



Article #17 in his recently published *Second Diasporist Manifesto* reads: "Always study Scholem's Kabbalism for my painting art because of his Kabbalism's aura of taboo, renewal, unreason and lots more."

"Scholem's Kabbalism" provided Kitaj with the tools to devise a personal theology of veneration for "Sandra-Shekhina" (*Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #21). To a great extent, this audaciously idiosyncratic faith, as adapted from Scholem, sustained him throughout his time in Los Angeles, after he left behind London and the city's venomous art critics in a rage in 1997.

"Scholem's Kabbalism" also gave Kitaj a theoretical vocabulary for the project that consumed him for the past quarter century, and with particular intensity during his Los Angeles period: "Jewish Art." For decades prior to his initial articulation of this project in the *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989), he had been voraciously consuming the works of his favored Central European Jews. For example, in the exhibition catalogue *R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, Richard Morphet notes that Kitaj discovered Walter Benjamin already in 1965. From that point forward, he engaged in an ongoing and intense program of reading Benjamin, along with his other heroes, Scholem, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig (with the French Jews Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida coming somewhat later).

What Kitaj intuited in the 1960s and would give more explicit expression to in the 1980s was that these thinkers understood and incarnated the vexing and age-old "Jewish Question"—the simultaneous *impossibility* of Jewish acceptance in Gentile society and *possibility* of great cultural genius issuing from the Jews' social marginality. Kitaj's growing preoccupation with the "Jewish Question," in both intellectual and personal terms, intersected with his long-standing practice of appending written commentaries to his pictures (present already at his first exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in London in 1963).

Kitaj increasingly came to see that practice as a manifestly Jewish act. In this, he was affirmed by the hostility of his London critics, who declared that "no amount of exegesis will improve paintings that fail for pictorial reasons." In response, Kitaj became a defiant and ideologically committed exegete, proudly taking his place in a long line of rabbinic predecessors. "Fitful Commentary," he writes, "waits patiently by some of my pictures as it does in thousands of years of Jewish Commentary." And here we come full circle, for the commentarial tradition that spoke most directly to him was "Scholem's Kabbalism": "Infinite interpretability, infinite lights shine in every word, says Scholem on Kabbalah" (*Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #15).

The ceaseless quest of the Kabbalist to decipher the code of God's language impels—or liberates—the commentator to generate constant and novel interpretations. Kitaj took this interpretive license from Scholem's reading of Kabbalah and created a self-consciously Jewish Art full of "taboo, renewal,

**Shekhina (Sandra), 2006**  
Oil on canvas, 14 x 11 in.  
© R. B. Kitaj  
Photograph courtesy  
of Marlborough Gallery,  
London

*I am devoted to the ancient  
Jewish concept of the  
Shekhina, the female  
presence of God. I have  
come to see Sandra as that  
presence in God's image as  
a personal devotion which  
excites me in art and life.*  
—R. B. KITAJ



unreason and lots more" (*Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #17). He had no interest in conventional forms of ritually based Jewish Art. Nor could he countenance an art devoid of ideas—or in his case, a Jewish Art divorced from the Jewish Question.

One of my greatest crimes (Or Jewish DADAisms) is that I shatter that great glass in art! Many Jews in the Art Scheme are closed to the Jewish Question in art. They cleave to universalist ideals, which is OK by me too. To wish to be widely liked is not a bad thing. (*Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #12)

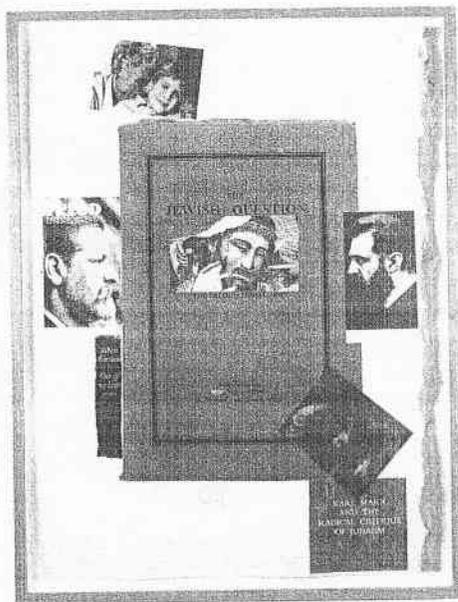
Perhaps so, but it was not Kitaj's way. He liked to thumb his nose at the critics, quoting with delight and approbation Derrida's statement that "I always adopted a stance to provoke them and give them the greatest desire, always on the verge to expel me again" (*Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #90). He embraced that which the critics hated, a Jewish Art "littered with ideas," as a hostile viewer once described his work, an art suffused with commentary and the Jewish Question (*First Diasporist Manifesto*, #39).

Kitaj's project has had few peers in the history of modern Jewish culture. For the sake of argument (and in tribute to his own proclivity for ranking), let it be said that there has never been a figure of such prodigious artistic talent and intellectual acuity who devoted himself so self-consciously to Jewish Art. There were indeed previous attempts to create a Jewish Art, smack in the middle of the golden age of Jewish nationalism, as we notice in the pages of the European journals *Ost und West* and *Rimon-Milgroym*. But no one involved in those efforts had the mix of talents of Kitaj. He was not only a brilliant figurative painter, possessed of an explosively colorful palette. He was also a great Jewish intellectual.

The art of being a great intellectual, it seems, is mostly lost in our age. There are many fine scholars in today's world. But there are precious few intellectuals akin to those European Jews who inhabited the cafés and

salons of Berlin, Vienna, and Prague, who lived in and through ideas—indeed, for whom ideas were of the greatest existential urgency. Kitaj not only admired those early twentieth-century thinkers; he was their heir. To sit with him in conversation was to recall a world unbound by disciplinary specialization, of free-ranging reflection on art, philosophy, and history. He was not a name-dropper, but he could summon up an article by Aby Warburg, an argument by Ernst Gombrich, or an aphorism by Ludwig Wittgenstein with great and natural ease. But more to the point, Kitaj's massive learning, wild in the ways of the autodidact, was not merely *lishma*—that is, for its own sake. Rather, he always applied it, poured it onto and around the margins of his canvases, yielding a unique artistic and intellectual creation, and a uniquely Jewish one at that.

Kitaj often called this project, as in his two manifestos, "Diasporist." Diasporism was about ceaseless agitation over ideas and open-ended "kabbalistic"



LEFT:  
**Study for the Second Diasporist Manifesto**, 1970–1996  
Collage, 30<sup>1/8</sup> x 22<sup>1/2</sup> in.  
© R. B. Kitaj  
Photograph courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, London

RIGHT:  
**Art Vindicatus color Xerox sketch**, ca. 1994  
© R. B. Kitaj  
Courtesy of Charles E. Young Research Library Department of Special Collections, R. B. Kitaj Papers  
Photograph by John Elder



interpretation. It was not about the celebration of powerlessness. Kitaj, after all, was a tough-minded Jew who hated anti-Semites and admired much in the State of Israel. That said, from the time he left home at age seventeen for the merchant marine, he remained a "painter who feels out of place much of the time, even when he is lucky enough to stay at work in his room, unmolested through much of his days" (*First Diasporist Manifesto*, #21). This was the solitary setting requisite for the nurturing of Jewish genius—a condition with which Kitaj was not only obsessed, but which he possessed. It was in this Diasporist setting that a giant of Jewish culture—and the most imaginative purveyor of Jewish Art in modern times—lived and died.

My wife, Nomi, and I were privileged to get to know Kitaj soon after he delivered a lecture at UCLA in June 1999 on, of all subjects, "The 'Jewish Question' in Art." We came to see not only his multiple brilliances, but also his incredible warmth, tenderness, and generosity. Sipping from the ubiquitous jug of diet cranberry juice at the appointed 4:30 p.m. hour, we talked and listened, cognizant of the fact that he was the rarest of breeds—a first-rate conversationalist, raconteur, intellectual, artist, and loyal friend all in one. We quickly grew to love him, and his loss leaves a huge void in our lives.

May his memory be a blessing to the family that he loved so, and his extraordinary example an inspiration to all!

David N. Myers teaches Jewish history at the University of California, Los Angeles. He shares with R. B. Kitaj the dream of creating an Archive of Jewish Culture in Los Angeles, a world-class repository of the work of great Jewish cultural creators. Kitaj cherished this ideal and donated his papers to UCLA as an important first step toward the realization of that goal.