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R. B. KITAJ, R.A.

1932 Cleveland – Los Angeles 2007

Portrait of Philip Roth

Charcoal on paper; executed 1985.

775 x 570 mm

PROVENANCE: The estate of the artist, (until 2008) – Private collection, England

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

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

Ronald Kitaj began his studies at the Cooper Union in New York and the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna. After serving in the U.S. Army, he enrolled in the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford in 1958 before transferring to the Royal College of Art in London, where he studied alongside such artists as David Hockney, Allen Jones, Peter Phillips and Patrick Caulfield. Older and more worldly than most of his contemporaries at the RCA, Kitaj was a particular influence on these younger students, who joined him in becoming the leading members of the nascent British Pop Art movement. In 1976, Kitaj coined the term *The School of London* to refer a group of artists including Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Michael Andrews and Euan Uglow, as well as himself. Elected to the Royal Academy in 1991, he was four years later the subject of a major retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London. Stung by the savage critical reaction to the exhibition, which was followed shortly thereafter by his wife's sudden death, Kitaj resolved to leave London for good. He settled in Los Angeles in 1997, where he lived and worked for ten years before his death, by his own hand, in October 2007.

Throughout his career, Kitaj was always particularly highly regarded as a draughtsman. He was equally adept in chalk and pastel; the latter medium he took up in the 1970s, encouraged by Hockney and inspired by Degas, who was a particular hero. In 1981, the art critic Robert Hughes noted of the artist that *'Of late, he has also emerged as one of the few real masters of the art of straight figure drawing in Europe or, for*

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*that matter, in the world... Kitaj draws better than almost anyone else alive, taking on all the expressive and factual responsibilities of depiction and carrying most of them through.*¹

Kitaj met Philip Roth in 1985, when the writer and his wife Claire Bloom were neighbours of the artist in Chelsea, London. Roth became a good friend, and his writings influenced and inspired much of Kitaj's thinking, particularly on the question of Jewish identity. Drawn in London in 1985, soon after Roth and Kitaj first met, the present sheet was, according to Kitaj, done in 'about six sessions'² [Fig.1].

Among comparable large-scale portrait drawings by Kitaj is a charcoal and pastel study of *Lucian Freud* of 1991 which is today in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York [Fig.2].³ Another portrait drawing of Philip Roth by Kitaj, drawn several years later and showing the head of the writer in profile, was, like the present sheet, retained by the artist until his death⁴. Drawn in charcoal on canvas and entitled *A Jew in Love (Philip Roth)* [Fig.3], this large drawing remains in the collection of the Kitaj estate.



Philip Roth besides his portrait at R. B. Kitaj's Studio, 1985
Colour photograph

¹ Robert Hughes, *Edgy Footnotes to an Era*, in *Time*, 26 October 1981.

² Rios, *op.cit.*, p. 61

³ Inv. 1992.41; *Morphet*, ed., *op.cit.*, no. 85, repr. p. 183.

⁴ Joanne Northey, *Chronology*, in *Morphet*, ed., *op.cit.*, repr. p. 64 (where dated 1991); Marilyn McCully, Michael Raeburn and Helen Watson, *Kitaj: Portraits and Reflections*, Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, exhib. cat., 2011, p. 48, no.25 (where dated 1988-1991); Cilly Kugelmann, Eckhart Gillen and Hubertus Gaßner, *Obsessionen: R. B. Kitaj 1932-2007*, exhib. cat., Berlin, 2013, repr. p. 230 (where dated 1988-1991). The drawing measures 590 x 340 mm.

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Fig.2: R. B. Kitaj, *Portrait of Lucian Freud*, 1991
charcoal and pastel on paper, 775 x 572 mm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Fig. 3: R. B. Kitaj, *A Jew in Love (Philip Roth)*,
1988-91, charcoal on canvas, 58.7 x 34.3 cm
R. B. Kitaj Estate