link with Kitaj's own family. It is curious to note that Seligmann and Dr. Kitaj are characterized by typically large Jewish noses. Their stereotypical physiognomy is read in the European tradition of seeing the Jew as physically different, as Other.<sup>48</sup> Kitaj, I feel, consciously selected the visible representation of this antisemitic association.

Kitaj is an artist whose strong conviction led him to pictorially document and to meditate on these atrocities. His art, as evidenced here, is an expression

<sup>45</sup>Nahma Sandow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 100.

<sup>46</sup>For references to Jacob Gordin, a well known playwright, see Max Brod, ed., *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910–1913*, trans. Joseph Keresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), pp. 111–112. For information on Löwy, a major actor, see in *Diaries*, pp. 110–111, 114–115. Kalb is taken from *Yoshe Kalb*, a play by I. J. Singer. Also, see Evelyn Torton Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on His Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971).

<sup>47</sup>The name Joe Singer was taken from an actual family friend Kitaj vaguely remembered from his childhood. For more information on Kitaj's fictional character Joe Singer, see Marco Livingstone, *R. B. Kitaj*, p. 9, fig. 1, pp. 38–42. In this monograph, Joe appears in the following paintings: figs. 113, 114, 117, 165.

<sup>48</sup>Sander Gilman, "The Jewish Nose: Are Jews White? Or, The History of the Nose Job," in Gisela Brinkler-Gabler, ed., *Encountering the Other(s): Studies in Literature, History and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), especially pp. 160–175.

of his identity as a thinking, creative man and reveals, upon analysis, how the Holocaust haunts him. The artist explains:

I think about the Holocaust every day and have done so for many years before my self-education in Jewish identity began. I'm really very glad I didn't have to go through it but I'm not sure it couldn't happen again. Boris Pasternak called the great war in his life a cleansing storm, a vast mutation, a storm as transforming. He said one must think and think about such mutations all one's life, and that is what I find myself doing.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore his involvement with this issue in regard to his work reflects his own code of morality. Kitaj feels that it is an abdication of responsibility, a betrayal of his forbears for even "a nonpractising Jew not to stand up and be counted with the others."<sup>50</sup> Kitaj's portrayal of the innocent lives taken during the Holocaust is his own learned vision of history. He gives permanent form to what must be remembered.

In his pain and anger over his 1994 disastrous reception at the Tate Gallery and the simultaneous sudden death of his wife, the painter Sandra Fisher, from an aneurysm, he did a series of paintings treating the theme of the art critic as her killer. Significantly, he was honored with the prestigious Wollaston Award for the best painting in the Royal Academy summer exhibition in 1997 for his multi-part work *Sandra Three, The Killer Critic*, in which sensitive portraits of Sandra and their son Max are linked to the controversial central panel, *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even*. With its title, a Duchampian spoof, and its image, based on Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*, Kitaj and other artists are shown firing at a monstrous "critic" in whose tongue curls the words "yellow press, yellow press, kill, kill, kill." *Sandra One/The Critic Kills* (italics) (1996), in which a portrait of Sandra Fisher is juxtaposed with stark and fragmentary, largely abstract panels, emblazoned with the words *The Critics Kills*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy summer exhibition in 1996. In *Sandra, Two*, a brochure published on the occasion of an exhibition of his work in Paris in 1996, he refers several times to Sandra's death under fire.<sup>51</sup>

The significant relationship between Kitaj's art and biography underlines the importance of biography in his life. The death of Sandra seemed to be a

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<sup>49</sup>Kitaj quoted in Tuten, "Neither Fool, Nor Naive, Nor Poseur-Saint," p. 65.

<sup>50</sup>Livingstone, R. B. *Kitaj*, pp. 34–35. Kitaj is not a practising Jew, although he tries to read a *Torah* portion and commentary every day. He goes to synagogue only for weddings, for funerals, and doubtless for other rites of passage.

<sup>51</sup>Wolff, "The Impolite Boarder," p. 33.

turning point for the artist: "London just died for me when she died."<sup>52</sup> The yearning and romanticism for study and life in Europe and its great art after four decades no longer had its appeal for Kitaj. In spite of recognitions he received following the post-1994 battle pursued by the English art critics and their insulting responses to his Tate retrospective, Kitaj decided to return to America. The artist who enriched the British art world, who became a highly visible figure in the European painting scene, and who defended such hallowed traditions in art as drawing from the figure felt more at home in America. Only in 1997, following these honors and events, did he finally decide to permanently leave London with his younger son Max to join his older son Lem and his grandsons. He lives now in Los Angeles in a house with a yellow painting studio.

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<sup>52</sup>R. B. Kitaj, quoted in Steven Litt, "Art Museum Acquires a Couple of Heavy-Hitters," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* 25 (November 1998): sec. A, 1, 15. 9.