

ROBERT KUSHNER

The Fabric of Gods and Goddesses : Textile Paintings from the 1980s

May 23 - July 22, 2023

91, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, Paris 8^e



Robert Kushner, *Tondo 5*, 1984, Acrylic and mixed fabric on cotton, 215,9 cm (85 in.) diameter
Photo Credit: Steven Bates / Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris / Brussels

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is delighted to present American artist Robert Kushner's second solo exhibition in Paris, following *Jardin Sauvage* in 2021.

Born in 1949, in California, Robert Kushner currently lives and works in New York. After studying at the prestigious University of California San Diego, renowned for its avant-garde visual arts curriculum, the artist is now considered to be one of the founders of the *Pattern and Decoration* movement, which developed in the 1970s in New York. Robert Kushner moved there in 1972 and met Amy Goldin, one of the movement's main theorists. At the time, she had encouraged encounters between artists and students in New York, among which there were Miriam Schapiro, Valerie Jaudon, Robert Zakanitch and Joyce Kozloff. These diverse interactions aimed at creating an artistic movement that placed visual arts and decorative arts on equal footing, revaluing artisanal traditions and disciplines reserved to women, such as sewing, in a direct attempt to reverse the gender roles.

While *Jardin Sauvage* presented a group of recent works by the artist, this new exhibition brings together earlier compositions in which the human figure appears as a decorative motif. This exhibition demonstrates to the artist's powerful syncretism, to a singular oeuvre which acknowledged its overtly decorative function. For, at a time when minimalism and conceptual art dominated the American art scene, Robert Kushner took a completely different direction: he chose to situate himself in a daring interval, mixing fine arts and decorative arts, which were then considered a minor art form. This return to motif and ornamentation allowed him to raise questions about the very concept of beauty in contemporary art, at a time when the United States bathed in a puritanical atmosphere where making beautiful things was suspect. Using a vivid color palette, the artist nourished his works with a blend of Eastern and Western cultures, combined with transdisciplinary artistic practices – let us recall that Robert Kushner's beginnings were marked by performance and theater costume design. These different facets allowed him to compose work rich in hybridities, resolutely contemporary: with its sophisticated aesthetics and the philosophical messages it conveys, his work resonates in the present world.

Robert Kushner's career has been punctuated by intellectual stimulation, through the exploration and learning of traditional art and craft techniques from the East and West. Abstract motifs, floral compositions and other still lifes are central to his work: these attributes are derived both from the landscape in which he grew up – California was a gateway to Asia at the time – and from his extensive travels to the East. As early as 1974, Robert Kushner traveled to Iran, Turkey and Afghanistan, with his former professor Amy Goldin. Faced with Byzantine churches, Persian miniatures, carpets from Istanbul, Islamic architecture and art, the artist appreciated, for the first time, the potential of ornamentation as a stylistic principle. These cultures allowed a porosity between the disciplines and envisaged a global art, in contrast with the artistic landscape familiar to the artist.

With his proclivity for fabrics, Robert Kushner learned to crochet from his grandmother and worked, in his youth, as a carpet restorer. A trip to India reinforced his interest in weaving and in other textiles. He worked in the craft center of the city of Ahmedabad, with an Indian family and discovered madras and mandalas. His works became progressively enriched with varied textiles such as silk, taffeta and cotton, where he mixed motifs with painting. Fabrics from the Middle East and Asia flooded the artist's studio; figurative or abstract motifs were deployed in his textile works and in his paintings, in the foreground or in the background.

Since the 1980s, flowers and abstract motifs have been a constant in Robert Kushner's oeuvre. The human figure, on the other hand, is transitory: it first appears in 1982, following his trip to India, and completely disappears in the early 1990s. The present exhibition brings together a selection of works in which the human figure is prominent. Alone or accompanied, the idealized bodies are close to the androgyny of Indian deities. Two paintings from one of his emblematic trilogies are included in the exhibition: *Sirocco* and *Love Crowning the Lovers* (1986) are part of a monumental cycle of three sequences, based on mythical imagery. This series addresses issues of mortality, regeneration and cycles, while establishing a close relationship with the divine in a historical context where AIDS has ravaged the artistic circles.

Although color is one of the most tangible elements available to artists, American colorists of the 20th century are few in number: Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin, Marsden Hartley or even Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who situate themselves in the vein of the Abstract Expressionists, are some of the meager representatives. Robert Kushner is one of those whose art is pleasing to the eye and satisfies the human soul: he harnesses color and decoration in a quest for pure visual pleasure, transcending the hackneyed debate between abstraction and figuration of his time. The work *Goddess* (1986) thus adopts vivid colors, far from the real world. The decorative motifs and the human figure come together without hierarchy or perspective. This decorative attitude is close to compositions by modern European artists, such as Raoul Dufy or Henri Matisse, who are sources of inspiration for Robert Kushner. The latter extends his influences to the use of gold leaf, reminiscent of the symbolist current, to Gustav Klimt in his sprawling floral compositions.

The exhibition presents subtle compositions of paintings and fabrics printed with figurative and abstract motifs, floral compositions and human figures, characteristic of his work from the 1980s and 1990s. A grouping that shows us the richness of all his beautifully assimilated influences, inscribing itself in a parallel history of American painting. His *Pattern and Decoration* works – along with those of the modern European artists who inspired the artist – are experiencing a revival today through museum exhibitions in the United States and in Europe: these compositions continue to be a source of inspiration for the contemporary art scene, both in their sophisticated aesthetics and in the messages they convey.

Born in 1949 in Pasadena (California, USA). Lives and works in New York (USA).

Robert Kushner's work has been exhibited extensively in the United States, Europe and Japan since 1975 when one of his paintings was included in the Whitney Biennial. In 1984, Robert Kushner was the subject of one-person exhibitions at both the Whitney Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum, and in 1987, a mid-career summary of his work was organized by the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art.

A monograph on Robert Kushner's three decades of artistic work, entitled *Gardens of Earthly Delights*, with text by Alexandra Anderson-Spivy and Holland Cotter, was published by Hudson Hills Press in 1997. A compilation of Kushner's recent paintings on Japanese screens as well as canvas, written by Michael Duncan, was published by Pomegranate in 2006.

In 2004, Robert Kushner installed two monumental mosaic murals, *4 Seasons Seasoned*, at the 77th Street and Lexington Avenue subway station. In 2010, an 80 foot long marble mosaic, *Welcome*, was installed at the new Raleigh Durham International Airport in North Carolina.

Robert Kushner's works are in the permanent collections of museums around the world: The Museum of Modern Art (New York, USA), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, USA), The Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, USA), The National Gallery of Art (London, UK), The Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, USA), Tate Gallery (London, UK), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco, USA), The Contemporary Museum (Honolulu, Hawaii), The Denver Art Museum (Denver, USA), Galleria degli Uffizi (Florence, Italy), J. Paul Getty Trust (Los Angeles, USA), Museum Ludwig (Saint-Petersburg, Russia) et The Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, USA).

"Robert Kushner is arguably the most significant decorative artist working today... Kushner's art goes against the prevailing trend toward the anti- or nonaesthetic, which takes revenge on life. He chooses instead to affirm the wonder of existence." — Donald Kuspit, *Artforum*, Summer 2007.

Robert Kushner's newest work presents some striking departures and some reiterations of themes that have been integral to his work for decades. The most visible introduction is a bold use of geometricized patterns that swirl through the backgrounds of his new floral compositions, echoing, amplifying and sometimes even undermining the rhythms of the more naturally drawn floral elements.

In some ways, this use of pattern refers back to some of his early experiments from the 1970s combining geometric pattern with floral and figurative elements. However, he now utilizes a full spectrum of color, gold, silver and patinated copper leaf and a fracturing of the patterns to create paintings that are both complex and exciting to decode. Robert Kushner has continually addressed controversial and often subversive issues involving the interaction of decoration and art and has been considered one of the founders of the Pattern and Decoration movement. In this new body of work Robert Kushner's paintings remain overtly beautiful and unapologetically opulent. His exotic and unique color sense has become even broader within this new series, the emotional range varies from somber and contemplative to exuberant and celebratory.

Robert Kushner has been represented by Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels, since 2021.

Paris Saint-Honoré

Robert Kushner

The Fabric of Gods and Goddesses : Textile

Paintings from the 1980s

May 23 - July 22, 2023

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri

Seydou Keïta

May 5 - July 15, 2023

Paris Cloître Saint-Merri II

Jason Saager

Intermediate Worlds

March 30 - May 15, 2023

Bruxelles

Group exhibition

15 years Brussels

May 25 - July 8, 2023

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