

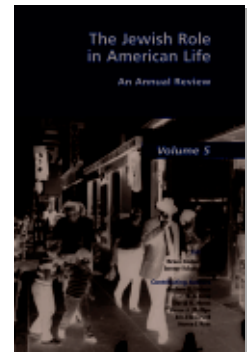


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CHAPTER THREE

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How to Reach 71 in Jewish Art

By R. B. Kitaj

EDITORS' NOTE: The following lecture was given by R. B. Kitaj at USC's twenty-fourth annual Jerome Nemer Lecture on October 20, 2004. This is not a transcript of the event but rather Kitaj's own prepared remarks—unedited. The photograph that precedes this chapter is that of Kitaj's late wife, artist Sandra Fisher, whose image is included in all of his publications. We are pleased to be able to include some wonderful samples of Kitaj's art, as well. The subsequent essay in this chapter is by David N. Myers, who was a respondent for Kitaj's lecture. Please see the introduction to this volume for more information.



Kitaj, *Freud Paints Me Twice*, 2004, oil on canvas

As you've guessed, I am a painter. I'm told I'm the first painter to do this lecture, so I feel honored. I am not a scholar, but I come from the People of the Book, lots of books really, and the Burning Books. Since I was a very young painter, books and book-learning have been for me what trees and woods are for a landscape painter.

I also have "Jew-on-the-brain" more than any other crazy painter alive, I dare say. This passion of mine gets me into a lot of trouble in what is called the art world, which is half Jewish but doesn't talk about it. I am the most controversial living easel-painter; that is to say that the world's museums, Glittering Prizes and an amazing Hatred—even a low-octane Jew-hate—come my way.

What Dr. Goebbels called "Jewish Intellectualism" is also taboo in today's kitsch driven art world. But, as everyone in this room knows, the Jews have been in trouble since the Expulsion from Eden. A French Catholic Judeophile named Charles Péguy called us "five thousand years of neurasthenia." In the immortal words of Sam Goldwyn, we've passed a lot of water since then. After the worst thing that ever happened to us, we found a billion new enemies, in the Muslim world, we never had before. I fear it will never end.

That trouble we are always in was one of the things that fascinated me about the Jews and drew me to them forty years ago, when I was a young painter, and I'm still fascinated and obsessed by the Jews today at age seventy-one, which makes my strange passion quite heretical in our Art Scheme, which, like my grandmother, likes to pull the shades down so the neighbors don't hear. I had no Jewish education. My mother was an atheist 'til the day she died, but my life has been quite a Romance in which the Jews and the Jewish Question have been my Tahiti (think Gauguin), my Provence (think Cézanne, my favorite painter), my Lost Horizon. I swore to become myself—the new Jewish painter of a Diasporist art who cleaves to my own version of perplexed Jewish life and thought.

My old pal, David Hockney, and I arrived at the Royal College of Art in London on the same day in 1959, almost forty-five years ago. I had just finished at Oxford on the GI Bill, brimming over with the teaching of the German-Jewish refugee art professors from the circle of the great art historian Aby Warburg. Soon, I began to read Hannah Arendt's regular dispatches from the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem, appearing in the *New Yorker*, which were later published in her very controversial book. I determined to educate myself about these strange people of mine who were always in such



Kitaj, *Servant of Abraham*, 2004, oil on canvas

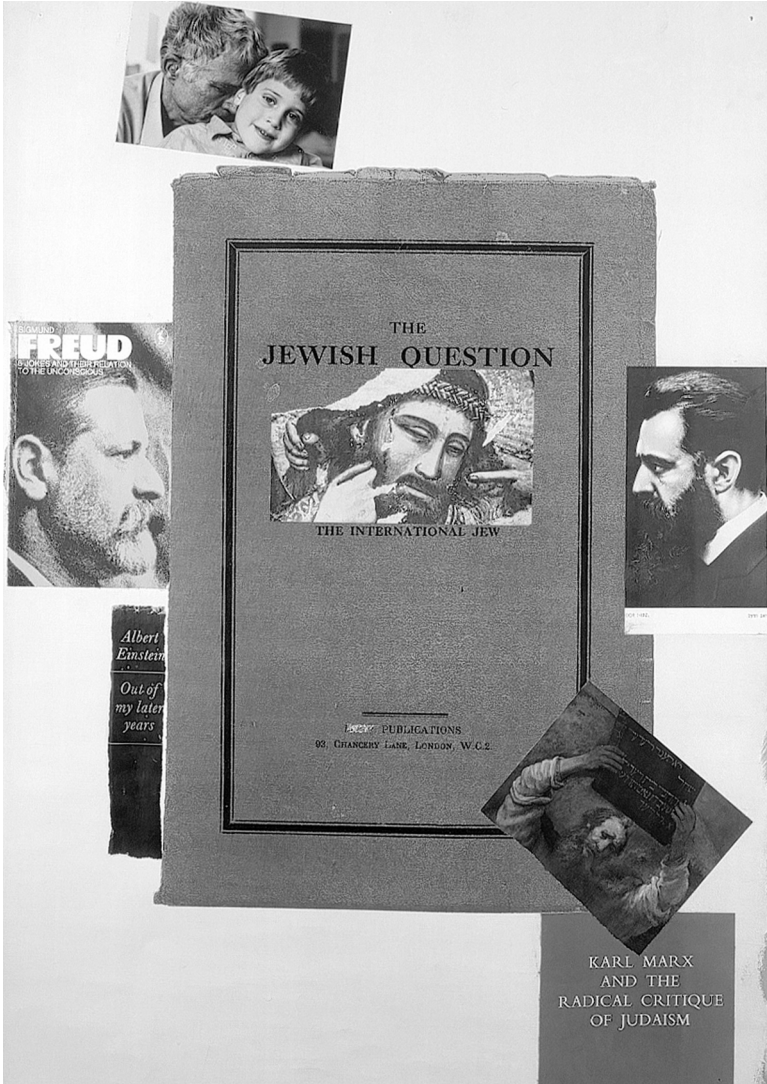
deep trouble. I was a book-nut anyway, so I began to study my Jews. Like many Jews, I went through a morbid period (which never really ends) studying the Shoah. And, I read all of Kafka. Like everyone, I had read the two and a half novels and some of the stories long before, but now I read Kafka the Jew—the fiction, the parables, the vast letters, and those incredible Jewish-inflected *Diaries* as well as a lot of the huge Kafka literature. I never got over him. To this day, Kafka is my greatest Jewish artist—far more of a Master for me than any Jewish painter. Kafka is my Chief Rebbe, my Besht, my Zaddik, and his creature, K, in *The Castle*, is my favorite Jew. Don't ask me why. That would take another lecture. W. H. Auden (a Gentile) said that Kafka was to our age what Dante and Goethe were to theirs. I'm painting a few Kafka pictures just now in my studio. I feel guilty not being there today. But a Jew, Clement Greenberg—an unlikely source—said it best for me. Clem, the paramount art critic of his era, wrote:

Kafka wins through to an intuition of the Jewish condition in the Diaspora so vivid as to convert the expression of itself into an integral part of itself; so complete, that is, that the intuition becomes Jewish in style as well as in sense . . . the only example I know of an integrally Jewish literary art that is fully at home in a modern Gentile language.

Well, I wanted to do that in a Jewish art of painting, and I still do! K never gets into the Castle in Kafka's book, so, right now, I'm painting *K Enters The Castle At Last*. It's fun. It's heretical. It's Jewish, and I wonder if any other writer or painter these eighty years got K into The Castle? The book is unfinished anyway and so is my painting. Kafka's *Diaries* always lie by my bedside. They're part of my Jewish Canon.

One heavyweight led me to another. Kafka to Benjamin to Scholem to Buber to the Hasidic Masters and Rosenzweig . . . some of them a hard read, even impenetrable, but I love them anyway and I pay them a lot of attention, so I read all about them—a very clear writer, Gershom Scholem, particularly has come to influence my painting again and again. Most experts agree that he was the greatest Jewish scholar of the 20th Century. He was awesome. Another path led me from the great Ahad Ha-Am to Pinsker to Herzl and the Zionists to the present tragic *tsouris* which I fear will never end, as I just said. At one time or another I read the Zionist essays of Einstein and the proto-Zionist Lazare and the brilliant and often boring and anti-Zionist Frankfurt School. My art also awoke to the wonderful Meyer Schapiro and my great living mentor Isaiah Berlin, and a lot of Freud and Benjamin and countless books about Modernist Jewish forebears.

All the years, don't forget, I was just as crazy about Modernist art and artists, every day, my Host Art in the Diaspora. Closer study of Torah was on hold for later! I seem to represent a new Jewish voice unseen before, or may I say unheard in the art of painting—recently a critic compared me to Bellow—well then, out on my own in a post-Roth/Bellow painting art. Then there were always Heine and Proust and Celan and above all Kafka. Thousands of books and picture books excite my art and live with me in my Jewish Library room where I study and browse each day; listen to some of the



Kitaj, *Study for the Second Diasporist Manifesto*, 1970-1996, collage

Jewish precursors I have schlepped to my painting experiments—they couple wondrously with my Gentile art masters, from Masaccio to Matisse; listen to these unlost souls who appear in my art imagination, some more, some less, some read long ago, some always on call. Here are a few of them: Panofsky, Karl Kraus, Berenson, Maimonides and his Mizvot, Adorno, Isaac Babel, Svevo, Dubnow, Canetti, Primo Levi, Shestov, Tristan Tzara, Ziga Vertov, Eisenstein, Levi-Strauss, The Hollywood Jews, Heschel (on the Prophets), Steinsalz (my favorite magic Rabbi!), Bruno Schulz, Aby Warburg and his amazing circle, Jabés, Bialik, Yerushalmi and many less-known gems like Carl Einstein, Jiri Langer, Jean Améry, the Partisan Review group of New York Jews, Abram Room, Edward Dahlberg and many more. I've read very little Marx and the Jewish Marxists except Benjamin. *I now try to read a Torah portion every day* and look forward to Robert Alter's new English Version. My Steinsalz *Talmud* defeats me—I am too old! And it's too much genius, even for me. Anyway, I'm anxious to study some Rashi to see why his *Commentaries* are so revered, and more Psalms before I die.

Some of my Jews were religious. *Very many more were not*, and never appeared in shul. Some, as you all know, had and still have no interest in being Jewish at all. They can mesmerize me—guys like the genius Wittgenstein and the loony Otto Weininger. Some—especially the philosophers—are quite difficult for me—and I'm not alone! Spinoza, Husserl, Herman Cohen, Bergson, Leo Strauss, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and so I like to read about them the way one reads commentaries on Scripture. My philosophy reading has been wildly idiosyncratic. But one of them, Emmanuel Levinas, has broken through to my life-in-art this last year or two, and I've made a few pictures inspired by him and his beautiful Jewish essays on the human face of the other.

Freud, his Jewish Science and his almost totally Jewish circle of Psychoanalysts has absorbed me recently—Freud the conflicted Jew. I've just painted three pictures of those three famous Jews, ID, EGO and SUPEREGO. A friend said that I must have the only library in the world where Marcel Proust stands next to Rabbi Soleveitchik. Each one of the guys on my long list just given, plus many others, crash my studio with beloved Gentile precursors already there, like Giotto, Manet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Degas, Matisse (my big six!) in the tricky business of making pictures.

Some dear friends have been living inspiration in my life, above all, Philip Roth, Isaiah Berlin, Aharon Appelfeld, Leon Wieseltier and David Myers who is my Los Angeles Rebbe. What is unusual about this litany—even strange—is that I am a painter, a shmearer of colors. My Bet-Midrash is the Studio where I paint pictures each day. My books feed the pictures I make in a perpetual dialectic which excites me.

The Jewish Question is the central drama of my life and I guess that no radical painter has put the Jewish Question so openly to the art of painting since very early Vitebsk Chagall one hundred years ago. My Russian grandparents were contemporaries of Chagall and the largest exhibition of Jewish Art ever held was called Chagall to Kitaj, about fifteen years ago in London. The term “Jewish Art” is interesting and very elusive. Some art people, including many Jews, loathe the term and shun it, for many reasons.



Kitaj, *The Jew Etc. Etc.*, 1989-2004, oil on canvas

Good art should be universal, they say. And I guess they are right, except that I don't think there is any "should" in good art, and I feel in my old bones that what is most particular about a person, what most excites him/her, what is most daring may be what is most compellingly universal because it is, well, most human. Another reason Jewish Art is not well liked is that the term is associated with the endless liturgical chatchkes one finds in Jewish Museums. Then there is the Shleper Art often advanced as Jewish Art; Flying Cows, Dancing Hasids, Lachrymose Rabbis and the like have not led to great expectations, especially in the last century of daring Modernism, new forms and total Evil. I leave it to the Rabbis to argue the 2nd Commandment.

Something strange occurred to me—that no Jewish painter had ever risen to greatness. (Don't worry—I never will either!). Jews and women were only allowed into art academies when they were freed up, sort of, by the Enlightenment. Thus, the first Jewish and women painters of any consequence arose only in the late nineteenth century in France—Pissarro, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt—very good, but minor masters. There is no Jewish Manet or Cézanne or Degas or Monet or Van Gogh or Matisse or Picasso. Don't argue with me—let's just agree for now! It drove me crazy that so many forefathers of Modernism were Jews—Marx, Freud, Einstein, Schönberg, Proust, Kafka, Eisenstein, Wittgenstein, and dozens more—but not in painting! There are ten or twenty very fine Jewish painters in the hundred years between Pissarro and Lucian Freud, depending on your taste and list, but no great masters to my way of thinking. Soutine and Balthus are my favorite Jewish painters. Balthus denied being a Jew and both lie with a cross over their graves. My own life-in-art has been largely determined by something called Modernism, by which I mean the daring intelligence which began to—I think the modern term is *transgress*—disrupt, violate and what is called *advance*, ossified Western traditions. The paramount catalyst painters in this Modernism were not Jews. That fascinated me because Jews were founding fathers in every other path, as I said. Jewish Modernism became my grand obsession and Jews in Trouble on my dark side. The Jewish Question and "Jewish Intellectualism" would define and endanger My Brilliant Career. You've got to be a daring soul to stand by me. Amazingly, some do!

Some Jews recoil at the very notion of Jewish Art. Some Jews recoil at the notion of Zionism, or of a Jewish Question at all. Some Jews recoil at the notion of God. Some Jews say He was out to lunch when we most needed Him! Jews love to argue. They argue in the Yeshiva—I believe it's called *pilpul*, and they argue in the Knesset, in their own besieged country, about Who is A Jew and other mysteries, and they argue in uncivil warfare in the world of art. Jewish Art can't be a precise term. It will never satisfy anyone. It is merely a code-term for what I might call an interesting and avant-garde predicament in art—that is, a predicament which interests me. In my experience, Jewish Art is TABOO in the Art Scheme! It is, well, too transgressive, too avant-garde for the art crowd. It's much more shocking than photos of advanced SEX or giant puppy dogs, or sink drains in art! Jewish Art is a cultural state of mind one inhabits or

not for reasons of one's own. There is no simple definition except to say that a Jewish Art exists in the sense that I will it to exist because the quest gives me a lot of heartfelt intellectual pleasure—in my studio, in my imagination, in my sense of art history and, I hope, in my pictures. Please don't ask me what Jewish Art looks like because there is no clear style, not yet anyway, like we know at once the look of Japanese Art or Egyptian Art, or Classic or Archaic Greek Sculpture—all, I might add, of circumscribed periods and less than obvious relations between style, of depiction, for instance, and the wider culture in which it appears. Who knows, someday a young Hebrew-speaking painter of genius, an Israeli Giotto may come out of the Negev and personify a newer Jewish Art than my own flawed Diasporism.

In the end, a Jewish Art exists, like so many passionate imponderables, because I say it exists in me and my pictures and in spite of the next guy who says "no, it doesn't." At the very least, *Jewish Art is a temptation to exist*. In art history, this reasoning has a very modern, 20th century pedigree. As some of you may know, a great deal of what is called Modern Art, and especially today, is art because the artist and his protagonists say it is, in the stolid face of naysayers. It was a strange, brilliant, artist-guru named Marcel Duchamp (not Jewish) who challenged what he called Retinal Art eighty-five years ago. Today he's the glitzy flavor of the young century for a million artists.

Violent opposition tells me that I may be doing something right in art! Jewish artists I know want their work to be universal. *So do I*—it is a noble goal. But for me, the universal, if such a wide thing exists, may best be approached, even led, by the particular, by what one is, if one can know oneself. That is what I meant earlier by a predicament in art which interests me. When I. B. Singer got his Nobel Prize, he gave his reply, his Nobel lecture, in Yiddish, and when people asked why he replied in a largely dead language, he said that his work could only be universal because of what *he* was. What one is! What we are! How can one not be changed forever by the Jewish Passion of sixty years ago? I, for one, was changed forever by the slow recognition many years ago of a Jewish Question. In scholarly terms, I am only an amateur of the Jewish Question. If the Jews are always in trouble, my pictures are troubled, and God knows, my art and I get into a lot of *tsouris*. To fellow painters I say: Paint the opposite of anti-Semitism—by treasuring the Jews! Because they are Holy Fools! Even Hitler outwitted them!

What I have called Diasporism in my *FIRST*, and now my *SECOND DIASPORIST MANIFESTO* (out soon), is a subtext for my Jewish Art because I don't live in the besieged Jewish State; like Herzl I have no Hebrew or religious background and I am a flawed but thrilled auto-didact in Jewish studies. I hope and believe that my strange Jewishness rehearses its essence in my pictures, but I'm very anxious about the rehearsal.

Clement Greenberg wrote: "I believe that a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write, as it is in almost every word of every other contemporary American Jewish writer."

That is the way I feel about my pictures. I want to invent a new Judaica for the art of painting, inspired by what amazes and excites me about the Jews, their crazy genius and their discontents and my own history and destiny among them. But life is short now.

What am I to make of a Diasporist Art no longer bound up with Yiddish and Hebrew culture and a Merciful God? Assimilation in general art culture is not possible for me anymore. I'm too old, and crazy incorrect for half the art crowd. I leave Assimilation to other Jews who would join the busy art world where Assimilation is just as seductive as it was for those German Jews of seventy years ago and their doomed symbiosis. Of course, don't worry, America will be different and OK! Montaigne, descended from converso Jews, says: "We must reserve a back shop wholly our own." Well, in a spirit of self-Reform, I dare to be wholly my own back shop Jew. Thus, I'm not exactly a representative voice of the Jews, but who was? the Viennese playwright, Theodor Herzl, with his idea of Uganda as a Jewish National Home? Spinoza, who the Jews excommunicated? or maybe the three guys who probably influenced our time most—Marx, Freud and Einstein—who may never have set foot in shul? At least I got married in orthodox shul, but that's another story. No, like Kafka asked: "What have I in common with Jews?" But, unlike Kafka, Proust and all my other precursor-fathers, my answer to Kafka's question is: everything in common, as well as nothing. I'll tell you what I mean: Isaiah Berlin once pounded his fist on my dinner-table in London and said: "A Jew is a Jew like a table is a table."