

TEXT PANELS

LIFE WITH KITAJ

The dedication to R.B. Kitaj's enigmatic "First Diasporist Manifesto" (1989) reads: "For Sandra, who puts me down when I complain, replying she'd rather live in these times (as a woman and artist) than any other." Sandra's optimism and gaiety were the perfect foil to her husband's studied angst.

Born in New York and raised in Florida, Sandra Fisher (1947-1994) studied at the Chouinard Art School in Los Angeles. She later moved to London to paint, reconnecting with Kitaj, who she had befriended in LA. The photograph of Fisher by Lee Friedlander with their son Max also catches portraits on the wall by Kitaj of her stepchildren Lem and Dominic. Fisher believed passionately in the greatness of Kitaj while pursuing a highly independent course in her own work.

Avigdor Arikha drew Kitaj and Sandra as they sat for the veteran American realist Raphael Soyer in 1983 (the two works are reunited here for the first time since they were made). Arikha played a decisive role in Fisher's personal formation, persuading her of the merits of painting "alla prima" (in a single session).

FROM LIFE

In a review of the exhibition "Representation Abroad" at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1985, John Ashbery noted Fisher's "bright painterliness that sometime evokes Sickert, Manet, or America's Ashcan School." While her mature style entailed drawing directly with the brush, observational drawing remained fundamental both to her practice and to her identity as an artist. Her life drawing often revealed an unabashed pleasure in male beauty.

Fisher's example of tenacious drawing from life and connection with older painters influenced Kitaj's rediscovery of traditional practices in the 1970s. She had already been working in pastel, for instance, when together in Paris they sought out Roché, where their hero Degas had bought supplies. Later, she would exert influence through the reciprocal portraits she instigated with other artists, proving herself a quiet catalyst in a revival of direct observation.

COLLABORATIONS

Easel painting is a notoriously solitary pursuit. To an unusual degree, the sociable Fisher worked with fellow artists, both depicting and sitting for them at work. These

artists included stalwarts of British figuration like Maggi Hambling and Stephen Finer, but her proposed collaborations could also encourage an artist like Maurice Cockrill, whose work embraced invented figuration, romantic landscape and abstraction, to return to life portraiture. Her work with John Dewe Mathews along the canals in London's Little Venice produced evocations of carefree outdoor joie de vivre more redolent of California than London, including an image used for a poster by London Transport. Fisher also collaborated with the American poet Thomas Meyer on three volumes of poetry, focusing on his interpretative reworkings of German poets, or "tracings", as he called them.

SHAKESPEARE

At the time of her sudden death in 1994 Fisher was working on a commissioned series of scenes from Shakespeare for the new Globe Theatre being built at Bankside, next to Tate Modern. It was a subject that perfectly suited Fisher, with her romanticism, her eye for beautiful youths and flamboyant costumes, and her passion for opera. The Globe commission instigated a new dynamism in the interaction of her figures that had started the previous year with her paintings for an advertising campaign for Heineken. The American actor Robert Wisdom—who went on to perform Othello at the Byre Theatre, St. Andrews, and in the British TV series "The Bill" and "Cracker"—was a favorite model.

MUSE

Fisher was frequently painted and drawn by other artists. Besides reciprocal arrangements with those who sat for her, she posed for Kitaj and his close circle, especially at the outset of their relationship. David Hockney made a drawing of her in an Ossie Clark dress, "Sandra in Yorkshire," which could not be borrowed or photographed for this exhibition. When she sat for Frank Auerbach, she documented the progress of his charcoal drawing in a series of 40 photographs which remain the only record of these works—Auerbach habitually rubs away each session of work if he is not satisfied with the results, continuing the next time on the same surface.

In the aftermath of her tragic, untimely death, images of Sandra have taken on a new poignancy. Kitaj has made Sandra the principal motif of his recent Los Angeles series, punning on the name of his city and his sense of Sandra as his personal angel, and has also launched a "magazine" bearing her name, which takes various forms, including, for instance, the checklist of the present exhibition. The second-impression monotype of Sandra looking in a mirror by Lino Mannocci, whose press Sandra kept in her studio, has a ghostly feeling. Gabriel Sempill made a "portrait" of her late friend's shoes that

recalls Fisher's own heartfelt "Max's First Shoes," whose sense of authenticity evokes Van Gogh's peasant's boots.

SITTERS, FRIENDS

While Fisher used professional models, including the late Tulio Brunt, who was an art student at the time, many of her paintings are portraits of friends: whoever was sitting, the human element was never diminished by formal issues. Out of concern for sitter comfort and a desire for an engaged subject, solitary figures often read. David Cohen would read aloud to Fisher and Maurice Cockrill, who would sometimes include each other in their compositions: in the painting of Cohen wearing a green coat, he reads an article by Richard Wollheim in *Modern Painters* magazine; in the image of him wearing the white sweater, he reads Stendhal's *On Love*. The historian of ideas Noga Arikha, daughter of Avigdor Arikha and a student at the time of her portrait, is seen reclining in the Corbusier chaise longue familiar in paintings by Fisher and Kitaj. The Picasso biographer and art historian Marilyn McCully—who is executor of Fisher's estate—wears a costume once owned by Violet Trefusis, Vita Sackville-West's lover and the daughter of Alice Keppel, mistress of King Edward VII.

SALON

Fisher favored a nineteenth-century salon hang in her various exhibitions, including the last in her lifetime at London's Lefevre Gallery in 1993. With her frank naturalism, romantic paint handling and the attraction to such traditional, often atelier-bound genres as the nude, individual and group portraiture she does not seem like a painter of her time—but she argued otherwise: "It may look as if I don't owe anything to the greatest aspect of the modernism of this century, but, in fact, I think about it all the time. I think of Modernism as a kind of boldness of spirit to say how strongly you feel about your subject, but also to find a simplicity, if it is possible."