R.B. Kitaj and the man-woman story

BY BRENDAN BERNHARD

It’s worth emphasizing, however, that Kitaj is very much a contemporary artist whose work is as unmistakable as any work, Jasper Johns or Bill Viola. Once in a long while, in a spirit of gentle mischief, he’ll even paint a small abstract. There’s one in his studio now, appropriately modest in size, based on a detail in a Matisse painting that the critic Clement Greenberg once singled out for criticism. (He dubbed it an “unresolved fault.”) Kitaj, who is obsessed both with the history of the Jews and his own Jewishness, calls it My Fourth Jewish Abstract. Naturally, there is a story behind the title.

“My father, Kitaj was a Viennese refugee scientist, and he used to receive a trade journal called Chemical Abstracts—meaning that they were précis of longer articles. And I never forgot that. So that’s the

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Despite living in Westwood, with all those wondrous UCLA girls jogging up and down the block, R.B. Kitaj claims to have lost all interest in sex. He’s finally turned 70, and he feels old. (“Nonetheless,” he says, “UCLA is the sexiest acronym in the English language.”) Six years after moving to Los Angeles from London, where for 40 years he was part of a group that included Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud, America’s greatest living figurative painter now comes equipped with a hearing aid, black-framed glasses and a sprouting white beard. He seems to welcome these signs of age, as if he were longing for someone to place a cane in his hand. “I just keep getting older and older,” he says, with something like wonder.

Kitaj talks as much as ever, however. In fact, as he leads me through his house, with lengthy stops in his drawing studio, his Jewish library and his Cézanne room, I find myself caught between looking and listening, unable to do either quite to my satisfaction. There’s just too much verbal and visual information to take in at once. In Kitaj’s world, everything has historical and artistic roots. When I ask him about the young woman in a portrait he’s working on, he tells me it’s actually his version of a girl in a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec.

Showing me an ink sketch David Hockney did of him in 1975 on a bench outside the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna, the legendary art school, Kitaj attended in the 1950s, he mentions someone who couldn’t get into the school at all: “Bitter failed the exam two years in a row, after which he disappeared into the bowels of the Viennese underworld. Some people think that’s what drove him nuts, pushed him over the edge, made him really bitter.”

On May 21, Kitaj’s first major art show in Los Angeles since his return to the city will open at L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice. The paintings and drawings are mostly about what he calls “the man-woman story,” or the amatory relations between the sexes, a theme he feels has been neglected by artists for at least three decades now. Typically, he has a theory as to why: Many of the greatest modern figurative painters (Hockney, Warhol, Bacon, etc.) have been gay, while scores of others have been abstract. Even his very straight friend Freud, whose figurative paintings are currently on display at MOCA, rarely shows lovers entwined. “The man-woman story is the greatest story ever told,” Kitaj says. “But since the death of Picasso, almost no one does it.”

Kitaj does, however. One painting (Los Angeles No. 11), painted with a charistically bold palette, portrays the artist as an old graybeard, stretched out in the bathtub with his late wife, Sandi, from whose youthful beauty he seems to be seeking the only sustenance available to him in this world. Another (Los Angeles No. 17) shows the two of them in Orthodox-looking garb, facing each other — eye to eye, mouth to mouth — like a tragic couple from the Old Testament. These paintings have nothing to do with today’s art world, and even less to do with the entertainment capital that features in all their titles. They are simply the projections of one man’s strange and fascinating inner world. Like a Bob Dylan song from Blood on the Track, in which railway lines coexist with the Crucifixion, Kitaj has placed his lovers outside time, free to roam the centuries at will.

As usual, Kitaj isn’t afraid to take on the big themes. God’s Back, a drawing based on the story that Moses once saw God from behind, dares to imagine what He looks like from the rear. (I can report that he has unusually broad shoulders and sports what looks like a vaguely gangsterish hat.) There are also portraits of other notables, including sketches of Emily Dickinson and Proust, as well as a gorgeous charcoal-and-pastel rendition of the young Piet Mondrian that makes him look oddly like Lawrence of Arabia. And in one painting, Kitaj and his wife can be seen deep in lovers’ tangle outside the Fox Theater in Westwood. This wouldn’t be so strange if it weren’t for the fact that both are equipped with wings.

Kitaj talks about painters like Matisse and Picasso, and, traveling further back in time, about Cézanne and Manet and van Gogh. In the way that only a person who thinks about them all day long can. They live on not just in the reproductions, but also in the walls of his studio, and in the hundreds of books that line its shelves, but in his head. Their problems are his problems. The struggles they began, he continues. On a quiet residential street in Westwood, the legacy of the first modern painters survives.

R.B. Kitaj papers. UCLA Library Special Collections.