The Kitaj myth

Kitač's art is constantly collapsing under the enormous weight of its creator's ambitions for it. The Ohio Gong, 1964, is an early and inchoate work, but it already shows Kitač's ambition. Its theme is the theme of so many of Kitač's paintings, The World Gone Mad, and the cluttered, collage-like disposition of figures within its perspective-less space is transparently intended to serve as a metaphor for this. A thinly dressed matron and a pair of abbreviated stockings clearly have evil designs on an innocent girl, one of the first of Kitač's several pallid, doe-eyed victims. A hallucinatory dream is being revealed about a monster woman while a face-figure in the background ascends into a brown and black void.

The Ohio Gong may only be a piece of juvenilia, but it exemplifies the coming of Kitač's work as a whole. It is clear, the terror and anxiety of life in the 20th century, is enormous. But if a painter wishes to treat vast and timeless themes, he must paint vast and terrifying images, and Kitač cannot do this. His monsters are not monstrosous but they are, rather, cartoon cutouts standing in for the idea of monstrosity — it is only necessary to recall the way in which it attempts to generate fear by something so horrifyingly beyond its own expressive reach, is extremely unpleasant.

Elsewhere, Kitač attempts to treat the Holocaust less bombastically. In black charcoal, he draws the entrance to Dachau, where Parisian Jews once huddled before their last trips elsewhere. But even Kitač being understated feels false and portentous and the give-away is that all his pictorial devices, in a picture which presents itself as simple, solemn observation, are cliches: the darkening cloudy sky, the black coal dust speckling of the picture surface, the looming black sillhouettes of anonymous buildings. Other pictures in a similar vein include a series of brooding interiors which fail precisely, because they are Breeding Images, Leaded With Overtones.

It is, fairly early on, that things will get no better. The philosopher Richard Wollheim, in an otherwise delightful biographical essay about Kitač, records that "in the summer of 1967, Kitač asked me, 'Are you familiar with that phrase 'old-age style'?" I answered, 'Yes.' and he said that that was what he was now interested in.' In the absence of any apparent emotional drive to create pictures, Kitač has spent his life concealing an absence, a lack in himself. His "old-age style" is just another of his disguises and in this so much else he is merely tentative, a painter going through the emotions but incapable of experiencing them.

The careless manner which Kitač has lately adopted is a hybrid style of pastiche, a little bit of fake Rokokum, a little bit of fake Picasso, but above all fake. These are the paintings of someone so infatuated with being painting like this that it's looseness, freedom, personal self-expression generally being regarded as traits of great artists in their old age — not of someone content to paint like this. Their transparency is primarily partly because, by painting them, Kitač has finally allowed the myth of himself to be seen through. The Wandering Jew, the 10 seas of painting, Kitač is still there behind the screen, to be the Wizard of Oz: a small man with a megaphone held to his lips.

Above: The Rise of Fascism, 1979-80. Top: The Autumn of Central Paris (after Walter Benjamin), 1972-3 (reproduced courtesy of Mr and Mrs Francis Lloyd). Kitač's art collapses under the enormous weight of his creator's ambitions for it.