

## INSIDE THIS HUMAN CLAY—

- we are living, we are looking,
- we are stuck, we are sticking,
- we enter and trace a path, then break down—daily.

Artist and model together make up the studio romance. It is a classic art historical trope, to be sure. To enter into the studio romance now is to draw upon all previous and enduring iterations of this relationship. It is to adopt a kind of universal template, to register its rules, to align with a long succession of familiar pictures and objects and thereby produce something inherently academic and untimely. However, like any other romance, this one thrives in an atmosphere of newness and intimacy. To scrutinize the embodied presence of another—and this is always “*the other*”—in all its nakedness within the closed confines of the studio is an intense experience, a limit-experience specific to this place, which is no doubt why artists will continue to return to it. Tradition weighs down the hand that renders the model, but the immediate, carnal nature of this encounter desires lightness and speed, sending the hand on its way, each time as though for the first time. The studio romance is elemental—at once utterly personal and common, almost anonymous. Strained through the sieve of art history, it seeks out a point of origin.

In 1976, RB Kitaj organized an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London titled *The Human Clay*. Gathering together works by like-minded peers in his British scene, the show announced the emergence of a new tendency toward figuration within a field still largely dominated by modernist abstraction and, in this way, argued for the artist’s life-long commitment to life drawing. As Kitaj suggested in his catalog essay, the sustained aesthetic observation of a human figure is a vital exercise in empathy, especially when considered against formalist aspirations to detachment and autonomy. The stakes of this once-routine practice are inevitably raised, taking on an acutely ethical, even political, dimension. Grappling with questions of the flesh continues to matter deeply.

What mattered then and matters now is the practice, the daily repetition of life drawing as a basis for art and a model for living. In Kitaj’s painting, *Painter (Sandra)*, 1990, the studio romance is presented as a tight, reflexive circuit—a self-sustaining coupling and feedback loop. The painter paints the painter painting. It is a visual riddle that undermines our capacity to

distinguish subject from object in order to get at a more nuanced understanding of what actually happens between them. The model—that figure perpetually coded as female—is the artist’s wife, the beloved other, his Sandra. She is naked but not necessarily posing, or at least not holding a pose; she is actively at work, her arm in motion with brush in hand. The composition suggests that she is in turn painting her husband, whose place in front of the frame we now occupy as viewers. Her nakedness insinuates his—as well as ours. The representation of living bodies also inevitably leads to considerations of their subsequent absence and what survives in memory, considerations that are compounded miserably and made morbid in death. Cropping the figure off across the jaw and at the crotch in such a jarring manner signals, as it anticipates, inconsolable loss. And then the loss points inward. The possibility had been floated in a prior work—*Self Portrait as a Woman*, 1984—that Kitaj’s model-wife can also be read as himself. This painting of a painter doubles as a kind of self-portrait, then again, such exercises in extreme empathy will always suggest moments of radical intersubjectivity. Part of what painting records is this process of losing oneself and becoming-other.

Gender-bending undertones aside, *Sandra (Painter)* shows where the studio romance can lead when it is pursued with rigor over time as both an everyday exercise and an end in itself. Resonant, if divergent, impulses may be seen flickering in the contemporary practices of Vanessa Beecroft, Kristian Burford, Kate Costello, Gerald Davis, Wintergarten Ltd, Thomas Lawson, Meleko Mokgosi, Jason Starr, Henry Taylor and Barak Zemer. In the thirty-seven years since Kitaj mounted his exhibition, the space of intimate embodied encounter between artist and model has narrowed considerably, pressured on all sides by an ever-increasing outpour of virtual images, and this is inevitably registered in all of their works. However, some part of the original formula persists; it is insisted upon. “The ‘earthed’ human image,” as Kitaj termed it, is inexhaustible in its “enigmas, confessions, prophecies, sacraments, fragments, questions...” These now take shape in relation (or opposition) to a cultural landscape flattened by glowing screens, on a ground continually revisited and reclaimed by those artists who cannot get over this human clay.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer & Jan Tumlir