Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



R.B. Kitaj (1932 - 2007)

Portrait of Philip Roth

Charcoal on handmade paper.

775 x 570 mm. (30 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.)

RECENTLY ACQUIRED BY THE STÄDELSCHES KUNSTINSTITUT UND STÄDTISCHE GALERIE, FRANKFURT.

R. B. Kitaj met Philip Roth in 1985, when the writer and his wife Claire Bloom were neighbours of the artist in Chelsea, London. Roth became a good friend, and his writings influenced and inspired much of Kitaj's thinking, particularly on the question of Jewish identity. As Kitaj wrote in his First Diasporist Manifesto, published in 1989, 'One outcome of my study of this strange people of mine is that painting, Diasporist painting in my own life, begins to assume some of the Jewish attributes or characteristics assigned to that troubled people. The listing of traits would be endless and funny. For the moment I will leave all that to my buddy Philip Roth (b.1933) and his great book The Counterlife, which is quite encyclopedic on these questions. I think that what the Jews promise, paintings may be made to promise.' Indeed, the First Diasporist Manifesto opens with a quote – 'The poor bastard had Jew on the brain' - from Roth's The Counterlife, alongside a reproduction of the present portrait drawing. (Roth may in turn have been inspired by Kitaj in creating a character named Pipik, who advocates a doctrine called Diasporism, in his 1993 novel Operation Shylock. The character of the former puppeteer Mickey Sabbath in Roth's novel Sabbath's Theater, published in 1995, was also based in large part on Kitaj.)

Drawn in London in 1985, soon after Roth and Kitaj first met, the present sheet was, according to Kitaj, done in 'about six sessions'. Loaned from the artist's collection, the drawing was included in Kitaj's retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1994, which later travelled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Despite the generally poor reviews for the exhibition as a whole, the present sheet was singled out for praise by several critics. (One noted that 'Works like…a magnificent portrait of Philip Roth seemed to me the strongest works in the show.') Among comparable large-scale portrait drawings by Kitaj is a study of Lucian Freud of 1991, which was hung alongside the present sheet at the 1994 retrospective exhibition, and is today in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Another portrait drawing of Philip Roth by Kitaj, drawn several years later, was, like the present sheet, retained by the artist until his death. Drawn in charcoal on canvas and entitled A Jew in Love (Philip Roth), the drawing remains in the collection of the Kitaj estate.

Provenance:

The estate of the artist, until 2008.

Exhibitions

London, Marlborough Fine Art, R. B. Kitaj, 1985, no.73; New York, Marlborough Gallery, R. B. Kitaj, 1986, no.73; London, Tate Gallery, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, 1994-1995, no.74; Amsterdam, Stichting Joods Historisch Museum/Jewish Historical Museum, R. B. Kitaj: Unpacking My Library, March to July 2015.

Literature:

London, Marlborough Fine Art, R. B. Kitaj, exhibition catalogue, 1985, no.73, illustrated p.43; Andrew Brighton, 'Conversations with R. B. Kitaj', Art in America, June 1986, illustrated p.102; R. B. Kitaj, First Diasporist Manifesto, London, 1989, detail illustrated p.8; Julián Rios, Kitaj: Pictures and Conversations, London, 1994, illustrated p.62; Richard Morphet, ed., R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, exhibition catalogue, London, Tate Gallery and elsewhere, 1994, no.74, illustrated p.152; Richard Dorment, 'It's time to learn that less is more' [exhibition review], The Daily Telegraph, June 22, 1994, p.20; Mark Shechner, Up Society's Ass, Copper: Rereading Philip Roth, Madison, 2003, illustrated on the cover; Andrew Lambirth, Kitaj, London, 2004, illustrated p.62; 'In praise of…RB Kitaj', The Guardian, 24 October 2007, p.32 (illustrated); Aaron Rosen, Imagining Jewish Art: Encounters with the Masters in Chagall, Guston and Kitaj, London, 2009, pp.88-89; Marco Livingstone, Kitaj, 4th ed., 2010, p.272, no.407; Mirjam Knotter, R. B. Kitaj: Unpacking My Library, exhibition catalogue, Amsterdam, 2015, pp.54-55; New York magazine, 28 May-10 June 2018, illustrated p.5.

Artist description:

American by birth, Ronald Brooks Kitaj began his studies at the Cooper Union in New York and the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna. After serving in the U.S. Army, he enrolled in the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford in 1958 before transferring to the Royal College of Art in London, where he studied alongside such artists as David Hockney – who was to become his lifelong friend - Allen Jones, Peter Phillips and Patrick Caulfield. Older and more worldly than most of his contemporaries at the RCA, Kitaj was a particular influence on these younger students, who joined him in becoming the leading members of the nascent British Pop Art movement. Having made London his home, he was represented by Marlborough Gallery and enjoyed a series of successful exhibitions in London and New York from 1963 onwards. In the course of curating an exhibition entitled The Human Clay at the Hayward Gallery in 1976, he coined the term 'The School of London' to refer a group of artists including Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Michael Andrews and Euan Uglow, as well as

Kitaj himself. Further exhibitions in England and America in the 1980's coincided with a renewed interest in his Jewish heritage and in Jewish culture and ideas, leading to the publication of his book, the First Diasporist Manifesto, in 1989. Elected to the Royal Academy in 1991 (the first American artist since John Singer Sargent to have been so honoured), he was four years later the subject of a major retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London. Stung by the savage critical reaction to the exhibition, which was followed shortly thereafter by his wife's sudden death, Kitaj resolved to leave London for good. He settled in Los Angeles in 1997, and lived and worked there for ten years before his death, by his own hand, in October 2007.

Throughout his career, Kitaj was always particularly highly regarded as a draughtsman. He was equally adept in chalk and pastel; the latter medium he took up in the 1970's, encouraged by Hockney and inspired by Degas, who was a particular hero. In 1981, the art critic Robert Hughes, writing of a retrospective of Kitaj's work at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, noted of the artist that 'Of late, he has also emerged (alongside David Hockney and Avigdor Arikha) as one of the few real masters of the art of straight figure drawing in Europe or, for that matter, in the world…Kitaj draws better than almost anyone else alive, taking on all the expressive and factual responsibilities of depiction and carrying most of them through.' Hockney himself recalled of Kitaj, shortly after his death, that 'He was a great draughtsman. (The best Jewish draughtsman of all, he told me.).'