

Robert Kushner DC MOORE GALLERY

Since the 1980s, Robert Kushner has used flowers as his signature motif, rendering leaves and blossoms in outrageously lush colors and against complex, geometric backgrounds. Recently, he has apparently grown more assertive in his application of the theme. In this new body of work from 2012, inspired by Willem de Kooning's black-and-white paintings (seen in the latter's 2011–12 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York), Kushner explores new techniques and meanings, abandoning the warm colors of his earlier works for a colder, floral world where grays and blacks prevail. It is riskier territory.

The paintings' backgrounds are composed of vertical lines of varying width and various colors (black, deep blue, maroon) and patterns (tight grid markings). In some works, the flowers sit atop collaged backdrops of old sheet music, book pages, and photographs taken from a late-nineteenth-century Italian portfolio—a collision of image and word. The rigid geometry of light and dark establishes a dramatic dialogue with the soft flowers in the foreground. Typically, the blossoms crowd the picture plane, creating at times a claustrophobic, almost nebulous mass. In the case of *Pansies and Forget-me-nots*, for example, the flowers nearly occlude the stripes; the result is a sort of filigree with fleeting explosions of gold and Pompeian red.

Robert Kushner,
Iris Ascendant, 2012,
oil, acrylic, and
palladium leaf on
canvas, 90 x 72".



In *Iris Ascendant*, the most striking painting in the show, figure and ground collapse. Both the flowers and parts of the striped background are depicted with the same application of diluted white paint (which has a marbled look), while two black bands echo and redouble the

verticality of the leaves. The sole naturalistic colors in the work are the solar yellow of the pistils and a hint of purple in the outline of the petals. Receding, advancing, and almost gushing from the canvas, the grays, whites, and blacks hit an intensely anxious and chaotic emotional key.

Manifesting a sensual essence (at times bringing to mind the erotic blossoms of Georgia O'Keeffe or Robert Mapplethorpe), the flowers lead us to confront their deeper meaning. The blooms are located within the symbolic space of Eros, and they allude to regeneration, fertility, evolution. But at the same time, they call attention to Thanatos, to withering, fading, death. While we witness the beauty and its generative potential, we cannot avoid the melancholy implicit in the flowers' ephemerality. Kushner's work

attests to beauty's fleeting nature and to the cycle of birth and death. Draining the blossoms of color, he accepts the flowers' fragility and gently underscores a moment suspended between these two states.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.