

Robert Kushner

DC MOORE

The decorative has long had a bad name in modern art, yet it's been there from the very beginning. "It can only do you good to be forced to decorate," Gauguin wrote to his friend Daniel de Monfried in 1892, while in 1953, Clement Greenberg noted "how intense and profound sheer decoration, or what looks like sheer decoration, can be." Greenberg admired the "large, monumental kind of decorative painting" produced by Bonnard, thought Cézanne wanted to emulate "the decorative masters" Rubens and Veronese, and argued that even Beckmann "realiz[ed] decorative design in spite of [his] inability to think it through consciously," thus "overcom[ing] his lack of technical 'feel' and . . . translat[ing] his art to the heights," ("the heights" being a "transfigured kind of decoration" achieved "by reconstructing the flat picture surface with the very means of its denial").

Robert Kushner is arguably the most significant decorative artist working today. Apart from the early works of Miriam Schapiro and the color Op experiments of Lucas Samaras, no American decorative works have the visual richness of Kushner's paintings *Spring Scatter Summation*, 2005, and *Seattle Summer Meadow*, 2006. Far from being simply adornments for an environment, these works are environments in themselves. If, as Greenberg thought, "traditional Western easel painting . . . subordinates decorative to dramatic effect," Kushner convincingly *integrates* the dramatic and the decorative, revitalizing a treatment of surface that had become stale and routine—not to say shallow—in so-called pattern painting. Each quality—drama and decoration—is given its due without the other being compromised.

Thus, in the works mentioned, the drama of the moving leaves, branches, and flowers—each appearing simultaneously as a luminous patch of color as well as a detail of a natural form—is supported by the ground of the grid, suggesting a harmonic interplay of natural heterogeneity and abstract homogeneity: on the one hand a dramatic illusion of experienced space, on the other a constructed decorative space, ingeniously interpenetrating one another. Thus the square (read: modernist) sections of the grid are sometimes of flat gold leaf, suggestive of the cloth of honor that sets sacred figures in their own divine space, and sometimes of a very painterly green, picking up the colors of the leaves while dispersing their shapes into formlessness. The overall effect is bright, lively, and sparkling (Kushner uses glitter to add to the intensity). There is no fall or winter in Kushner's work, although *Three Philodendron Monstera*, 2007, and *Trudy's Garden*, 2006, do feature some brown and black planes evocative of the mortality implicit in both. But Kushner's flowers bloom forever.

Kushner's art emphasizes nature's beauty, giving the effect of "transcendental emotivity, so grand and precious," which Gauguin's

Robert Kushner,
*Spring Scatter
Summation* (detail),
2005, oil, acrylic,
gold leaf, and glitter
on canvas, ten
panels, 7 x 46'.

supporter the Symbolist critic G. Albert Aurier wrote "makes the soul tremble before the pulsing drama of the abstractions." It is this that a surface that is simultaneously a depth can convey. Mauricio Lazansky, the great printmaker, stated, "Throughout history there have always been two kinds of artists: those who work for beauty and those who use art as a means of revenge for life." It is refreshing to see an art that works



for and celebrates beauty and life—a joyously *biophilic* art, to use Erich Fromm's term. 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