

Marlborough

R.B. Kitaj:
After the Tate Wars
(Selections from a
postponed exhibition
curated by Dan Nadel)

Art Basel
Online Viewing Room

VIP Opening date:	Wednesday, June 17
Public Opening date:	Friday, June 19
Closing date:	Friday, June 26

When Marlborough asked me to organize an exhibition of R.B. Kitaj's paintings there was a little popping noise in my forehead—like an airlock unsealing. It makes such sense. Kitaj, and particularly his final paintings, which are the focus of this exhibition, is more relevant than ever in 2020. Through them we can look back upon a now-contested 20th century cultural legacy and marvel at his fluency and, yes, raging dignity. Yes, the work and the man are rude, uncouth, and certainly insensitive. But all the better, for despite it all, his intention was for the imperfect human. Kitaj! One of the only artists of merit to, as they say, “foreground” his Jewishness.

As you know, when he received viciously bad reviews for his 1994 retrospective at the Tate and, two weeks its close, his wife, Sandra, died from an aneurism. he responded with a letter, “J’Accuse,” directly echoing Emile Zola’s response to the Dreyfuss Affair. Did the

reviews have a whiff of anti-Semitism? Some did. He moved to Los Angeles in 1997. He killed himself there in 2007. The paintings here are mostly from that 10-year span. What happens when the loud-chewing, over-sexed cultural America Jew moves to one of maybe two places he really belongs (New York being the other)? Kitaj consciously scaled back, made simpler paintings, spoke of practicing a “late style.” Haunted and embracing his past. Like Philip Roth’s Mickey Sabbath, pushing himself into his memories, his lovers, his literary obsessions. He said he wanted to get to what Cezanne was doing – to strip things down to structural strokes. No more layering of images. No artful veneers left. Just a remaking of his world, even as he knew it was slipping away.

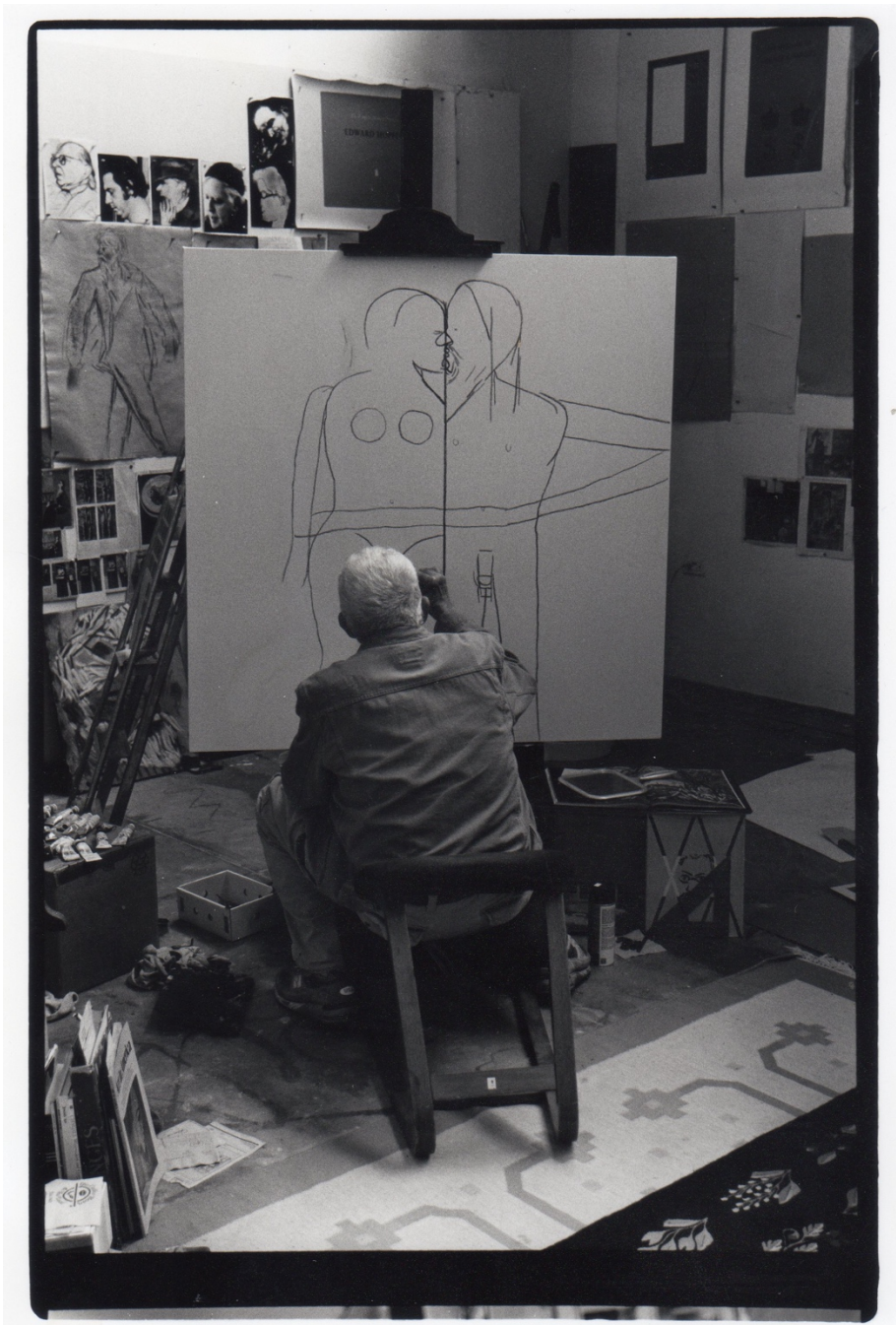
—Dan Nadel



Los Angeles No. 16 (Bed), 2001-2002
oil on canvas
48 x 48 in. / 121.92 x 121.92 cm



Los Angeles No. 24 (Nose to Nose), 2003
oil on canvas
48 x 48 in. / 121.9 x 121.9 cm



Kitaj in his Los Angeles Studio, 2003. Photo by Max Kitaj. © R.B. Kitaj Estate.



Los Angeles No. 28 (Hug), 2004
oil on canvas
36 x 36 in. / 91.4 x 91.4 cm



Self-Portrait as Punchbag, 2004
oil on canvas
23 3/4 x 24 in. / 60.3 x 61 cm

January 29, 2020

Dear Ben,

I want to tell you something about this thing that's weighed on me, that led me to yet another distraction, pulling me, in a way you would never permit yourself to be, into a cathartic but unproductive set of thoughts centered on the painter R.B. Kitaj and Anti-Semitism.

A while back Marlborough asked me to organize a show of R.B. Kitaj's paintings. When the gallery asked there was a little popping noise in my forehead—like an airlock unsealing. Kitaj! A painter of genius and unrelenting disinterest in good taste or correct content. Gary has talked about Kitaj. An American who lived in London and made a splash in the 1960s with layered “history painting” style figurative images of contemporary life. He was very successful for most of his career – he kind of achieved a level of fame just a notch below his friend Hockney, who credits him for early and crucial encouragement. Now he's pretty far out of fashion – his pictures too complex, literary, and loud for contemporary eyes.

Virtuosic draughtsman, and, old-fashioned libertine, but not ironic about his concerns. Friends with my all-time literary hero, Philip Roth, who, as every essayist will tell you (and I will, since you don't read essays), drew from Kitaj for his orgiastic flesh bag Mickey Sabbath in *Sabbath's Theater*. One of the only artists of merit to, as they say, “foreground” his

Jewishness. Kitaj! Who lived in London as a self-described whore-mongering Jew. London, where Anti-Semitism is a matter of chuckling liberal discourse. Fittingly, Kitaj was and remains represented by Marlborough, a made-up gentile (and genteel) name for a gallery started by Franz Kurt Levai, a Jewish Viennese merchant and collector who fled Austria in 1938. His parents and much of his family were killed by the Germans. He began the gallery in 1947 as Francis (Frank) Lloyd. His nephew, Pierre Levai, would later run the New York branch, and now the whole megillah is run by Pierre's son, Max. So, a business built by refugee Jews nominally undercover. How perfect that Kitaj, with his freight of history, would find a home there.

You'll like the grim sequence here: Kitaj received viciously bad reviews for his 1994 retrospective at the Tate and, two weeks after its close, his wife, Sandra, died from an aneurism. He responded with a letter, “J'Accuse,” directly echoing, of course, Zola's response to the Dreyfuss Affair. He blamed the

reviews for his wife's death. Did the reviews have a whiff of Anti-Semitism? Some did. He moved to Los Angeles in 1997. He killed himself there in 2007. I don't think his L.A. is your L.A. Closer perhaps to Sammy's, but not knowable to me, really, as I like to play it safe. The paintings in the show are mostly from that 10-year span. What happens when the loud chewing, cultural America Jew moves to one of maybe two places he really belongs (New York being the other), the place where Jews have made themselves anew for over a century?

Kitaj consciously scaled back. He spoke of an "old age style." He said he wanted to get to what Cezanne had done – to strip things down to structural strokes. No more layering of images. No artful veneers left. These are aesthetically simpler paintings, like de Kooning at the end. Memories of his literary obsessions, simple portraits. There is a way in which, as his body failed under Parkinson's Disease, he took care to simply picture his immediate world. That's what this show is. The project has also pushed me again back to my own Jewish self, and a recent run-in that still shakes me.

You know my parents – I was raised as a reform Jew. My identity from the start was tied to the Holocaust, which, looking back now, was not even forty years passed – it was as we view 1980 now. "We" lost family over there, and a curtain came down around my father's lineage. Did I tell you about the excitement in my brain when *Schindler's List* was first published? It was based, I was told, on my Nana's friends. They were celebrities for me, perhaps when I was 7 or 8? I knew Judaism through death, escape, through heroics, through survival, and books by Roth, Malamud, Bellow. In my confusion even John Cheever seemed part of it – a red book with curly-cue type on the spine? It seemed part of the same world, New York, that gave me the other stuff. Kitaj honored this very Jewish book/culture obsession with a fifty-print portfolio in 1970 – *In Our Time*. It's subtitled "Covers for a Small Library After the Life for the Most Part." 50 tattered book covers silkscreened on individual sheets. Simple, effective. You would appreciate the scrappy efficiency and the absurdity of it.

This ties back to something a few years back. Not so long ago, lunching with an art dealer, he used the term "Jewy" to refer to collectors who won't pay what he asks. I didn't say anything. The conversation continued. Which is its own kind of shame. A couple months later, in another meeting with the same dealer, he made a similar comment about discounts. I looked up at him and said, "you know I'm Jewish, right?" Silence. On to other matters. Shamefully, I let it go there. I mentioned it a few times to friends in the biz. One, said, "So many collectors are Jewish, how can he say that?" She's in the business! Truth is, we all are "in business." Another friend, who is Jewish, had a similar reaction: comment is horrible, yes, but it's so impractical. *Why would he say that – doesn't he know?*

But see, as you would dryly tell me, that's missing the point. Of course, the dealer knows, but there's no friction between the words and the thought. The dealer doesn't think his Jewish client is a rat-fuck big-nosed kike. His thoughts don't extend that far. That's what's so scary about it, so humiliating. It's the casualness darkness of "Jewy." The thoughtlessness, precisely the tossed off-nature of the hate – that's where the evil really is. You can refer to a client as Jewy out of her earshot and still sell her a painting, and she'll still invite you to dinner. And none of it matters. Her Jew money is always good there. They will forever do business with us, we will forever feel normal, until, suddenly, they will not, and we will not. Ideology I can engage with, or, I suppose, struggle against. Banal, thoughtless hate... that's much more dangerous. It's the stuff of the collaborator. Of the bureaucrat. The fucking moral casualness of it all.

Listen, I'm not a schmuck, I know that shit is bad everywhere, and we live a compromised existence. I am keenly aware of the depths. And I know that, as you once told me, we have to play the personnel we've been dealt. Every day a compromise. I am not asking for a purity test. But it scared me. The best we can do is try to do the creative stuff we do with people that share some common set of values or love. Perhaps especially on some naïve level, in "the arts." The most valuable thing I learned in philosophy was basically, "it is what it is." Which is why I so appreciate Kitaj and Roth raging

against that “what it is,” trying with savage, Semitic beauty to create and fuck their ways through it, all within the upper echelons of the genteel (and finally gentile) world of culture. I cannot rage like they did. You know that. Remember when I used to simply fall asleep at late night shows in Providence? I am a nice boy. The most I can do is write you this letter.

But Kitaj did more. He wrote a handful of supremely fucked books, the best of which was left unfinished at his death – *Confessions of an Old Jewish Painter*. That you should read ASAP. Obviously, it’s a nightmare of womanizing and bad behavior but that shouldn’t get in anyone’s way. It’s art like Big Star’s *Sister Lover* is art, like Al Goldstein’s, *I, Goldstein* is art. In an earlier book, *First Diasporist Manifesto*, he writes “Diasporist painting, which I just made up, is enacted under peculiar historical and personal freedoms, stresses and dislocation, rupture and momentum.” Along this line, one of the greatest works of Jewish art in our lifetimes is *Uncut Gems*, created by three fairly maniacal Jews and starring Sandler – our shared suburban icon (though I know you prefer Will Ferrell, which says... something). The finest writing about the film is by Richard Brody in the *New Yorker*: “The panic and paranoia that drive Howard have an underlying historical undercurrent, a weird sense of belonging that he finds in the uncertainty, the instability, the terror, the exclusion he endures – even if he largely brought it on himself.” This writing about Howard (named for our beloved Stern – did I mention that Bill Callahan is a big Stern fan? I discussed Brent and Caitlin’s swinging with him) may as well apply to Kitaj as well.

And in this passage from *First Diasporist Manifesto* he could be writing about *Uncut*

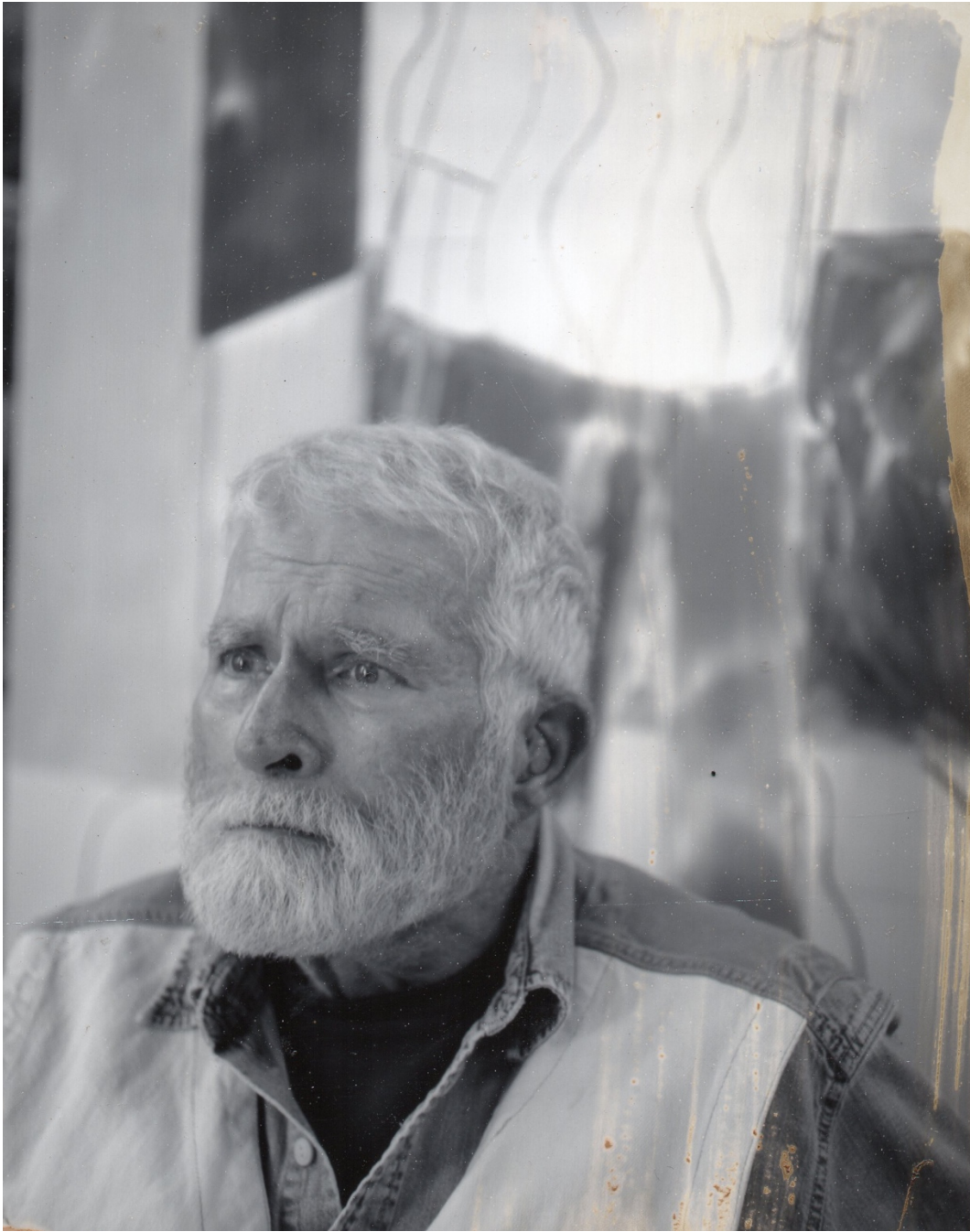
Gems: “... it is Jewishness that condemns one, not the Jewish religion. It became reasonable to suppose that Jewishness, this complex of qualities, would be a presence in art as it is in life.” Indeed, and so the Passover scene (Kitaj had Passover with Isaiah Berlin back in England – I met with Berlin twice when I went to Oxford. He was in a house that looked precisely as fulsomely alive with the dead as you would wish the grand old man to have) in *Uncut Gems* is as memorable as all of Howard’s loudmouth compulsive gambling, eating, fucking, arguing. It’s a whole life that both contains and births a world.

See, it’s an entire life that is dismissed when I sit at a table and hear about “Jewy” art collectors. Maybe I’m going too far, maybe not. Kitaj goes on in his *First Diasporist Manifesto*: “I would reclaim the Jews and our little ‘problem’ for my corner of the painting art, when I can. A Diasporist painting is one in which a pariah people, an unpopular, stigmatized people, is taken up, pondered in their dilemmas, as unsurely as Impressionists ponder the dilemmas of light in nature or as Cubists take up perspectival and planar dilemmas.” This he did perhaps most touchingly in his final years, reduced, DIY, style, like early Sebadoh, like *Gems*.

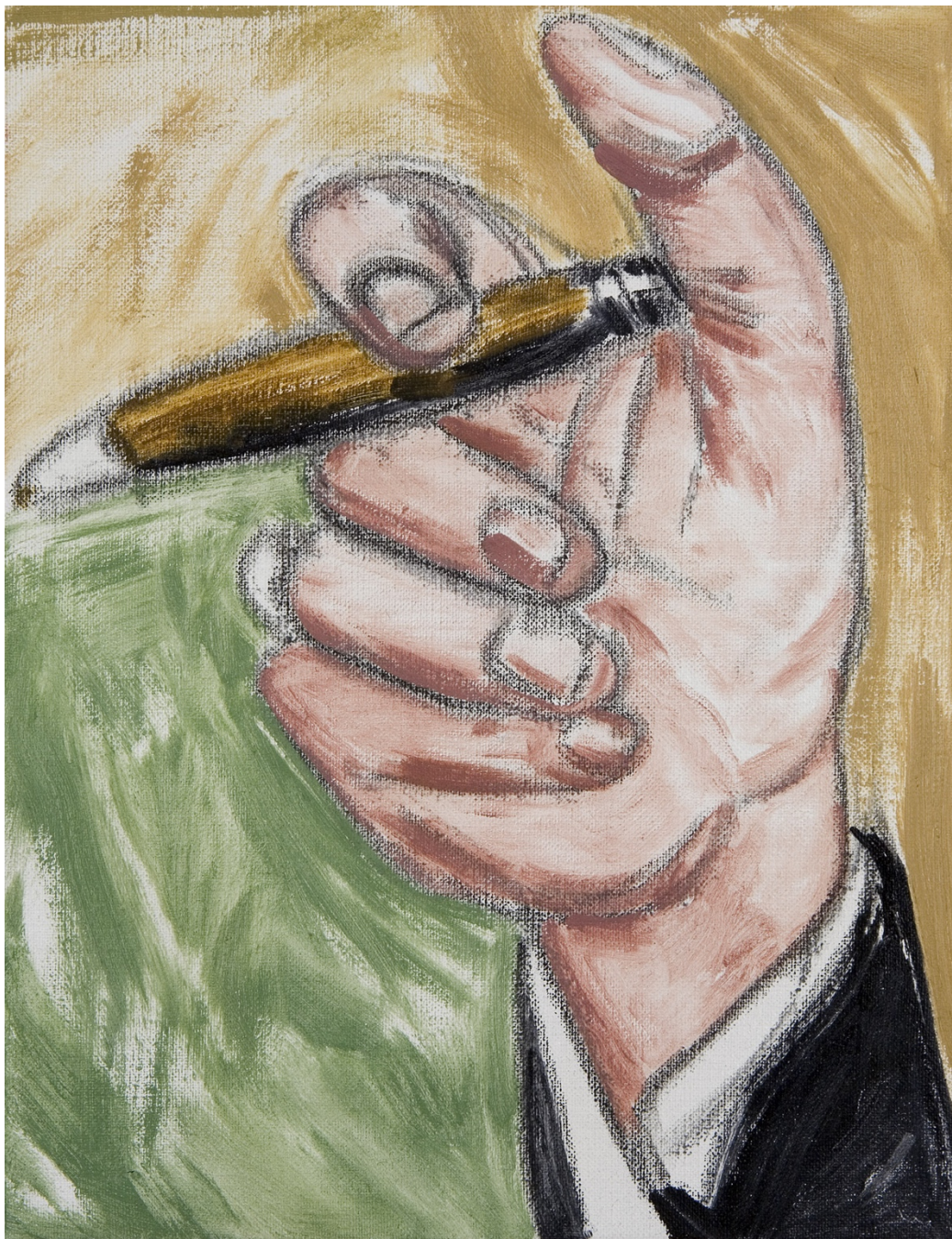
As our great Silver Jew wrote: “Friends are warmer than gold / when you’re old.” See you soon.

Love,

Dan



Proof for portrait of Kitaj in his Los Angeles studio, 2003. Photo by Paul O'Connor.



Sigmund Freud, 2007
oil on canvas
14 x 11 in. / 35.56 x 27.94 cm



Los Angeles No. 5 (abstraction creation), 2001
 oil and charcoal on screen-printed canvas
 60 x 47 1/2 in. / 152.4 x 120.65 cm



Kitaj in his Los Angeles Studio, courtesy the R.B. Kitaj Estate.

Kitaj is fearless in his appropriation of styles, figures and compositions made by other hands. His work is an overflowing cornucopia of cultural references, from Titian to W.C. Fields, from Weegee to the Talmud. He's a self-proclaimed wandering Jew—and not just geographically. All of these influences play host to his diasporic mind.

He wants to infuse his art, he says, with the Jewish tradition of exegetical argument. To do so, he occupies others' territory and wrestles with his presence there, assimilating what's useful, contributing what's personal, all with the utmost integrity and brilliance, humor and humility. The results, as seen here, can be dense and complicated.

"R.B. Kitaj roams far and wide for complex works"

By Leah Ollman

Los Angeles Times

May 2003



Los Angeles No. 7 (Double), 2001
oil on canvas
36 x 36 in. / 91.44 x 91.44 cm



Los Angeles No. 11 (Bathtub), 2002-2003
oil on canvas
36 x 36 in. / 91.4 x 91.4 cm