

R.B. KITAJ and DAVID HOCKNEY: Collage of a Lifelong Friendship

DAVID HOCKNEY is my oldest friend from 1959; the most popular artist since Warhol; the best natural draughtsman alive. At various times we have influenced each other, this Bradford Bombshell and I.

– R.B. KITAJ

It was just after 8pm on a Saturday night when I received this message: “David is taking a break from his installation in Cologne and will arrive at the Jewish Museum in Berlin on Sunday between 11–11:30am”

Some time before this, I’d contacted gallerist Peter Goulds to ask on the off chance if David Hockney might be interested in coming to visit the Ronald Brooks (R.B.) Kitaj exhibition at the Jewish Museum. It held the largest retrospective of Kitaj’s work since his death in October 2007 (firmly placing Kitaj in the canon of late 20th century art). I knew Hockney would be in Cologne to open his own exhibit “A Bigger Picture” (2012) at the Museum Ludwig. Barely holding out for a response, it seemed highly unlikely that Hockney would come, having never been hugely inclined towards interviews. To my welcome surprise, Hockney came. Dressed in an elegant gray double-breasted suit, bouyed by the exotic plant print of the black Hawaiian shirt he wore underneath, and topped by an aptly northern English checked flat-cap, the significance of Hockney’s appearance marked the fondness he still holds for his dear friend, the late R.B. Kitaj. The following text is a collage of my interview with Hockney and statements by Hockney and Kitaj about their lifelong friendship.

First Encounter (1959)

R.B. KITAJ: During our first days at the Royal College, I spotted this boy with short black hair and huge glasses, wearing a boiler suit, making the most beautiful drawing I’d ever seen in an art school. It was of a skeleton.

DAVID HOCKNEY: I was 22 and he was 27. I was a little provincial boy from Bradford – had never been abroad – and he’d sailed the seven seas you know, came from New York, and had seen the world – I hadn’t. He was much more sophisticated and I saw that he drew very well. He bought my drawings for five pounds. That’s a lot of money; I could live for a week on five pounds. He had the first skeletons I did. We had two things in common: we liked to draw and we liked to read. Literature and drawing. I remember we talked about books, especially Kafka.

We became instant friends, Hockney with his broad Yorkshire accent and me with my bland Ohio accent.

Ron was a great influence on me, far more than anything else; not just stylistically – he was a great influence stylistically on a lot of people, and certainly on me – but in his seriousness too.

Hockney was inspired by Jean Dubuffet’s way with words, numbers, and images. In the early 60s he was painting in a more or less abstract graffiti-like manner.

We began to talk and I said why don’t you make paintings about your own life? I was painting about my Jews and my books and Hockney was just coming out of the closet, so I said paint that. He did and the rest is art history and gay art history.

“He switched to his gay culture as I began on my Jewish culture in its first forms.”

In October of 2012, during his visit to Kitaj’s retrospective at the Jewish Museum, Hockney recognized himself in a portrait. In the center of Kitaj’s painting, England Bathers (1982), he’s sitting in the closet, wearing his round glasses. He was literally coming out of the closet.

Hockney, following Kitaj’s advice, painted We Two Boys Together Clinging in 1961. In the painting – beside the word “Clinging” – Hockney quoted a verse from Walt Whitman’s collection of poems Leaves of Grass (1855): “Power enjoying, elbows stretching, fingers clutching, / Arm’d and fearless, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.” But he left out the eponymous verse: “We two boys together clinging, / One the other never leaving, / Up and down the roads going, North and South excursions making.” The words “never” and “yes” are positioned beside the lips of the two kissing young men.

Ron was slowly doing these strange pictures, and I talked to him about them and about my work. I’d talk to him about my interests: I was a keen vegetarian then, and interested in politics, and he’d say to me, “Why don’t you paint those subjects?” He was right. I wasn’t

painting anything for myself. So that was the way I broke it. I began to paint those subjects. But I still hadn't the nerve to paint figures; the idea of figure pictures was considered really anti-modern, so my solution was to begin using words. I started writing on the pictures. When you put a word on a painting, it has a similar effect in a way as a figure; it's a little bit of human thing that you immediately read; it's not just paint. I wrote "Gandhi" on this picture about Gandhi. I can remember people coming round and saying that's ridiculous, writing on pictures, you know, it's mad what you're doing. And I thought, well, it's better; I feel better; you feel as if something's coming out. Ron told me "Yes, that's much more interesting."

He switched to his gay culture as I began on my Jewish culture in its first forms.



R.B. Kitaj, *Dismantling the Red Tent*, 1963–64. Courtesy of the R.B. Kitaj Estate

Class Politics

Hockney and I were both young socialists then, by inclination, not by dogma, and we both were great readers. We still are, but socialism (not Socialism) ran deep in his bleak – but loving – industrial northern Bradford, while my stuff came from my Russian- and Yiddish-speaking Bundist maternal grandparents, Dave and Rose Brooks, who helped raise me in the bleak – but loving – industrial northern Cleveland. My grandfather read the *Yiddish Daily Forward* every day and Hockney's father read the *Daily Worker* every day. I also began to introduce writing into my canvases [...] My writing tended toward the ancient Jewish tradition of commentary [...] while Hockney tended toward urgent homosexual messages. He would take up my neo-Surrealist disjunctions and figure invention but he was also influenced by Dubuffet I think, and we were both influenced by Bacon. In an interview, speaking about me, Hockney said, "I think he liked my cogitation." We were both ambitious exotics, for sure.

I was very provincial, with a very, very strong northern accent which I still have. When I was young, my mother said you have to speak clearly no matter your accent, so people could understand. When I got to London, my accent was mocked, but I then looked at the people who mocked me, looked at their drawings and saw that I could draw better than them, so told them to shut up. I had confidence because I knew I had talent. I never bothered much about class. My family was my first class. I think from early on, [Kitaj] seemed to me like an American intellectual. He was an intellectual person. He was an archivist. He knew his ancestors came from Russia; he was very conscious about that. I'd never been to America at that time. I first went to New York in 1961. My father wasn't a joiner of anything, he was too

eccentric. He was a leftist, and he thought the *Daily Worker* was for peace.

The question of class in England has intrigued me, as it has always fascinated David. I believe it has driven him as poignantly and decisively as his sexual life has. If his origins (which include his extraordinary parents) drive him, they drive his art. There is a genius in origins – ripe for picking, in art and life, for those who feel it's there for them. Speaking as a diasporist Jew, my own origins explained themselves to me slowly and bodied forth in my life and pictures unsurely and uneasily. Hockney the Yorkshireman was never in doubt. Northern England is his native strength and he knows it. A few years ago, we were driving down Nichols Canyon (both diasporists by then in some palpable way). I was feeling sorry for myself, saying I felt alienated in England after a quarter of a century. I'll not forget what he replied: "I've got Bradford; they'll never take that from me." If a class order had helped to blight his beloved Yorkshire – and who can doubt it, those who have walked the streets of northern England (or read Orwell) – then Hockney would rise up in his art as a paraphrase of one of his favorite books – as *The not so Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*. He would fulfill my favorite definition of art: Nietzsche's belief that "art is the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere."

At the time when Kitaj left London for Los Angeles, Hockney had already moved to California. In 1997, Hockney would frequently return to Yorkshire to paint his first landscape, The Road to York through Sledmere.

His romance with LA was about two things: Los Angeles was "elsewhere," about as unlike England as a place could be, and, as his friend Christopher Isherwood said about Berlin, Hockney said that Los Angeles meant boys. Boys in LA spelled romance, swimming pools, and thus his memorable splash paintings, which may be arguably the best anyone ever painted out there so far. It is a rare event in modern art when a sense of place is achieved at the level of very fine painting. Sickert's Camden Town comes to mind, and above all, Hopper's America, in which I grew up. Hockney's California is one of the only recent exemplars.

The Human Clay

In Los Angeles Hockney introduced Kitaj to the American painter Sandra Fisher. They met again in 1972 in London, where they fell in love and started living together. Fisher familiarized Kitaj with the use of pastels, prompting his experimentation with the medium.

I began again, after some years, to learn to draw, mainly from life, at what I will call a higher pitch, a pitch of some ambition and skill and quality. I sought to train myself to achieve the kind of drawing many modernists I admired had done in their early years, well before their iconoclastic periods.

[Kitaj] used to come very often, to sit in cafes, to look for books. He used to buy the pastels there.

The Old Masters are like roots deep in the earth [...] and like so many young people, I was attracted by the pretty, frail wisps growing on the surface – the dandelion weeds (Duchampism, collagism, montage, Surrealism, the chimerical freedoms young artists cherish so). These dandelions are so easy to pluck, so much easier to get at than the deep roots [...]. They seem now like fool's gold in my own practice. I must leave their distinct potential to others.

In London, 1976, Kitaj – commissioned by the Arts Council – curated "The Human Clay" at Hayward Gallery. Coining the term "School of London" for his selection of artists, Kitaj took the title of the exhibition from a quote by W.H. Auden, introduced to him by Hockney: "To me Art's subject is the human clay."

An important observation came upon me. Never had London enjoyed such a large number of extraordinary artists at work as at that moment. The moment included Frank Auerbach, Hockney, Anthony Caro, Henry Moore, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Leon Kossoff, Peter Blake, Michael Andrews, Howard Hodgkin and, yes, myself, to name only 11 of the 35 in the show." This exhibition, its catalog, and its fallout would damn me and make me new enemies to go with those who already hated my "literary" pictures, my "obscurities", and my ever scolded "pretentiousness."

This was at the time when Abstraction was king [...] It was the time when they deliberately gave up teaching drawing in art schools. We would argue, I would argue, Ron would argue. Neither of us taught anywhere. So we were not involved, and had no power, only a voice. I would argue that teaching drawing is teaching people to look." Kitaj: The Brits barely tolerated "Human Clay" – but they never forgot it and a few never forgave it [...] In interviews, I defended myself, saying that modernism is truly dear to me and that I sought to reengage the energies in allusive human form that were being neglected in the theoretical aftermath of

heroic modernism – itself conceived by Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse, supreme champions of human form [...] What I don't regret is standing up for Beauty – the beauty of drawing people. But the damage was done and unforgiving enemies would lay in wait in London's deeply frustrated and class infected crowd. The brash American, with the big Chelsea house and his beautiful American mate, would be marked down. If you don't believe me, then you don't know that grey psychological London; my very own London.



R.B. Kitaj, *The Wedding*, 1983–93. Courtesy of the R.B. Kitaj Estate/Tate, London 2012

The Jewish Wedding

Kitaj and Fisher married on December 15, 1983 at London's Sephardic Bevis Marks Synagogue, after they returned from Paris. For his wedding, Kitaj assembled his minyan (10 Jewish men), among them were his friends Frank Auerbach, Lucian Freud, and Leon Kossoff. Hockney was his best man.

That was okay, but the guy who leads the bride to the altar, Auerbach, has to be a Jew. Those orthodox Rabbis had never seen such a gang under the chupa – Hockney the dyed blonde, Ron's adoptive daughter Dominic in her sari, Freud, in paint-stained corduroy pants, who claimed he'd never been in a synagogue in his life, and Sandra, the most beautiful bride in London, in her Yves Saint Laurent brocade jacket. Ron's son Lem, and Kossoff, and the rest of the minyan of Jews were off to the side. Life for me had reached a dangerous perfection.

Sandra told me that she missed her friend in Paris – Michel, the copyist she met at the Louvre and had an affair with [...] Hockney always seems to appear at crucial moments of my life, like my wedding, her funeral, and other such times. He came over and said something Yorkshire smart – “You'll have to marry her luv.” I couldn't eat or sleep for three days, just slumped in an Aalto chair half dead. Then Sandra said, “I'm coming home to you.” It was over when she was back in my arms and I proposed to her, and she said yes.

“Life for me had reached a dangerous perfection.”

It was in the oldest synagogue in London. Beautiful place, very lovely room, 17th century, I think. It's still there. They lived together for quite a while. He came to see me once telling me she'd run off to Paris. I said to him, “Stop, stop this Ron!” It sounds like a Hollywood movie.

A lot of people would like to run off to Paris. It sounds romantic. He was very affected by her absence; he'd just stop working.

It was between 1989–93 that Kitaj painted The Wedding, donating it later that year to the Tate Gallery.

It was, after all, about a new start in life, its major source of influence being Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1911), which represented a new start for the life of painting.

Ron never mentioned Jewishness beside the intellectuals. It became his subject. I understood that it was going back to your roots.



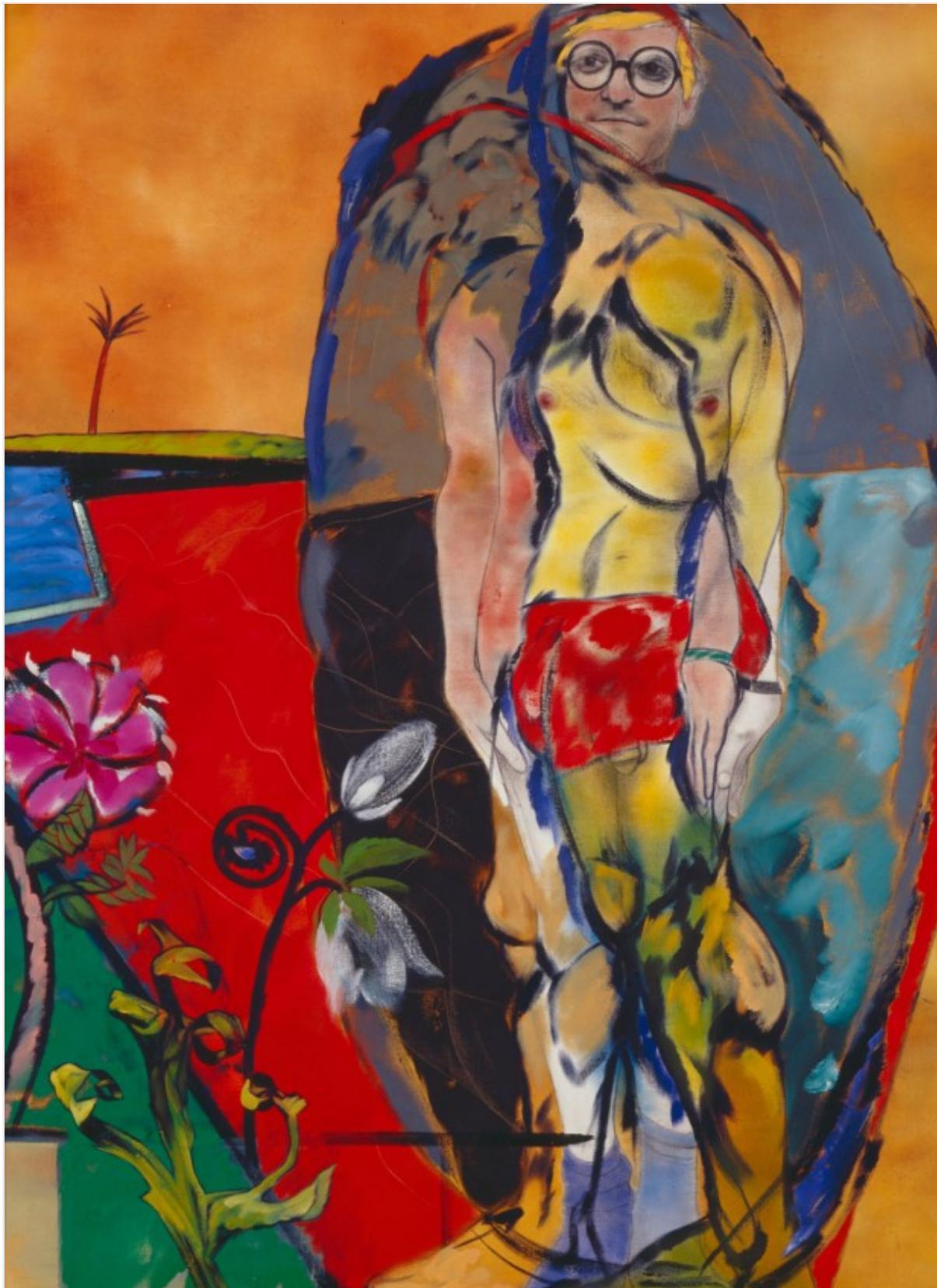
David Hockney naked in front of a blank canvas at his London studio, taken by R.B. Kitaj, 1976. Courtesy of Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA

*In 1976 Kitaj painted Hockney from a picture he had taken of him standing naked in front of a canvas at his studio in London. The first version was called *David (unfinished)* (1976–77).*

I didn't care much for it and it lay in storage for many years. In the late 80s, David described to me the death of his friend Isherwood in California. I took up the old portrait again and drew a kind of alter-figure across the original one, with Chris Isherwood in mind. Like Hockney – and unlike me – he had been a very optimistic

individual, with a sublime personality. So I made the both of them into Cubist doppelgängers of each other, representing both life and death in a particular, perspectival California setting.

[Isherwood] was the first author I'd met that I really admired. I got to know him and Don Bachardy, whom he lived with, very well [...] It wasn't only that we were English, but we were both from northerners. I remember Christopher later said, "Oh David, we've so much in common; we love California, we love American boys, and we're from the north of England."



R.B. Kitaj, *The Neo-Cubist*, 1976–87. Courtesy of R.B. Kitaj Estate

Tate War and Suicide

Letter from David Hockney (June 14, 1994):

My dearest Ron,

You must be very proud of your achievement in those rooms at the Tate. What they show of you and your thoughts is quite fantastic.

I have only really "browsed" as you might say and I intend to study it more, but it is magnificent looking. Only Picasso comes near the same excitement for me.

All Art is idiosyncratic, really, which is why one needn't compare, but it is very very beautiful. Ron, it has touched me deeply. The catalogue is terrific as well, the layout and scale of things is just right. I think a lot of people will be touched by its strange beauty. You needn't have to talk to people again much because your voice is loud and clear, and so beautifully existing in those rooms [...]

How right you are to see wider perspectives in the spiritual history of your ancestors. One forgets that at one's peril.

I will go early one morning (you & Picasso can get me there at 8am).

Much much love my dear friend,

David

However, the London press heavily criticized Kitaj's retrospective at the Tate. After the exhibition ended, Sandra Fisher suddenly died from an aneurysm. Kitaj blamed the critics for "murdering" her.

Art terrorists tried to kill me off and they got her instead. You think not? Think again. In a National Gallery film about me, Hockney said, about Sandra's death, that if you love someone, you could be hurt more than your lover who is being attacked. Many good people agreed. Some did not [...] An aneurysm, like, a heart attack and a stroke, can be triggered by stress.

Sandra was more pained than Kitaj by the critics. She looked radiant and healthy. It was so sudden [...]. He was affected by criticism more than I was, a lot more. He would write to critics. I pointed out that England is a very small country with a very large press. The United States is a very large country with a very small press. I told him that in London – where you have six or seven daily newspapers who have critics that are competitive – the critics are more vicious. An editor would say "could you knock him?" Well I could brush them off, I didn't care. You should ignore them. Most artists do. But that was his way, I accepted it. He was my dear old friend and I accepted what he was like. The attacks were viciously appalling. I was appalled that a newspaper would publish it. When Sandra died, John and I came immediately. There were other friends there too. Little Max was 11 years old. I did a drawing of them both. Max still has it. Max has Sandra's eyes, very much so.

In his manifest to the so-called Tate War, "I Accuse!" Kitaj wrote:

During the Tate War, the ever-shrewd Hockney would say that the war was possible because the living dead knew I would never go out: they would never meet me socially [...] Hockney said I was perceived as aloof and hermetic and the living dead had their knives out for a celebrity anyway. Hockney was right but there was much, much more at work. Frank Auerbach summed it up perfectly, as usual. He said, succinctly that I came from a different culture! Sandra's death confirmed that I couldn't belong in London, so I came home.



R.B. Kitaj, *The Killer-Critic Assassinated by His Widower, Even*, 1997. Courtesy of the R.B. Kitaj Estate/Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway

Kitaj and Hockney saw each other for the last time in June 26, 2006 in Kitaj's "Yellow Studio" in Westwood, LA:

A few days ago, Hockney (grey haired at last) came to visit this old wreck. I'm his oldest living friendship – damn near 50 years! We talked for two hours. Dom(inie) and Max joined us by chance. It was very nice indeed. We got to bed at eight with Saul Friedländer.

[Max] is a very sad boy. When he came back one afternoon he found his father dead. He found him on the bed. Max told me then how he knew he was planning this and that he'd put it together [...] He was a hypochondriac and accumulated pills. I don't go to the doctors, I do the opposite. Already before his heart attack in 1989 he felt very old, he wanted to be old.

Epilogue

After his visit to the Kitaj retrospective in Berlin, David Hockney wrote this summary to me:

What I saw was this struggle to communicate his ideas. I always thought he was an excellent draughtsman, and I know, like Degas, he loved to draw (so do I). He always thought drawing was at the heart of picture making, and was less impressed with photography. I of course agree, it's drawing that will alter photography now with Photoshop and new technology. R.B. was less interested in these ideas than I am. If you are an archivist like he was, you will have a job for life decoding him – it's very worth while.



Lee Friedlander, R.B. Kitaj and his wife Sandra Fisher. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco