



edited by David Lister

arts news

# Painter takes his revenge on 'thug' critics

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The Royal Academy has been thrown into consternation by a painting submitted by the distinguished Royal Academician R B Kitaj for next week's Summer Exhibition.

The artist has painted a portrait of his late wife, fellow artist Sandra Fisher, who died of a brain haemorrhage last year. He has written on the canvas the words: "The Critic Kills."

Kitaj's last major exhibition, at the Tate Gallery, was panned by a number of art critics and both he and his wife were devastated by the criticism.

However, the clear message that the brain haemorrhage was caused by unfeeling critics is understood to have startled the Royal Academy.

If the picture is hung in the Summer Exhibition it will be seen by hundreds of thousands of people. If it is not, it will be a slap in the face for one of the Royal Academy's most famous members.

Sir Philip Dowson, president of the Royal Academy, said yesterday: "It shall be hung in



Message in the medium: Kitaj's latest work is believed to have startled the Royal Academy and caused 'considerable hand-wringing' over its inclusion in the Summer Exhibition

Gallery 1. It is a strong personal statement and there is no question of not hanging it."

However, one source inside the institution said that there had in fact been "considerable hand-wringing" over whether to hang the picture or not.

Kitaj was not available for comment.

Sandra Fisher died in September 1994 during the Kitaj retrospective at the Tate. She

and her husband married in the Eighties but were together for 24 years.

The art historian David Cohen, who knew the couple and who wrote Fisher's obituary for the *Independent*, said: "Fisher was unwavering in her conviction that she was married to one of the great artists of the late-20th century."

He added: "The fierce antagonism of newspaper critics

towards Kitaj's retrospective – in contrast to the response of an admiring public – made for a stressful last summer for a woman who will be remembered by many for her almost saintly happiness."

Her death left Kitaj, at 62, with a 10-year-old child to bring up, just as the suicide of his first wife, 25 years earlier, had left him with children aged six and eleven.

More than 46,000 people saw the Kitaj show and the catalogue proved so popular that it had to be reprinted.

The Tate described him as one of the most "outstanding figurative painters" of the late 20th century. But the critics were unsparing.

One of the fiercest described the exhibition as "wretched adolescent trash ... a pox on fawning critics and curators for

foisting on us as heroic master a vain painter puffed with *amour propre*, unworthy of a footnote in the history of figurative art".

Another wrote: "R B Kitaj is doubtless familiar with the old French expression 'He does not take himself for a piece of excrement'. The absolute assurance with which he views himself as an artist of world historical significance lends this ex-

hibition a poignancy which the paintings themselves, so cold-hearted, never begin to achieve."

Kitaj, who had never given interviews, responded: "The criticism was lower and shittier than even I am. God knows what went on in the minds of these savage reviewers ... The thing is thugs travel in bunches. They like the smell of the enemy."

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## Attacks and a counterblast

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