

"Kitaj's portrait of Bill Clinton," article from Marlborough Gallery Art Edition  
by Tom Phillips.

## Kitaj's portrait of Bill Clinton

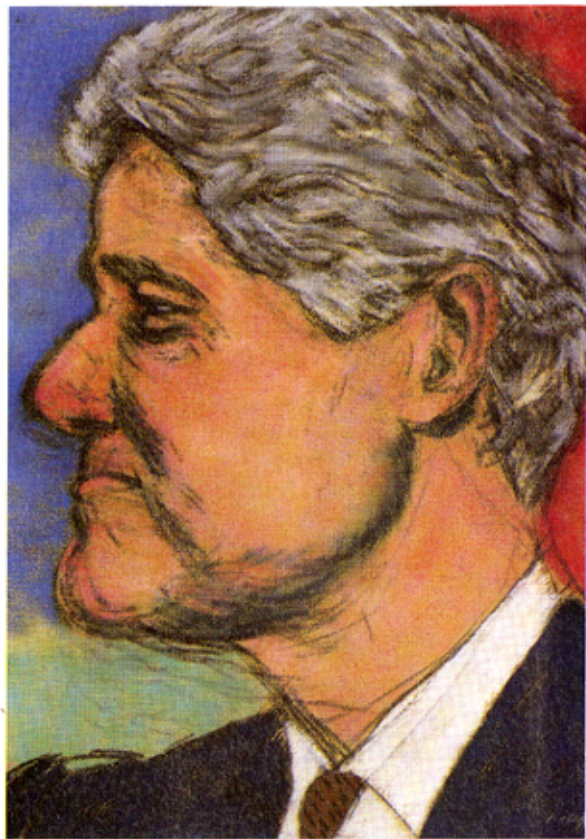
A work of double daring now hangs in the sober Great Hall of University College, Oxford. It was bold of the college to commission from RB Kitaj RA a picture of their highest-achieving alumnus, the President of the United States of America, and bold of Kitaj to undertake the task with such limited access to the sitter and, moreover, to find an idiom in which to make a telling image.

When the picture was unveiled at the end of April its reception was somewhat cool and bewildered, and the word 'Popeye' was much bandied about in college corridors as well as in the local press.

Visiting the hall the next day in the reticent and uncelebratory light of mid-morning I was surprised to find Kitaj's portrait looking already quite at home. Immediately it was the all-Americanness of the drawing (a life-sized head in pastel) that struck me. The simple features crowd the frame and the famous chin and shock of hair are more exaggerated by their proximity to the edges of the paper than by any element of caricature. The picture asks an insolent question. Is this, it seems to say, the emblematic cartoon American kid of the silver-lined log-cabin become leader of the whole gang of the world? A boy-next-door apotheosis of the American Dream; King Biff or the Emperor Chuck, as if stamped on some gigantic coin.

Degas and Gillray seem to fight it out in this worked-over profile. It is not Kitaj's greatest likeness but one of his most cunning. The artist's Oxford connections go back to the 1950s when he studied at the then libertarian Ruskin School where I also drew from the model a year or two later. The Ruskin is now a fully-fledged art school with a site on the Internet (manned by Jake Tilson) and it was a notable coup for the Ruskin master, Stephen Farthing, to get Kitaj to give an informal talk to the students. It was heartening to hear that the night of the long critical knives, which attended the artist's stupendous retrospective at the Tate so recently, has not affected the young who displayed a knowledge of and admiration for his work and gave him an ecstatic reception.

He described his audience with Bill Clinton, who turned out to be not so much of a sitter as a stander, allowing the artist more or less an observer's role as he talked mainly to other people for an hour or so. The portrait makes a memorable icon out of a brief encounter, and the rambling treasury of artefacts that is Oxford University is the richer for it. *Tom Phillips RA*



*A cunning likeness:  
RB Kitaj's portrait  
of the American  
President Bill Clinton*

