

ARTFORUM

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Robert Kushner

DC MOORE GALLERY

Robert Kushner's last exhibition at this gallery, in the winter of 2012–13, was austere by his standards, leaning heavily on a grisaille palette said to have been inspired by the spare black-and-white paintings of Willem de Kooning, so powerfully grouped in the retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York the previous year. Between finishing those works and conceiving the recent show, Kushner visited a painter friend, respected and senior, who told him, "You've been doing the same thing too long. . . . Go more Baroque." (He tells the story in a talk posted on the gallery's website.) Taking the advice to heart, Kushner decided, like so many artists of the Baroque period, to paint cacti. Also an assortment of flowers from a garden in Maine, where he spent the summer of 2013. How a search for the Baroque led to the flowers of New England and the cacti of California (Kushner based his cactus paintings on memories of childhood visits to the Huntington

Gardens in San Marino) is a question worth asking, but a better question may be to what extent these paintings and collages are the departure that Kushner was looking for.

I'm not sure they are; if anything, the relatively somber paintings in the previous show seemed more of a break, in color and mood if not in structure and approach. Even so, I found the current show totally seductive, but then I usually do with Kushner. A perennial painter of flowers, he often works with a literal floridity—an excess, a superfluity, an overheatedness—that is surely what his friend was thinking of when she told him to go for Baroque. The ungainly accumulations of quite different artists such as Dale Chihuly and Nancy Rubins, though, actually seem to me closer to the Baroque than Kushner's work does: Whereas they want to swamp the senses, to overpower, he combines his abundances and indulgences with a fundamental rigor. In the same talk on the website, Kushner flaunts his indifference to Cubism ("I don't really care!") but also his love of the collages of Kurt Schwitters, which, of course, owe Cubism a large debt. In a similar disjunction, Kushner's work, too, harks back to the grids of Cubism and other branches of early modernism: He began most of the works here with a set of horizontal bands, grounds for his renderings of flowers, that he later complemented with vertical ones. Needless to say, as a principal in the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s, Kushner won't take his modernism unadulterated: His bands and bars owe as much to the repeat patterns of textiles and the scrolls and screens of Asian art as to Cubism and the Bauhaus. But either way, these are stable, rooted compositions, whose luxuriance is mostly balanced out.

The luxuriance comes not just in the floral imagery itself—in this show, besides the exotic succulents, workaday but beautiful plants such as phlox, quince, and black-eyed Susans—but in the inventive variance of Kushner's treatment of it. Paints may be thin or solid, wet and foamy or dry, rich or delicate, fluid or flat or glossy, and are offset by panels of gold leaf or occasionally of silvery palladium. Petals may be solid colors or transparent outlines, taking their color from the painted ground behind them, or may carry the color of one such ground into an area where they overlap another. In the standout work, the triptych *Midnight in the Huntington Library Cactus Garden*, 2014, the central cactus form has neither outline nor solidity, being described only by an evenly distributed collection of creamy, starburst-like spikes. Yet this ghostly presence is simultaneously a bulging phallic form—a witty summation, perhaps, of the kind of regeneration Kushner was looking for in going Baroque.

—David Frankel



Robert Kushner,
*Midnight in the
Huntington Library
Cactus Garden*, 2014,
oil, acrylic, and gold
leaf on canvas,
9 × 11'.