Corita Kent: The Nun Who Revolutionized the Art World

By Ashley Knight

The Baker Museum in Naples on Sept. 27th unveiled “Someday is Now,” a survey of more than 30 years of work by artist and designer Corita Kent (1918-1986). The exhibition was organized by Ian Berry, Dayton Director of the Tang Museum, and Michael Duncan, independent curator and art critic, in collaboration with the Corita Art Center in Los Angeles.

Corita with student, Immaculate Heart College, Los Angeles, c. 1955. All images are courtesy of the Tang Museum at Skidmore College and Corita Art Center, Los Angeles.

Corita was born Frances Kent in 1918 in Fort Dodge, Iowa. She grew up in Los Angeles and joined the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1936, taking the name Sister Mary Corita. For more than 30 years, she experimented in printmaking, producing a vast body of work that combines faith, activism and teaching with messages of acceptance and hope. Her groundbreaking prints from the 1960s pose philosophical questions about racism, war, poverty and religion and remain iconic symbols of that controversial period in American history. While previous exhibitions have focused on Corita’s 1960s serigraphs, “Someday is Now” is the first major museum survey of her entire career, including early abstractions and text pieces as well as the more lyrical works made in the 1970s and 1980s. The show includes over 200 serigraph prints, as well as rarely exhibited photographs she used for teaching and documentary purposes.
From 1947 through 1968, Corita taught in the art department at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. At IHC, she developed her own version of Pop art, mixing bright, bold imagery with provocative texts pulled from a range of secular and religious sources, including street signs, scripture, poetry, philosophy, advertising and pop song lyrics. She proclaimed her upbeat theology in prints that repurposed well-known advertising phrases of the time, such as “The big G stands for goodness” (General Mills) and “Put a tiger in your tank” (Esso gasoline). As Corita’s friend, theologian Harvey Cox, noted, “Like a priest, a shaman, a magician, she could pass her hands over the commonest of the everyday, the superficial, the oh-so-ordinary and make it a vehicle of the luminous, the only and the hope filled.”

Her avant-garde designs appeared widely as billboards, book jackets, illustrations and posters. Suddenly, the exiguous rooms of her art department were transformed into a global center for design and printmaking that had IBM among its clients. By the mid-1960s, Corita and IHC’s art department had become legendary, frequently attracting such well-known personalities as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Charles and Ray Eames, Buckminster Fuller, Saul Bass and Alfred Hitchcock. Her prints featured phrases and graphic patterns that cribbed from cultural references and juxtaposed high
and low, techniques seen in the work of contemporary artists from Andy Warhol to Shepard Fairey.

During the 1960s, she lectured extensively, appeared on television and radio talk shows across the country, and on the cover of *Newsweek* in 1967. As a teacher, she inspired her students to discover new ways to experience the world. She asked them to see with fresh eyes through the use of a “finder,” an empty 35-millimeter slide mount that students looked through to frame arresting compositions and images. Seeking out revelation in the everyday, her students explored grocery stores, car dealerships and the streets of Hollywood.
In 1968, Corita left the Order and Los Angeles. She settled in Boston to devote herself entirely to making art and design. In the next 18 years, she continued to create her own serigraphs—more than 400 pieces. She also made commissioned works for Group W (Westinghouse Broadcasting Company). Until her final days she kept active in social causes by designing billboards and posters for Amnesty International, the International Walk for Hunger and Share, among others organizations. The U.S. Postal Service also commissioned her to illustrate a Love Stamp, which was unveiled in 1985. Corita lost her battle with cancer a year later.

Today, her *Rainbow Swash*, created in 1971 and commissioned by the Boston Gas Company, still appears at the Boston Gas tank on the Southeast Expressway, and her work continues influence hundreds of contemporary artists and designers.


*Ashley Knight is an arts writer based in Miami.*
R.B. Kitaj 1932-2007

_The Wedding_ 1989-93

**Artist biography**

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, Kitaj studied at the Cooper Union Institute in New York in 1950-1 and 1952. As a merchant seaman in the early 1950s he visited Havana, Mexico and South America. He was a student at the Academy of Fine Art, Vienna in 1951. He attended the Ruskin School, Oxford in 1958-9, and the Royal College of Art from 1959 to 1961. It was at the Royal College that he met David Hockney, who became a close friend.

His first one-man exhibition was held at Marlborough Fine Art, London in 1963. He taught at the University of California Berkeley in 1967-8 and the University of California Los Angeles in 1970-1. In 1972 he returned to London.

His 1983 marriage to the American artist Sandra Fisher (1947-94) is celebrated in his paintings _Cecil Court, London WC2 (The Refugees)_ (Tate Gallery T04115) and _The Wedding_ (Tate Gallery T06743).

In 1976 Kitaj selected for the Arts Council of Great Britain a group of British works, connected by a common theme, which formed the core of an exhibition called _The Human Clay_. The show included works by Bacon, Freud, Auerbach, Kossoff, Moore, Hodgkin, Hockney, Kitaj himself, and others. Kitaj's essay for the catalogue, in which he proposed the idea of a _School of London_, became one of the key art historical texts of the period. In 1989 he published the _First Diasporist Manifesto_, the longest and most impassioned of his many texts discussing the Jewish dimension in his art and thought.

His various honours include election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1982. In 1985 he became the first American since Sargent to be elected to the Royal Academy. Numerous retrospective exhibitions of his work have been held, including shows at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC and tour 1981-2; and the Tate Gallery, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1994-5. He moved to Los Angeles in 1997.
Further reading:
Terry Riggs

October 1997

**RB Kitaj: an obsession with revenge**

The painter RB Kitaj was known for his brilliant draughtsmanship and fierce intelligence. Until the "Tate war" of 1994, that is, when critics savaged him as 'pseudo intellectual'. Will the first retrospective since his 2007 suicide finally rehabilitate him?

The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even, 1997: RB Kitaj’s greatest act of revenge was this painting, displayed at the Royal Academy’s 1997 Summer Exhibition. Photograph: Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway/RB Kitaj Estate

Tim Adams

Sunday 10 February 2013 01.00 ESTFirst published on Sunday 10 February 2013 01.00 EST

Later this month two exhibitions will stir memories of perhaps the most rancorous and tragic episode in recent British art history. The Jewish Museum in London and the Pallant House gallery in Chichester will together stage the first British retrospective of the work of RB Kitaj since his suicide in 2007. The shows will also offer the first comprehensive look at the artist’s painting in this country since a controversial exhibition at the Tate gallery in 1994 dramatically changed the course of the rest of Kitaj’s life, and his art.

That 1994 show, a landmark for a living painter, became known to Kitaj as the "Tate war", and letters and documents that have now come to light reveal that the phrase was not an exaggeration. What had been planned as the culmination and crowning glory of a life's work proved to be something quite different. On one side of the battlefield back then were the art critics of the British press, who seemed to have lined up to outdo one another in destroying Kitaj's claims to attention. And facing them were Kitaj, then 64, and his friends and fellow British painters – Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, Frank Auerbach and others – who, letters now reveal, disagreed among themselves about how this savage and apparently highly personal broadside might best be countered.
The real casualty of this battle, in Kitaj’s eyes, was his beloved wife and muse, Sandra Fisher, who died of a brain aneurysm aged 47, two weeks after his Tate show opened, and whose death the painter blamed directly on the shock of his very public critical humiliation. The fallout from this tragedy led to Kitaj’s self-imposed exile from his adoptive London, along with his young son, Max, back to America, and to a studio in Los Angeles, where he nurtured an obsessive loathing for particular British critics that involved splenetic death threats and fantasies of violence.

Reading back through the archive of that time, and looking again at some of the work Kitaj made subsequent to the 1994 show – compulsive, defiantly erotic paintings of his late wife, as well as wild and exacting imaginings of firing squads taking aim at a many-headed Brian Sewell and Andrew Graham-Dixon – these wounds still feel very much open. MJ Long, the architect, and a friend of the painter since the 1960s, says to me now that "there is no doubt that Kitaj went crazy for a while over all of it". It was Long's late husband, Colin St John "Sandy" Wilson, who tried to co-ordinate the initial response to the critics from Kitaj’s outraged friends, dispatching letters to Freud and Hockney and the rest, correspondence that will be included in the Pallant House show. It was a frenzy of activity that continued until events took a far bleaker turn with the sudden death of Sandra while Kitaj himself was away in America at the bedside of his mother who was also terminally sick.

In the months that followed, Kitaj's grief and anger took on an epic quality. "He came to our house that Christmas," Long recalls "and he was in quite an extreme state. There was little comfort for him and no way of talking him out of it really." Kitaj, always an intense and vividly articulate character, who had run away to sea from his home in Cleveland, Ohio at 17 and become an important and charismatic fixture in the London art world from the moment his first solo show had opened in 1963, ranted with a sense of loss and despair to his closest friends. These included his long-time confidant Philip Roth, who, it seems, partly based the outrageous character of Mickey Sabbath, in his incandescent novel Sabbath's Theater, on the grief-stricken Kitaj – the book is told in the voice of a furious and confessional puppeteer driven mad by vividly sexual dreams of his lost lover, tortured by a fear of impotence and oblivion, by turns contemplating suicide and raging against the dying of the light.

Richard Morphet, who curated the 1994 Tate show, still talks with a degree of incredulity and shock at how events drove Kitaj to this kind of state. "Nearly 20 years on, it is all still too fresh in my mind," he told me last week. "The
issues still remain crystal clear." Morphet had known and occasionally worked with Kitaj for nearly 30 years by the time of the Tate collaboration, and the retrospective was the fruition of that friendship.

As a result, Morphet recalls, "I felt the jolt of it almost as much as him, I think." The strange thing was, he says, that initially there were actually one or two positive reviews of the show. "And the opening itself was a really euphoric occasion, large numbers of people from the art world, and a real kind of confirmation of Kitaj's dedication over the years. When we went to bed after the party there was this sense of pleasure that he was getting his due for all of that, and then the following morning this extraordinary cascade of vitriol began..."

The reviews, which seemed to grow in ferocity from a fairly hysterical start, went on for several days. "The funny thing about it is that, though in mine and many people's views the hostility was well over the top and vicious to him as a person, nevertheless this was clearly what the individual writers genuinely believed," Morphet says. "I think they were sincere in what they wrote. It was in a way a nasty accident they all expressed it at the same time."

When Morphet spoke to Kitaj in the days following the show he was "sort of disgusted really, very distressed. He never said it but I think this exhibition was what he had always wanted and worked towards his whole life. And the extremity of the outburst against it was as if to say: this is not valid. His whole raison d'etre was trashed."

The main reason for the critics' damning verdict on the show, Morphet believes, was what was seen by one as Kitaj's "pseudo-intellectual bullshit". Kitaj was an eclectic reader and claimed literary inspiration for much of his work from writers ranging from TS Eliot to Franz Kafka to Walter Benjamin. He self-consciously rooted himself in an outsider's tradition, of Jewish intellectualism, equally obsessed with language and image. At the suggestion of Nicholas Serota, the Tate director, Kitaj sought to reflect some of this erudition in extended captions to his paintings that explained their inspiration and genesis. To many of the critics, who saw Kitaj invading their space, telling them what to think, this appeared to be fighting talk. Andrew Graham-Dixon in the Independent called him an "inveterate name-dropper... The Wandering Jew, the TS Eliot of painting? Kitaj turns out, instead, to be the Wizard of Oz: a small man with a megaphone held to his lips."
There was a great deal more in this vein. Protest as they might, critics like nothing more than giving perceived pretension a sound kicking, in the belief that it lends their own somewhat esoteric calling a grounded, street-fighting quality. Kitaj, the subtext went, had been asking for it with his captions, and got what was coming to him.

Morphet was staggered by this personal aggression. "It is ludicrous to suggest that Kitaj was just this arrogant figure. The critics seemed to object to the prominence he gave in his work to his own ideas and personality... as if he were the first artist to foreground himself!" The curator spent a lot of time in the galleries observing the crowds at the show and believed, contrary to critical opinion, "that people were really gripped by it, and went round at a snail's pace because they were so engaged not only by these extraordinarily sensual paintings, but also by these texts that accompanied them – those captions which caused all the trouble..."

Rereading those critical pieces now, it does seem, as Morphet argues, that collectively "some line had been crossed". It was certainly a moment, in any case, when the critics decided to judge the man as much as his work, and both were found wanting. By the standards of our own free-for-all of vicious anonymous blogging and comment, the savaging of Kitaj's reputation does not seem particularly extreme – but you could certainly make an argument for it being years ahead of its time, a taste of bile to come. The boundary-breaking was led by Brian Sewell in London's Evening Standard, who, under a heading "Tales half-told in the name of vanity" had – given his own bearing – the nerve to conclude that Kitaj was "a vain painter puffed with amour propre, unworthy of a footnote in the history of figurative art". Tim Hilton, also in the Independent, kicked off with the observation that "Ron Kitaj is an egotist, at his best in interviews..." And on it went.

Sandy Wilson, having written to his friend at the show's opening to exclaim about the fact he was "able to create what William Blake called 'Emanations'!!" now found himself in the position of trying to rally support for Kitaj. To this end, Wilson drafted another letter, which would take issue in particular with Graham-Dixon: "One is compelled to ask why a critic with reasonable claims to be taken seriously should indulge in such a bilious assault not only on the work, but also more disgracefully on the man himself," Wilson wrote, and invited the painters Kitaj had christened the "London group" and beyond, to add their signatures to his missive. Some were keener than others. Hockney signed up; so did Peter Blake and Leon Kossoff and Michael Andrews;
Hodgkin said no; Auerbach, whose work Kitaj had championed, and who was a close friend, reluctantly agreed, with the caveat that "governments, ministries, committees, boards may be impressed by numbers, but if there are several signatories to a letter attacking one individual it seems like ganging up". Lucian Freud likewise counselled, "Though it is often a good idea to write to someone in order to object, agree, question or ridicule anything they may have said or done (or even to challenge them to a duel or ask them to lunch) I feel it is pointless to gang up on a third-rate critic when you don't consider him seriously. As they wisely say in Ireland: what do you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

Kitaj himself eventually thought the letter a bad idea, having been told by Wilson that "Every minute you spend thinking of Sewell is a victory for Sewell and a cause of great distress to Sandra."

His words, to Kitaj's distracted mind, quickly proved more pointed than anyone could have imagined. Sandra Fisher, a painter herself, had been Kitaj's soulmate since he met her after the death of his first wife, by suicide, in 1969. Sandra had long been an antidote to his depressive tendencies, friends recalled, bringing her native Californian light to his doubt. She had closely helped him with the retrospective and was, MJ Long recalls, already feeling the strain at the time of the show's opening. "She really didn't look well then," Long recalls. "I remember thinking that the whole thing seemed to have taken its toll on her." Morphet recalls seeing Sandra after the reviews started coming in: "She was very hurt by it all, but also fantastically strong."

RB Kitaj in New York, 1985. Photograph: Christopher Felver/Corbis

When he was given the news of his wife's death, Kitaj immediately drew the conclusion that the critics had killed her. "They aimed at me and they got Sandra instead," he subsequently claimed, to anyone who would listen. Though he of course wildly exaggerated any motive on the part of his detractors, there is a sliver of medical credence to Kitaj's belief – recent medical opinion does acknowledge severe stress, and resultant raised blood pressure, as an exacerbating factor in aneurysms of the type that Fisher suffered. The obituary in the Independent noted, without irony: "Her sudden death leaves Kitaj, 15 years her senior, with a 10-year-old son to raise, just as the suicide of his first wife 25 years ago left him with children aged six and 11, children for whom Sandra Fisher became mother. The fierce antagonism of newspaper critics towards Kitaj's recent late retrospective – in contrast to the
response of an admiring public – made for a stressful last summer for a woman who will be remembered by many for her almost saintly happiness."

Advertisement

Friends tried to encourage Kitaj to abandon the link in his mind between the two events, but he was unable or unwilling to. "Your victory over Sewell lies in the work you have yet to do," Wilson wrote to him and advised him to read the prayers of Søren Kierkegaard and ask for patience and forbearance.

In the event, Kitaj determined on more direct catharsis. For the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997, in among the still lifes and daubs of favourite pets, he submitted a large painting entitled *The Killer-Critic Assassinated By His Widower, Even*, a composition indebted to Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*, in which two figures fire bullets into the engorged faces of a hydra-headed monster, whose tongue extends across the picture with the words "yellow press, yellow press, kill, kill, kill" written upon it. (The attached price tag was £1m.) The painting was displayed next to *Sandra Three*, the latest in his ongoing attempt to conjure his wife's flesh, and text which announced his departure from Britain.

At the time of the show, Kitaj confessed to one journalist: "Never ever believe an artist if he says he doesn't care what the critics write about him. Every artist cares. Those reviews of my show were by pathetic, sick, meagre hacks. They were about small lives and lousy marriages." Painting, he noted, had become a means of revenge, a subject which, he claimed, "interests me more and more". Richard Dorment, the *Telegraph* critic numbered among his tormentors, observed that: "When I ventured to criticise his work in the past – years before his wife's death – Kitaj sent me hate mail so frightening and threatening that my wife wondered whether we should turn the letters over to the police." This time the fears seemed more genuine.

Germaine Greer, judge of that year's Summer Exhibition, and never a woman to shy away from controversy, awarded the £25,000 prize to Kitaj as something of a farewell gift, while noting that "Sandra Fisher survives in her husband's work not as a fellow painter, but as Shekhina, the female aspect of the deity of the Kabbalah with whom he seeks union. But Fisher was not divine; she was very, very human. Once Fisher died, she lost her independent agency and became a figment of Kitaj's relentless imagination..."

It was there, in the Californian years that followed, that Sandra stayed. In Los Angeles, as recently released documents from Kitaj's archive reveal, his life fell
into a pattern, motivated, as the painting of the later years shows by a hardening of earlier obsessions: into his Jewish identity, the abiding absence of his wife, and his ongoing contempt for his detractors. A small National Gallery show in 2002 prompted Brian Sewell to revisit the earlier criticism, though not in any conciliatory spirit. It had not, he wrote, been "a systematic attempt to cut the painter down to size'. Critics do not enter into conspiratorial agreements with each other – they are far more likely to lick the arses of such panjandrums as Kitaj than take a common line against them." He went on to say that "any embarrassment I feel is on behalf of the institutions that nourish the vanity of this now preposterous obsessive personality, with his rant and bombast about the Jewish Question, and his wife Sandra (a rather better painter than Kitaj once he had begun his slip into decline)."

In later years, a woman named Tracy Bartley worked as Kitaj's assistant and looked after him, transcribing the notes he wrote every morning at his favourite cafe – on the morning walk there he would habitually "talk" to Sandra, ask her for guidance – "and then he would return with yellow legal pads, notes, manifestos, an unfinished autobiography" before starting to paint. Richard Morphet sees in this late work, in which Kitaj often renders himself Lear-like, a white beard in the midst of emptiness or chaos, a lonely figure full of longing, evidence of "terse, abbreviated, thrilling images, full of awareness of himself".

In 2004 he made a self-portrait in which he stares wickedly at the viewer, from under a baseball cap, an incarnation of Philip Roth's leering Mickey Sabbath. The diary entry attached to that portrait reads: "mid Aug 05. Here I am again, after a year or so, still alive, still an irritant. I have Parkinson’s disease but it's OK so far. I love my cane, draw, study, write (in my Coffee Bean [cafe]) every day. The best thing about Parkinson's is my addiction to chocolate fudge sundaes. The worst thing is the medication. So I don’t take it, which drives my neurologists at UCLA nuts. Parkinson's has no cure. I give myself five years with 'luck'."

The painting is included in the Jewish Museum show, which demands if not rehabilitation of Kitaj's work – he has never disappeared from view – then certainly reappraisal. Morphet believes absolutely that he will take his place alongside the luminaries of the London group: "Freud, Bacon, Auerbach, he certainly belongs in that company." Kitaj would, no doubt, have been compelled to know if future critics would concur – and perhaps amused to note that his own tormentors might have been careful of what they wished for:
if they thought his work was self-absorbed, what were they to do with the generation of Tracey Emin?

MJ Long spoke to Kitaj a week or so before his suicide, and recalls how he seemed more depressed than ever by his growing frailty, the debilitations of Parkinson's, and suggesting he was finding it difficult to paint. "It was an awful way to die, and especially to know that Max would find him," she says. "But he certainly would not have wanted to go on if he couldn't work." Among Kitaj's last diary entries was one which read "Failure, failure as always". These new, judicious exhibitions, though, may yet tell other stories.