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ART IN SANTA FE



Pattern Seeking

FOR PAINTER AND COLLAGE ARTIST ROBERT KUSHNER, “DECORATIVE” IS NEVER A DIRTY WORD.

BY JOHN DORFMAN

Robert Kushner, *Malinalco*, 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 90 x 120 inches.

BACK IN THE '70s, when Minimalism and Conceptualism were the rage in the American art world, just about the worst thing a work of art could be was “decorative.” Suspicious of beauty, worried about lack of seriousness in the aftermath of Pop Art’s great commercial success, artist and critics deployed the “d” word with deadly intent, aware that it could sink a body of work or even a career. But one group of artists—among them Kim MacConnel, Joyce Kozloff, Betty and George Woodman, and Robert Kushner—actually took the term as a badge of pride. They launched a movement they called Pattern and Decoration (P&D), which took inspiration from the realm of crafts, acknowledged the traditional contribution of women to visual culture, and proudly raised the banner of sensual beauty. Kushner, now 65, is still devoted to the decorative, creating a variety of works that all embody his belief that art can and should bring pleasure to the eyes while still stimulating the mind.

Kushner’s latest work is actually two bodies of work—large-scale floral-themed paintings and smaller-scale collages that combine found typography and calligraphy with old photographs and prints, and fragments of textile, all layered with painted floral elements and bands of color. The floral paintings build on his

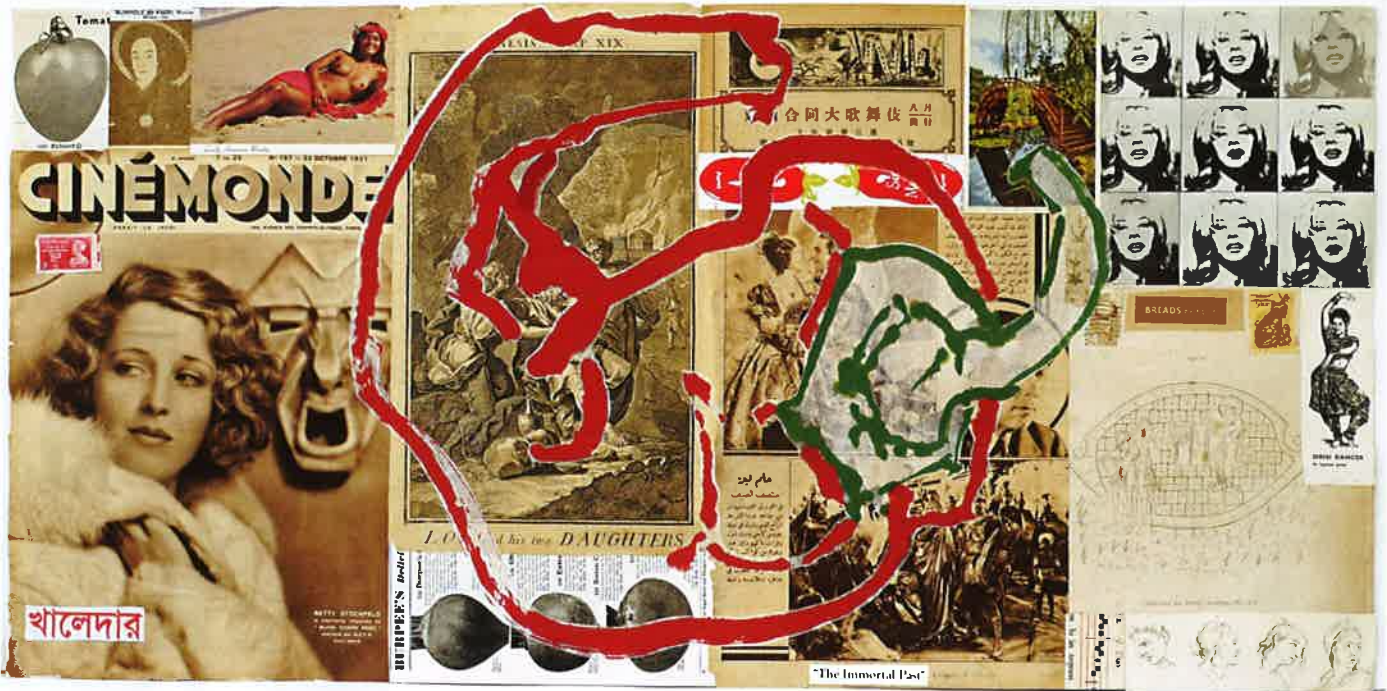


longtime interest in botanicals, and even though these are by no means straight naturalistic renderings, Kushner is quite specific as to which species he is riffing on. The canvases are titled as if they were pages from a florilegium—honeysuckle, bellflower, rudbeckia, fern, daylily, phlox, quince, and *rosa rugosa*. The colors Kushner uses in this series are bright and cheerful—purple, light green, royal blue—a change from his previous series, in which the flowers defied expectations

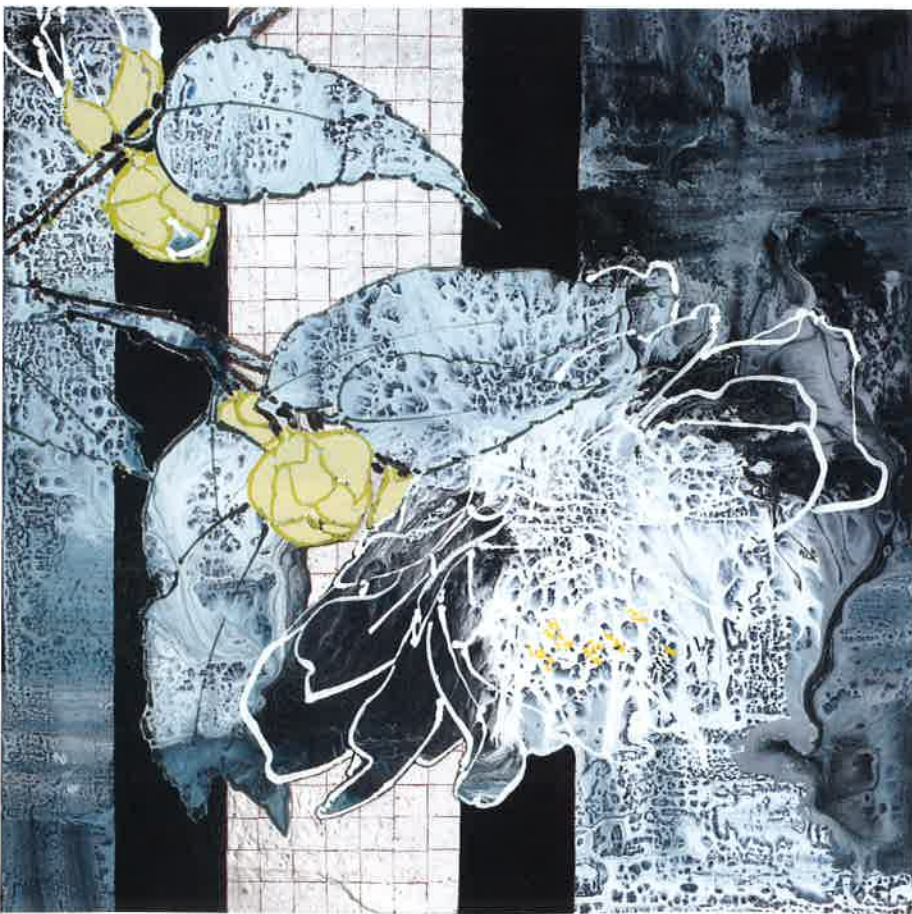
by appearing in black, white, and a silvery tone that looks as if it were created from an exposed daguerreotype emulsion.

In all of these paintings, there is a constant play between positive and negative space; flowers and leaves will switch colors as they pass from one band of contrasting background color to another, sometimes seeming to appear in outline, other times filled in. Space is subverted by the paradoxical combination of wallpaper-like flatness and the illusion of depth

Heraldic Iris, 2012, oil, acrylic, gold leaf, and collage on paper, 28 x 28 inches.



From top: *The Immortal Past*, 2015, oil, acrylic, and collage on paper, 18 x 36 inches; *Camellia Starlight*, 2012, oil, acrylic and palladium leaf on canvas, 48 x 48 inches.



induced by the layering process. Adding to this slightly disturbing sensation, the flowers seems to enter the picture from somewhere else; they are never fully contained by the frame. The eye is kept guessing, or at least working hard—Kushner’s concept of pleasure does not include tolerance for visual laziness.

“Pointing to a 1934 clipping from an Arabic magazine called *Al Arussa*, published in Cairo, he is delighted to find a photo of Shirley Temple right next to one of the Egyptian chanteuse Oum Kouloum.”

In the collages, the pleasure principle is right up front. While the overall visual impression is the most important thing, the details of the scripts—including Chinese, Arabic, Hindi, and European, both printed and manuscript—the snippets of old documents and images like fragments of memories, all are fascinating and fun on their own terms, which Kushner gladly



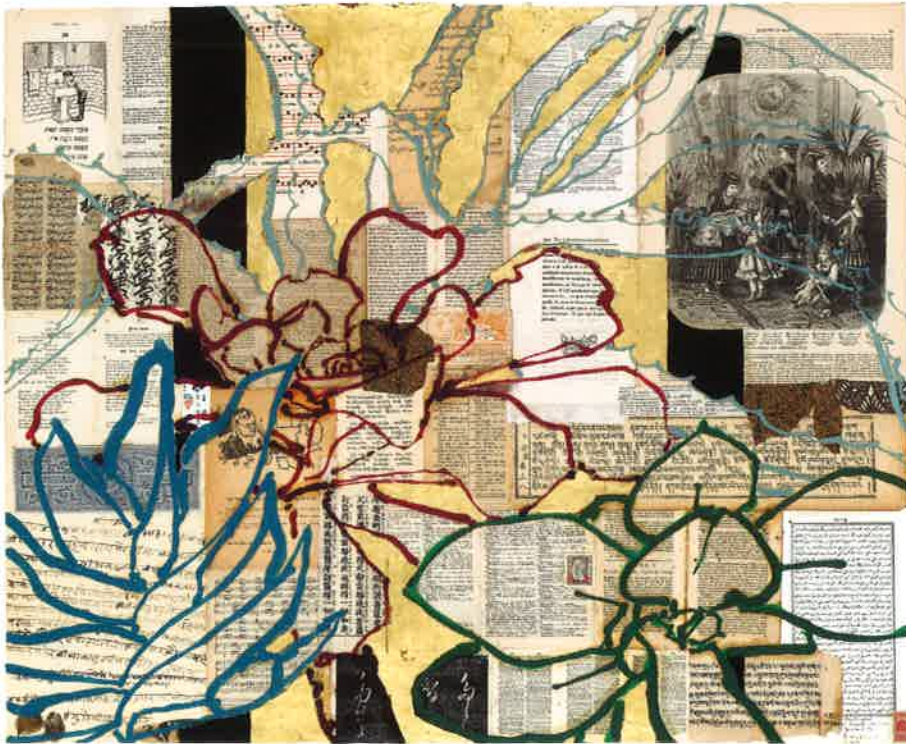
acknowledges. Pointing to a 1934 clipping from an Arabic magazine called *Al Arussa*, published in Cairo, he is delighted to find a photo of Shirley Temple right next to one of the Egyptian chanteuse Oum Koulsoum. “Nothing like contemporary Islamic culture,” he observes with a smile. In search of material for his collages, Kushner has been haunting the Strand Bookstore in downtown Manhattan. “What I’m looking for is sense of the ‘other,’” he explains. “In my studio I have Ad Reinhardt collages for *Art News*, a Japanese woodcut book with kabuki text, and an 1870s dress pattern that looks kind of like a navigational chart. The process is finding something, then something else, high and low

all jammed together.”

Kushner’s tendency toward visual omnivorousness and penchant for patterns were bred in the bone. Growing up in Pasadena, Calif., he would haunt the nearby Huntington Library, spending hours looking at old books and prints and wandering in its gardens. His mother, Dorothy Browdy Kushner, was a painter and printmaker who frequently used flowers as subjects and was her son’s “first teacher, critic, and supporter.” The interest in textiles also goes way back: “My first excitement was about that,” he recalls. “For five years I worked as a carpet restorer. Learning not so much about the physical structure but the design

From top: *Indian Summer—Homage to Bonnard*, 2000, oil, acrylic, glitter, gold leaf, and silver leaf on canvas, 72 x 216 inches; *Tarantella*, 2010, oil, acrylic, gold leaf on plywood, 26 x 56 inches.





Clockwise from top left: *Huntington Library Cactus Garden II*, 2014, oil, acrylic and gold leaf on paper, 30 x 36 inches; *O Aloe*, O Maillol, 2014, oil, acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 72 x 36 inches; *Blue Flounce*, 1974-79, acrylic on cotton and polyester, 93 x 72 inches.



structure of a textile by taking it apart and restoring it is extreme and informative. The way I use verticals and horizontals—does it come out of Cubism? No, it's the warp and weft of textiles."



When he first started exhibiting, at the age of 25, Kushner, along with many of his P&D colleagues, did very well, despite the stated anti-decorative bias of the art world. He had shows at the Whitney, was championed by the critic Amy Goldin, and sold plenty of work through Holly Solomon Gallery. "Then all that disappeared," he says. "So what do you do? Keep on working! Keep it alive, take all these sources, have it be vivid and present in my studio. I'm making the things I want to see." He's having success in the market again now, exhibiting regularly at several galleries

around the country. He also makes print editions of his work. He put them in the hands of a broader base of collectors.

Still, Kushner still feels like an outsider in many ways. "The structure of art world is very tight now," he says. "So much of what you see in galleries now looks like the artist is bending over backward to make things ugly. That's O.K., but that's not the only thing. Actually, a fantastic amount of work right now is decorative without the artist taking responsibility for it. No one wants to say it because of the pejorative associations." But Kushner has his eye on a broader span of time. He feels a kinship with classic-era Japanese artists like Sotatsu and Isson ("a prince," Kushner calls him), Chinese painters like Li Xubai, and collage masters like Kurt Schwitters and Jess. And above all, Matisse, whose leafy cutouts and hot palette are clearly echoed in his work. "I'm so grateful to Matisse," says Kushner. "Without him I'd be nothing." 