



Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea © R.B. Kitaj Estate, courtesy Marlborough Fine Art.

# R.B. Kitaj, Revolutionary Nostalgias on the Shores of the Mediterranean

**Violant Porcel.** Art historian

The painter Ronald B. Kitaj, born in Ohio in 1932, reached Europe in 1951. After visiting several European capitals, Kitaj arrived in the Catalan town of Sant Feliu de Guíxols, where he lived periodically for 30 years. His experiences in this small town, with an important anti-Franco substrate, as well as the highly enriching relations he established there, are reflected in several of his works, such as “Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea” or “To Live in Peace (The Singers)”. Both works have multiple layers of meaning, along with literary and intellectual references that show Kitaj’s pictorial complexity. The coming of democracy and modernisation in Spain in the 1970s encouraged the artist to seek other similar sources of inspiration, such as Judaism. Thus, Kitaj sold his house in Sant Feliu de Guíxols, putting an end to this important part of his life.

In Orphic tradition, Mnemosyne, the personification of memory, is a source of life that frees those who drink from its waters from oblivion and disappearance, giving them a kind of rebirth.<sup>1</sup> For R.B. Kitaj (1932-2007), memory was also not used to preserve memories as petrified effigies but rather became a creative mechanism, a device to generate new images and discourses. Thus, the painter persistently interweaved political research with personal experiences, intellectual interests with feelings. Undoubtedly, the experiences accumulated in Sant Feliu de Guíxols, a town in Girona that he considered his second home for almost 30 years, helped to shape a particular vision of the world that influenced his creative universe.

The artist arrived in Sant Feliu with the same mentality as so many other American

creators: in search of an isolated location, on the shores of the placid Mediterranean, to distance himself from the great urban tumult and pressure. However, there he not only found a place to create but the place itself, its history and culture, seeped into certain works.

Next I will analyse some works that the renowned artist conceived in the Catalan town and reflect on his link. However, these experiences in Catalonia left profound marks not only on his works created in Sant Feliu but also on different pieces made in London.

Of Jewish origin, Kitaj was brought up in a liberal agnostic environment. Some of his mother’s friends had fought in the Lincoln Brigade, so since his childhood Spain had formed part of his imaginary as that legendary land where there had been heroic struggles against fascism.

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1. A first version of this article was published in the journal *Disturbis*.

In 1953, a long tortuous bus journey from Barcelona led the artist and his first wife, Elsi Roessler, to Sant Feliu de Guíxols, then a pleasant coastal town with a sleepy appearance, which actually sheltered a significant anti-Franco substrate. The Kitajs rented Can Bartra, a stately home in the town's sea promenade to spend the winter. The painter, barely 21 years old, spent his days reading enthusiastically: he discovered Baudelaire, explored T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and immersed himself in the traditions of symbolism and surrealism. The result of all this was a unique allegorical painting that includes a profile of the author of the *Cantos* and that has now disappeared. Later, Kitaj regretted having devoted so much time to reading instead of painting during his youth, but it was that training that fed his unique work, so anchored in the literary universe. And his early period distilled the influence of Eliot and Pound, both in the creative use of fragmentation and the suggestive immersion in the past, and these authors later even provided a motif for some of his works. "For me, books are what trees are for the landscape painter",<sup>2</sup> he later said.

In this first period he met Josep Vicente Romà (1923-2011), who became socialist mayor of Sant Feliu de Guíxols in the era of democracy, from 1980 to 1990. When they struck up a friendship, Vicente was working as a clerk in the Can Planellas cork top factory, in the same street where Kitaj bought a house in 1972. With fluent English as a result of his military service in Algceiras, Vicente was able to converse with the artist on any subject, from Saint John of the Cross or Buñuel to the Civil War or Catalan nationalism. That first journey profoundly marked the painter, who in 1998

recalled: "My best memories of Spain are still next to the fireplace in our old house, with my first wife and friend Josep Vicente Romà talking for hours against Franco."<sup>3</sup>

The vision of Catalonia that Vicente transmitted to Kitaj did not reflect a patriotic recovery of medieval splendour but rather revealed to him a culture that interweaves tradition with the present of a heterogeneous society that could not express itself freely. Kitaj, who felt a special predilection for oppressed peoples, immediately shared this vision. In that period he also struck up a friendship with the poet and painter Josep Albertí (1913-1993), who had fought on the republican side during the Civil War and was then held in the Argelès-sur-Mer refugee camp.

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For the rest of the decade, Kitaj rarely visited Sant Feliu but from 1962 a new period began for the painter, during which he went there regularly in the company of his wife and children, first with Lem and later Dominie, alternating his stays in the Vicente family's house and other rented homes.

## Research into Anarchism and the Civil War

In the early 1960s, Kitaj began to explore a painting style that reflected the different historical events with a critical spirit. In Sant Feliu

2. R.B. Kitaj, *Impresiones de Kitaj. La novela pintada*, Madrid, Mondadori, 1989, p. 51. (Own translation; originally published in English under the title *Kitaj, Pictures and Conversations*, Wakefield, Moyer Bell, 1997.)

3. R.B. Kitaj cited by Elsa Fernández-Santos in "La figuración intimista de Ronald B. Kitaj llena de rostros y color el Reina Sofía", *El País*, 15th April 1998.

he undertook a series of works that explored important figures of anarchism and the Spanish Civil War.

Kitaj advocated an ethical dimension of the artist, whose objective had to consist of establishing a commitment to society. Aware of the impossibility of contributing an absolute truth about historical events, Kitaj posited that it was only feasible to approach a fraction of these events and that their complexity demanded a broad perspective. This approach advanced the interest in peripheral discourses especially developed during postmodernism, with examples such as the controversial works of blurred imagery made by Gerhard Richter in 1988 about members of the German terrorist group Red Army Faction, or the allegorical paintings with a messianic atmosphere “The Citizen” (1981-85) and “The Subject” (1988-90), in which Richard Hamilton reflects on the conflicts in Northern Ireland.

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In 1960, Kitaj created striking canvasses that examine the political history of the modern left such as “The Murder of Rosa Luxemburg”, an interesting dissection of the brutal murder of the Marxist theoretician, or “The Red Banquet”, on Mikhail Bakunin and Alexander Herzen. One year later, he produced “Specimen Musings of a Democrat”, which includes references to the anarchists Louise Michel, Dan Chatterton and Mateo Morral, extracted from the book by W.C. Hart *Confessions of an Anarchist*. However, the conception of the

work was inspired above all by the engravings that accompanied two articles by the historian Frances A. Yeats about the elementary theory of the Majorcan philosopher Ramon Llull, published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. Kitaj had acquired the whole collection during his stay in Oxford in the late 1950s, when he studied at the Ruskin School, above all influenced by his relationship with the art historian Edgar Wind, a decisive promoter of the publication. “Specimen Musings of a Democrat” is a painting with a strong experimental tension, in which images and texts work as an associative device, inspired to some extent by the *Atlas Mnemoysne* by Aby Warburg.

During those years, Kitaj’s work introduced the written word through printed material or handwritten texts. His painting thus became a reflection on the medium itself, in the wake of pictorial experiences like those of Kurt Schwitters or Francis Picabia.

Since they forged their friendship, R.B. Kitaj and Josep Vicente talked constantly about politics. They shared an idealistic vision of socialism and exchanged knowledge of the subject: “Josep Vicente became my older brother (...). Even then (1953) he was the spirit of that Catalan town waiting to be sharply awoken. His socialism was so pure that it melted in the mouth. We walked and talked along that wonderful desert coast towards Palamós, Cap Creus, Ullastret, the luxurious S’Agaró.”<sup>4</sup>

During the 1960s, Kitaj followed the left-wing movements in the United States with interest and told his friend about new developments: “The New Left in America is very strong now and next year I will go with the family to teach for a year at the University of California at Berkley (San Francisco) as a guest professor (...). That place is the main hotbed of

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4. R.B. Kitaj, *Impresiones de Kitaj. La novela pintada*, op. cit., p. 331. (Own translation, see note 2.)

dissent in America and we are very excited to go there.”<sup>5</sup> In the same letter he cites left-wing American publications such as *The Nation* or *Dissent* and recommends to Vicente authors who reflected on the causes of marginalisation, for example Michael Harrington, founder of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) party, whose book on poverty in the United States decisively influenced Kennedy, or the revolutionary thinker from Martinique Frantz Fanon, who analysed the issue of decolonisation, subjects that always interested Kitaj.

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Sant Feliu played an outstanding role in the Civil War because of its workers' movement radicalised by an anarcho-syndicalist hegemony and many years of struggle. From the late 19th century, the cork top industry had made the town important. In 1913, it became the biggest exporter of industrial products in the whole of Spain. This involved the presence of workers' organisations with significant influence on the social network with the creation of trade unions, production and consumption cooperatives and mutual aid societies.

The First World War and competition from the United States and Portugal unleashed a crisis in the cork sector that created major

unemployment, strengthened the workers' movement and increased social conflict. The local federation of the CNT, created in 1918, quickly gained a large number of affiliates. And the weekly *Acción Social Obrera*, published in Sant Feliu from 1919 to 1932, became the voice of this convulsive period. In the 1920s, the situation improved but, one decade later, it deteriorated again because of the restrictions of the importer countries and the rise in customs duties. The Civil War worsened the situation, which finally resulted in the scarcity of the post-war period.

During the first months of the war, the CNT dominated the new power in Sant Feliu and nearby towns such as Castell d'Aro, in which the different committees assumed control of defence and provisions. They took charge of municipal and economic management and collectivised the Water Company, electricity and transport. As in other Spanish towns, in Sant Feliu there was an attempt to set up a new economic and social structure inspired by the anarchist ideal of a self-organised society. Sant Feliu was one of the Catalan towns that suffered most victims because of bombing during the war, and one bomb exploded on 13th August 1937 in the busy sea promenade, where Kitaj would be living in 1953. The town fell on 3 February 1939 to Franco's troops, which immediately began making arrests. Jaume Mestres and Serafi Bosch i Marquès, who was imprisoned on several occasions, were among the anarchists who lived through this convulsive period and were in Sant Feliu when Kitaj appeared.

Josep Vicente was fully aware of this situation. After the war, Francoists imprisoned his father, a carabineer, for three and a half years. Moreover, he stayed in contact with anarchists of that period who, through him, were used as

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5. Letter from R.B. Kitaj to Josep Vicente, 1966.

informants by important Spanish Civil scholars such as Ronald Fraser and Hugh Thomas, who was introduced by Kitaj.

That summer of 1962, the artist moved to Begur with his wife and first child in a house they had found through the Vicente couple and Josep Albertí. They planned to stay for two months, but a few weeks later decided to leave due to its poor state. They could not return to their flat in London because they had rented it out to pay for their holidays, so the Vicente family invited them to stay in their house, and the day they moved coincided with an anti-Franco meeting. The Vicentes' home often became a clandestine meeting point for politicians who were later decisive in democracy, such as Jordi Pujol, future president of the Government of Catalonia, or Joan Reventós, founder of the Catalan Socialist Party, among others. Undoubtedly, the artist personally experienced the subversive atmosphere taking shape behind Franco's back.

Kitaj and his family occupied Eugeni's room, then the only child of Josep Vicente, who would later also have Joan. The artist painted obsessively while his wife, sitting in a string chair, read him the *New York Times*, as well as poetry and essays. During summer 1962, some of the most significant paintings in his first exhibition at the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery in London, "Pictures with Commentary, Pictures without Commentary", were conceived, which established him in a decisive place in the London artistic scene. Kitaj carefully developed a catalogue full of references for each work, which ranged from his own reflections to quotes from others, and a general bibliography related to the Civil War. Thus he established his personal dialogue between literature and painting, which would become a unique distinction in his production.

Kitaj also introduced a photograph in which he appeared with his son in Sa Conca, then a solitary beach he often visited, testimony of his summer stay in Sant Feliu. In this context of remembrance, he went to the exhibition opening dressed in an old-fashioned looking suit, commissioned from a tailor in the town, asking him to use the writer Miguel de Unamuno's clothing as a model.

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In Sant Feliu, he painted "Interior / Dan Chatterton's Town House", entirely dedicated to Dan Chatterton: "He was a legendary anarchist and Catalonia had been the hotbed of anarchism,"<sup>6</sup> commented the artist. This English libertarian, with an energetic and independent spirit, lived in extreme poverty and at home he published pamphlets himself that he later sold, notably including *Chatterton's Commune*, *The Atheistic Communistic Scorcher*, a publication he developed over years.

Kitaj often segmented the pictorial surface into parts. This is seen in the initial works through rigid compartments that accentuate the flatness of the picture; a characteristic later maintained in his graphic production. In the early 1960s, he began a new stage in which he used architecture to create the divisions on the canvas. This work shows the coexistence of both phases.

The artist portrayed Chatterton's home. On the stairs, a divided body suggests Matisse's cut-outs but with sandy tones. It is surrounded by collages with leaves showing faces and

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6. R.B. Kitaj quoted by M. Livingstone in *Kitaj*, London, Phaidon Press Inc., 2010, p. 234.

silhouettes of figures. Perhaps an interpretation of the eccentric politician who produced his pamphlets, filled with revolutionary ideas against the oppression of the poor.

The painting “Junta” was also begun this year in the Empordà region. Kitaj explains in an essay that he wrote about the work in his great monograph compiled by Marco Livingstone: “It was painted partly in Catalonia and grew out of my friendship with Josep Vicente, which began in 1953. He used to talk fondly of the grizzled old anarchist he would introduce me to and of how well they fought in what he still calls ‘our war’ and of their only very brief historical success, organizing some coastal villages before oblivion came down on them.”<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Marco Livingstone, a kind of essay draft, Kitaj comments that at that time he had finished reading *Homage to Catalonia*, by George Orwell, and Sant Feliu gave him the opportunity to explore the Catalan anarchist tradition.<sup>8</sup> Although he had probably discovered the book before his first trip there, he probably reread it, as it is cited in the general bibliography of the catalogue. In fact, “Junta” (1962) distils the influence of the raw honest story by Orwell, who came to Catalonia and fought on the Aragon front. The English writer praised the revolutionary committees created by the anarchists in the first months of the war, vividly detailed the discrepancies between the left-wing factions – including the brutal prohibition of the Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) – and reproached the foreign press for not reporting the true revolutionary intention of the libertarian struggles. This perceptive chronicle, contrasted with the

information provided by the anarchists of the war who suffered its terrible consequences in Sant Feliu, gave Kitaj a vast understanding of the subject.

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In “Junta”, the artist began to shed the expressionist patina, so typical in his earlier works, developing greater sharpness in the drawing, of caricatural features and vivid colours. The painting is divided into five panels of similar sizes; most include a half-body masculine figure, and the penultimate is divided into two parts.<sup>9</sup> In the Marlborough Fine Art Gallery exhibition catalogue, Kitaj added somewhat cryptic sentences and quotes to accompany the work, for example, “What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross,” a famous verse from the poem LXXXI from *The Pisan Cantos* by Ezra Pound. In the phrase “Dan Chatterton at home” the English anarchist reappears; “Old and New Tables”, the chapter of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, overcomes the old doctrines and reaches man’s creative freedom; lastly, the phrase “His bomb adorned with flowers” reintroduces the reference to the explosive artefact that the Catalan anarchist Mateo Morral threw at Alfonso XIII in Madrid. The artist outlines the bouquet that covers the Orsini bomb, used by Morral and typical in the libertarian movement, in the lower section of the panel divided into two parts.

7. R.B. Kitaj, *Kitaj*, op. cit., p. 142.

8. R.B. Kitaj quoted by M. Livingstone in *Kitaj. Retrato de un hispanista (Kitaj. Portrait of a Hispanist)*, Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, 2004, p. 50.

9. Marco Livingstone relates it to the cinematic technique known as jump-cut (an editing resource that produces a visible cut in the continuity of the action). Kitaj could have applied it to generate a change of rhythm and thus stimulate the viewer’s attention (M. Livingstone, *Kitaj. Retrato de un hispanista (Kitaj. Portrait of a Hispanist)*, op. cit., p. 141).

Kitaj reveals more information about the meaning of the painting in the monograph on his work by Marco Livingstone, where he says that the figures embody members of a benign revolutionary junta, and the figure on the last panel represents the anarchist leader Durruti. Above Morral's bomb there is a strange two-headed figure who, according to Kitaj, is a personification of the *doppelgänger* (double) and alludes to divergent individuals in the juntas who, on certain occasions, are condemned to split or die murdered in the name of ideological purity. Perhaps this is the heroic fall of anarchism and, by extension, of so many revolutionary movements with lights and shadows. The same year as the creation of "Junta" and "Interior / Dan Chatterton's Town House", Kitaj made "Reflections on Violence" in London, alluding to the controversial Georges Sorel as one of those idealistic figures who, on occasions, find themselves dragged to the edge of the abyss for certain ideas.

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Buenaventura Durruti had become a revolutionary icon, and in the Marlborough exhibition the artist not only expressed it himself on canvas but also included his photography in the catalogue and the gallery window during the exhibition. The general bibliography includes a pamphlet about the anarchist leader, published by the CNT and the FAI in 1937.

Kitaj, moreover, notes that "Junta" prefigures his interest in archetypal figures, in the style of great literary characters, which he developed in the series of personifications of the exile between 1975 and 1978. An example is "The Hispanist" (1977-78), a portrait of the

Catalan Nissa Torrents, who worked as a lecturer in literature and Latin American cinema at University College London.

Kitaj took his reflection about the Civil War to London. Also in 1962 he made the emblematic "Kennst Du das Land?", which portrays a group of soldiers submerged in a kind of snow-covered sea, where he investigates the terrible consequences of the war for both sides. He later picked up the theme in the portrait of "La Pasionaria" (1969) for *The Sunday Times Magazine*, and in the graphic works "La lucha del pueblo español por su libertad" (1969), "Kampflieder – Battle-Songs – Canzoni di Guerra" (1969-70) and "What is Comparison?" (1964).

## Sant Feliu as a Stage

The old train station of Sant Feliu de Guíxols provides the stage for the enigmatic meeting between the two lovers of "Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea" (1964), another work conceived in Josep Vicente's house. While Kitaj's early works show self-engrossed characters, from 1964 the artist constructed figures who dialogue with each other. However, this relationship often conceals a light tension that provokes perplexity in the viewer. The mysterious couple of "Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea" is a clear example of the new period.

Now Kitaj gave an absolutely central role to drawing and plain colours, in keeping with the pop language that impregnated the British artistic scene of the time. The exhibition catalogue of the New York Marlborough-Gerson Gallery that Kitaj presented in 1965 reproduces a first phase of painting that shows the importance the artist attached to the accuracy of the line. Although his compositions were less cryptic than in the past, the multiple meanings of his works persisted. And his painting, far from being organised as a closed system,

is resolved in a multiplicity of forms. “Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea” shows a half-body woman and man kissing, protected by an ethereal architecture that goes back to De Chirico. At first sight, the image seems symmetrical but, if we observe closer, we see that it conceals certain compositional incongruities. The masculine figure’s face is blurred, the arm around the woman is separated from the body and the elements framing the couple elude perspective, like one of the lateral mechanical structures or the table on which the salt and pepper cellars and the wine glass are placed. Although we find a narrative aim in the work, the scene forms part of an indefinite space-time context that undoubtedly evokes the melancholic atmosphere typical of metaphysical painting. The rigid compositions of his earlier period have disappeared completely, and the architecture creates the divisions in the pictorial space. The motifs that had been separate now interact by giving the work greater unity.

One of the interpretations of “Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea” refers to the dramatic separation between loved ones because of the Holocaust.<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, Kitaj began to investigate the Jewish genocide. The media trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1960-61, responsible for the transport of those deported to the German extermination camps during the Second World War, provoked in the artist an unease that had lay dormant within him.<sup>11</sup>

The train as a conduit leading to the atrocities of the concentration camps or as a way of fleeing Nazi persecution emerges throughout his career, from the explicit image of a rail in the striking lithograph “The Cultural Value of Fear, Distrust and Hypochondria” (1966)

to more allegorical representations through intense characters in a train compartment in works such as “The Jew, Etc.” (1976-79), “The Jewish Rider” (1984-85), or the renaissance-like landscape in which the entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau is seen, through which the trains full of prisoners passed in “If Not, Not” (1975-76).

But Kitaj himself shows us the roots of the painting in his magnificent conversations with Julián Ríos, who affirms: “His secret life will be partially revealed (always partially) when, sooner or later, I write about it. Meanwhile, of course, the painting was inspired by a small station and its melancholia.”<sup>12</sup>

*The painter turns the female protagonist of the painting into a narrator who appears nude, like a mythologised presence*

For the Tate Gallery retrospective, organised in 1994, the artist wrote prefaces that accompanied some of the works exhibited, as an extension of the images and not as a conclusive interpretation. Most of these texts allude to influences and interests that drove him to create a painting; and in a few cases, among them “Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea”, he invented a fiction. The painter turns the female protagonist of the painting into a narrator who appears nude, like a mythologised presence. The woman locates the story in a small port town on the Catalan coast and explains that, after an unhappy marriage, she begins a relationship with Eusebio, creator of the painting, embodied in the blur-faced character kissing her.<sup>13</sup> She explains that he is a local artist who has abandoned his recognised

10. J. Shannon, *Kitaj. Paintings, Drawings, Pastels*, London, Thames and Hudson. London, 1983, p. 24.

11. R. B. Kitaj quoted by Joanne Northey in *R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective*, London, Tate Gallery Publications, 1994, p. 59.

12. R. B. Kitaj, *Impresiones de Kitaj. La novela pintada*, op. cit., p. 353. (Own translation, see note 2.)

13. Julián Ríos relates the kiss to that of John Rice and Mary Irwin in the film *The Rice-Irwin Kiss*, 1896. J. Ríos, *Impresiones de Kitaj. La novela pintada*, Madrid, Mondadori, 1989, p. 71. Other authors mention the influence of film noir.

urban landscapes to explore the representation of unique scenes such as the one that concerns us, little appreciated by his usual clients. Every Friday, continues the woman, the painter says goodbye to her in the terminal reproduced on the canvas to go to the brothels of Barcelona.

The story is nourished by biographical references to Kitaj's stay in Sant Feliu de Guíxols. Some of them are expressed in the painting and others, perhaps, are used by the artist to fabricate a discourse of remembrance of his Catalan period. As we have seen, the space where the farewell between the two lovers takes place is inspired by the train station of the Empordà town. Between 1892 and 1969 there was a narrow railway line between Girona and Sant Feliu, popularly known as "el Carrilet", which transported passengers and merchandise. The vanished station, of industrial neoclassical style, is recognised through a fragment of the iron beam roof. This roof also heads the lithograph "What Is Comparison?", made the same year as "Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea", in which book covers about the Spanish Civil War are reproduced, such as *Heroes of the Alcazar* (1937), English version of the publication by the German Rudolf Timmermans, or *The March of a Nation* (1937) by the British Harold G. Cardozo, an essay that Kitaj used to develop other works. In the bottom margin the wine glass and the salt and pepper cellars of the painting are inverted. Moreover, the luminous face of the woman appears in another lithograph, "For Fear" (1967).

"El Carrilet" passed in front of the home of Josep Vicente – Sobrevia was for years the name of its street –, so Kitaj must have regularly seen the train while he was living there. However, his journey did not include a stop in

Barcelona. The reference to the painter's frequent journeys to Barcelona to visit the brothels alludes to Kitaj's own visits to the brothels of the Barrio Chino. The young woman with the penetrating expression in the lithograph "Barceloneta" (1979) represents the remains of these fleeting trips.

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The text also mentions the new creative direction started by the painter Eusebio, who gave up his popular urban landscapes to compose strange scenes with the couple from the painting as the main characters. Kitaj had few relationships in Sant Feliu but, according to his conversations with Julián Ríos,<sup>14</sup> during his stay of 1953 he usually went out in a fishing boat with his friend Eusebio. To create the male character in the preface to "Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea", Kitaj could have used the name of his old friend and attributed him with his own artistic personality. In the moment of creating the work, Kitaj explored new expressive forms associated with the pop current through oneiric compositions with figures.

"People are always saying the meanings in my pictures refuse to be fixed, to be settled, to be stable."<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of Kitaj's works could be applied to his characters, in constant transit. Through their expression they seem to focus their thought in another place, their body is often in movement. Robert Hughes described the couple in the painting as "rootless cosmopolitans."<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly, the blurred parts of

14. R.B. Kitaj, *Impresiones de Kitaj. La palabra pintada*, op. cit., p. 335.

15. R.B. Kitaj, "The First Diasporist Manifesto", in N. Mirzoeff (ed.), *Diaspora and Visual Culture. Representing Africans and Jews*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2000, p. 38.

16. R. Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, p. 103.

the man emphasise that movement, perhaps the woman with ideal features represents the abandoned home.

Another important work that includes Sant Feliu as a stage is “To Live in Peace (The Singers)” (1973-74), reproduced on the cover of this issue. Kitaj made it in his third period in the town, when in 1972 he acquired a small 19th century middle-class house with gardened patio in Guimerà Street, a kind of sanctuary hidden among alleys, far from the tourist bustle that was beginning to spread along the Catalan coast. There he endlessly read and drew, together with his new partner, the painter Sandra Fisher, and their children. Kitaj felt part of the place, learnt Catalan, read Salvador Espriu, Carles Riba, Josep Pla, and shared with his friends the desire for freedom: “*Sóc plen de l’impaciència de veure i sentir el aire nou de Catalunya... Vull molt, molt estar a Barcelona i caminar enmig dels gents*”<sup>17</sup> [I am very impatient to see and feel the new air of Catalonia... I really want to be in Barcelona and walk among the people]. During this period the artist managed to restore family harmony after the bitter loss of his first wife in 1969.

Indeed, the painting distils this calm through a festive conversation with friends, after an Easter lunch. The framework of the lengthy meeting is the Vicente family house, at the top of a hill, from where the sea can be seen. Seen standing up is the painter Josep Albertí, amateur baritone, performing a song. On the other side of the table is Úrsula, his Swiss girlfriend. Teresa, Josep Vicente’s mother, her body leaning to one side, observes the scene relaxed. Vicente appears in profile, surrounded by a green element, and his wife, Mercè, and Catalina, his sister, are seated at his side. The image is divided into two clearly differentiated parts. On the right, the vivacity of the group,

with objects spread over the table and the disorganised chairs. It all reflects an animated movement. In contrast, the left section features a geometrical composition almost without elements, with the peaceful Mediterranean landscape in the distance, accentuating the serene effect even more.

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Kitaj usually carried a camera to take any picture that might interest him. On this occasion, he also immortalised the scene with different photographs he used as the basis for composing the picture. A year after starting it, the artist made a draft outline of the composition in Vicente’s house, perhaps to show his friend the progress of the piece. The empty chair that appears in the painting, is occupied in the sketch by a child seated in profile, perhaps one of Vicente’s children, who had also been at the lunch. The rest of the characters are practically located in the same position although, in the painting, the space around the group appears smaller and some elements are added, such as the lamp.

The child was probably removed for compositional reasons, as his presence could have dominated the scene, leaving the action of the table in the background. Moreover, the division of rhythms, clear on the canvass, would have vanished with this figure.

Previously, Kitaj had begun a study for “To Live in Peace (The Singers)”, which he never finished. The image shows a portrait of the future mayor smoking in profile. The

17. Letter from R. B. Kitaj to Josep Vicente, 1975. The artist’s original Catalan is preserved.

character's impassiveness recalls the faces of serene beauty of the Quattrocento, a period that always interested the painter. It also prefigures the bright pastels that the artist would paint from life, many of them in his house in Guimerà Street. The bottom section of the work again shows Kitaj's fascination with fragmentation, as well as his desire to create geometrical divisions. On this occasion, the artist also showed Vicente his progress in the work. For a long period, the Catalan's house exhibited a black and white photograph of the work underway.

His interest in portraits of his friends grew in this period. Another suggestive example of the same year is the painting dedicated to the film directors Kenneth Anger and Michael Powell (1973). "To Live in Peace (The Singers)" represents a kind of altar in homage to the people he most valued in Sant Feliu.

*Thus, in Kitaj, life and work are intermixed. The painting "To Live in Peace (The Singers)" clearly shows this: his friendships embody the characters of the painting, the scene takes place in the house where the artist lived on several occasions*

As Joe Shannon says,<sup>18</sup> in this painting Kitaj leaves aside the dense reflection on historical catastrophes to develop a work that overflows with light and expresses happiness, in the wake of "Luncheon of the Boating Party", by Renoir. During Franco's regime many families found their stronghold of freedom in the domestic ambit, which allowed them to momentarily escape a system that constrained them. The laughter, the enjoyment of this group of friends in his house, was an act of

resistance to Francoism. Marco Livingstone talks of a peaceful rebellion, in the shadow of fascism.<sup>19</sup> The rocky density of the figures and the distortion of the image, like an illusion, also suggest that allegory. Kitaj also said about the painting: "Watching the Catalans, this family of friends, emerge from under fascism to live in peace during the years I had a house there, played strange tricks on me because I would eat at the table you see in this painting year after year and envy their, what shall I call it? – their elective affinity for what they deemed to be their own..."<sup>20</sup> As the end of the dictatorship drew close and freedom was palpable in the air, Kitaj identified less with Catalonia. In his status as a nomad, it was as if he needed to find another place in conflict to take sides. Nevertheless, the painter shared with Catalans the extraordinary happiness of waking up from the Francoist nightmare. Testimony of this is his later painting made in London in 1976, "Catalan Christ (Pretending to Be Dead)". He also reflected on the recently inaugurated democracy through "Communist and Socialist (second version)" (1979), an intense drawing in pastel and charcoal, which immortalised the socialist Josep Vicente with his friend Joan Vilà, historical militant of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC), both with circumspect face, deep in conversation about politics in a public place, the Eldorado coffee shop in Sant Feliu. One year later, Kitaj wrote to Vicente ostensibly excited about this new period, and mentioned his possible role as mayor, a position that, as we have noted, the politician would hold in the town for a decade: "Dearest Josep... I have your dear letter now. It is the most beautiful letter I have ever received... It was almost worth the abomination of the 40 yrs regime

18. J. Shannon, *Kitaj: Paintings, Drawings, Pastels*, op. cit., p. 28.

19. M. Livingstone, *Kitaj*, op. cit., p. 29.

20. M. Livingstone, *Kitaj. Retrato de un hispanista (Portrait of a Hispanist)*, op. cit., p. 150.

for you to come to the beauty of your understanding now... to come now to the prospect of a socialism (fulfilled or not): (...) My closest american friend Jim Dine (the painter) is here with me and I have let him read your letter to give him some idea why I have another life at Sant Feliu... (...) you are my brother, commissar, priest, keeper of the flame! Alcalde?"<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in Kitaj, life and work are intermixed. The painting "To Live in Peace (The Singers)" clearly shows this: his friendships embody the characters of the painting, the scene takes place in the house where the artist lived on several occasions, and it all becomes an allegorical canvas that symbolises an act of insurrection against the dictatorship. Kitaj affirmed that memories build sacred dreams for his paintings.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, "Where the Railroad Leaves the Sea" and "To Live in Peace (The Singers)" feed from evocations of his residence in Catalonia.

In the 1970s, Sant Feliu entered a period of modernity that standardised its physiognomy with other European coastal towns; at the same time, it began to be invaded by the implacable architecture of mass use, a new landscape that sought to eradicate any vestige of the past and in which Kitaj did not feel so comfortable.

Following a visit to Israel in 1980, Judaism gained a presence in the artist's life and work: "The way Josep addressed his Catalan dream inspired and encouraged my own growing excitement in the Romance of Jewish studies. I would wander the city of Gerona, heartland of Jewish Kabbala long before I would read the Zohar, written there (not far from my house of Sant Feliu!)"<sup>23</sup>

One year later, while Sandra Fisher and Kitaj were living in Paris, they decided to sell

the house in Sant Feliu, where they would never return.

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