

ROBERT KUSHNER
SILENT OPERAS



March 7 - April 15, 1989

**University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts
State University of New York at Stony Brook**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Most of all, I wish to thank Robert Kushner for sharing his work with the Stony Brook community.

Rhonda Cooper
Director



Goddess, 1986
Acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric
on canvas, 117 x 37"

Photo credit: © Adam Rich

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New York at Stony Brook

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Front cover: *Weeping Angels*, 1988
Oil and metal leaf on canvas, 90 x 110"

ROBERT KUSHNER: *Silent Operas*

"My work," said Robert Kushner, "is a reflection of the way I think... And I think in terms of opposites, of things looking one way, being something else..." (*View*, 1980). The notion that things are not always as they seem is a recurring theme in Kushner's work. That the artist chose to call the current exhibition *Silent Operas* suggests Kushner's fascination with the juxtaposition of opposites.

As a student at the University of California at San Diego, Robert Kushner was a sculptor with a strong interest in working with suspended objects. After an early series of fur and feather polyurethane clouds suspended by strings, Kushner turned to the creation of multi-media works on fabric. His current work was foreshadowed by one of these early pieces, which featured the faces of angels applied with glitter on chiffon scarves. Moving to New York in 1970, Kushner continued to be fascinated with fabric, particularly in found garments that he could alter. In the early 1970's he made a series of costume/sculptures of leather, fur, and found objects that he incorporated into performances. At that time, his interest in decoration was to make use of something that was considered shocking in its unacceptability.

Kushner was profoundly affected by a trip to Iran in 1974. Iranian architecture, rugs, tiles, and clothing, with their intricate and masterful patterns, inspired Kushner to create work that was even more colorful, patterned, and decorative than it had ever been before.

He showed these first "decorative" paintings on fabric in a one-person exhibition at Holly Solomon's gallery in SoHo. The Holly Solomon Gallery became a center for a number of artists in the new Decorative movement, including Valerie Jaudon, Kim MacConnel, and Robert Zakanitch, as well as Robert Kushner. Along with many others, these artists were instrumental in defining and promoting this new style of art called "pattern painting." As pattern painting was incorporated into the mainstream, it became increasingly acceptable to recognize the decorative impulse as a legitimate form of artistic expression. Despite the advances made by Kushner and his colleagues, however, many critics continue to view decoration as somehow less profound, less intellectually valid, and more "artsy-craftsy" than so-called "high art."

Firm in his belief that art can be both decorative and meaningful, Robert Kushner set out to test how far an artist can go with prettiness, pattern, and repetition. His work forces the viewer to confront this fundamental question. Teetering on the very edge of gaudiness, the body of work that Kushner has created is undeniably decorative, but it is at the same time clearly something very much more.

The paintings Kushner executed between 1975 and 1977, often in the shape of a *chador*, the traditional floor-length Moslem veil for women, were painted with floral and abstract designs. Subsequent works included animals, faces, and human forms. The influence of Henri Matisse, with whom Kushner readily admits his obsession, is clear in these works: the use of pure color and collage, the juxtaposition of diverse patterns, the figurative line drawings, the arabesques, and the interest in floral motifs. While Matisse, too, was inspired by Islamic art, Kushner plays on a distinctive sort of dichotomy in which things are not as they seem. Certainly, elements in Kushner's paintings point to Matisse, but his collages of patterned fabrics, intentionally gaudy and outrageous, are very different in feeling and intent from the work of Matisse. There is a stridency to Kushner's patterns that keep them from imparting the serenity conveyed by the paintings of Matisse. While Matisse used his colors for their sensual and decorative value, Kushner despises "sweetness" and insists that decoration doesn't have to be soothing or pretty.

The work of Robert Kushner clearly transcends the sum of his early influences. Traveling to India, he developed an interest in the use of sari cloth and the way saturated color abounds on the streets of India. His interests in Eastern religions and philosophies and in the art of the Far East is abundantly reflected in his work. In addition to using kimono fabrics, Kushner was influenced by the Japanese way of juxtaposing diverse patterns, as evidenced by Japanese textiles and woodblock prints. His interest in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy and literati painting is reflected in the fluidity of his line and the typically literati avoidance of slickness. The ultimate restraint, intentionally stopping at the edge of technical perfection, can be attributed both to the lessons Kushner learned from studying the great literati masters and to his personal practice of meditation.

Kushner's recent subject matter reflects his profound and long-standing appreciation of classical mythology. After reading an illustrated book entitled *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths* by Edgar and Indri d'Aulaire to his son in 1984, Kushner began to incorporate this iconography into his paintings. Tired of painting neutral semi-reclining nudes, he turned to classical mythology as a new, more emotionally charged source of subject matter. *Danae*, *Hylas*, *Goddess*, and *Apollo and Artemis*, all of which are included in this exhibition, were painted in late 1985 and 1986. These large fabric hangings (with the exception of *Goddess*) were based on Greek mythology. Artemis, the virgin goddess of the moon, was the daughter of Zeus and the twin of Apollo, god of the sun. Like her brother, the slender and athletic Artemis reflects the ideals of youth and beauty. Brother and sister, sun and moon, libertine and chaste: Kushner again suggest the *yin-yang* quality of the universe, this time as expressed in Greek mythology.

Danae was imprisoned in a brass tower by her father, Acrisius, because of a prophecy that her offspring would kill him. Danae is impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold and gives birth to a son, Perseus. When Acrisius locks Danae and Perseus in a chest and throws them into the sea, Perseus escapes and fulfills the prophecy. In the painting, Danae stands upright, looking apprehensive, her body a collage of Japanese fabric with stylized wavy lines and flowers to represent the waves of the sea. Gold metallic fragments suggest the shower of gold.

Hylas, a favorite male companion of Hercules, was known for his youth and beauty. While on the expedition of the Argonauts, Hylas was pulled into a spring by water nymphs enchanted by his beauty, never to be found again. Kushner shows him half-absorbed by a checkerboard fabric covered with spirals. The spiral forms, reminiscent of ancient Cretan pottery, serve as a symbol of the water that consumed Hylas as he nonchalantly displays his idealized body. Decorative motifs, used as symbols, are first understood as patterning but, on another level, support the narrative and, along with the colors, the emotional impact of the paintings. This intertwining of iconography and decoration, of paint and fabric, is a paradoxical comment by Kushner on the nature of painting.

Most of the paintings in this group are double-sided. Kushner's interest in visual puns led him to create paintings that could be viewed in the round like sculpture. Again, what is first perceived is not always a reflection of reality.

The next group of paintings, also from 1986, are larger works that, in their depiction of angels and earthly love, contrast the earthly and the celestial—a duality of the cosmos. The three-part cycle of *Sirocco*, *Love Crowning the Lovers*, and *Fallen Angels*, also follows the theme of the Greek myths, this time by focusing on idealized immortal beings.

In *Sirocco*, two unclothed figures lean back to back, one holding ribbons that form a protective circle around them. The title refers to a hot, oppressive, dust-laden wind that originates in the deserts of North Africa and blows as far as Italy and nearby Mediterranean areas. The cacophony of patterned fabrics—including fragments of saris, kimonos, floral brocades, and metallic cloth—along with the look of languor on the woman's face, adds to the unease of the scene. The close proximity of the figures and the physical support that the man offers the woman again echo the emotionality that Kushner brings to these paintings.

In *Love Crowning the Lovers*, which is 15 feet wide, the colors are neither soothing nor harmonious. The collage elements are more distinct, allowing geometric shapes to overlay the lovers and the angelic personification of love. The gold palmette border at the top, reminiscent of a stage curtain, is decorated with a stylized flower design of the American mid-west and echoes the gold leaf of the laurel crown. The large rectangle of shiny gray bonded mylar is beautifully played against the gold leaf and the delicate obi patterns at the bottom and the kitsch rose in the upper left corner.

Fallen Angels, the largest of the three (9'8" high by 18'2" wide) and the most violent, portrays two angels thrown head-first toward the ground. Stylized cloud motifs, in heavenly blue and royal purples, cover the fallen angels. To their left, in a thunderbolt pattern, is their expeller, while above is a beautiful silk brocade appliqué on velvet of floral motifs from an ecclesiastical hanging. The colors chosen for the painting, acid oranges and yellows, forest greens and lavenders, played against the serene browns and golds of the



Sirocco, 1986
Acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric
on canvas, 116 x 174"

brocade and the slate gray ground, add a strong emotional intensity while denying the painting as a whole of "prettiness" or a sense of regularity. The fall ends the cycle, but like Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and procreation, it also brings about its regeneration.

Around the same time that Kushner became intrigued with Greek mythology, he began looking at the mystical paintings of Gustave Moreau, the lyrical, dream-like paintings of Odilon Redon, and the allegorical murals of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. These influences added still another cultural layer to Kushner's work, that of 19th century French art with its classical, romantic, realistic, and Symbolist styles. The influence of such early twentieth century artists as Bonnard, Gris, Leger, and Picasso, as well as Matisse, point to Kushner's continued interest in the art of France.

The most recent paintings in the exhibition, *Judith and Holofernes* and *Weeping Angels*, both of 1988, represent a departure in format. The use of the rectangular stretched canvas, used here by Kushner for the first time, has led to his decision not to work with hanging fabric at all and to focus even more closely on his subject matter. The juxtaposed areas of sensual color and pattern in *Judith and Holofernes* are larger and appear fully realized and distinctly Japanese. The use of the random gold-leaf squares flecked in the upper left corner is reminiscent of the backgrounds of

Japanese screen paintings and handmade sutra papers. The subject, however, is taken from the Old Testament story of Judith, the Jewish heroine who saves her people from the Assyrians by decapitating Holofernes. The lush colors and the relative calm of the background act as a counterpoint to the subject and render it all the more horrifying.

In *Weeping Angels*, even the patterned collaging of the surface is gone as two androgynous kneeling figures are shown in front of large, nearly undifferentiated areas of colors. The colors are less jarring, and the focus of attention is clearly on the figures. The embrace is one of comfort as the angels weep over the plight of humanity.

Kushner's use of color blocks and fabrics, interwoven over, under, and around the figures, adds an interesting play on negative and positive space as background and foreground shift. This interweaving of opposites represents the merging of the dual forces of the universe and reflects Kushner's theme of things not being what they seem. Kushner seems to be reminding us that duality is part of the human condition—indeed, that it is the way of the cosmos—and that the "dusty world" of the Buddhists needs to be transcended after all.

Rhonda Cooper

ROBERT KUSHNER

Born 1949, Pasadena, California

EDUCATION

1971 BA with honors, University of California
at San Diego

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1988 Michael Lord Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
lanetti-Lanzoni Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1987 Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Robert Kushner: New Bronze Sculpture"
Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia
Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; traveled to J.B. Speed Museum,
Louisville, Kentucky and Aspen Museum of Art, Aspen,
Colorado
- 1986 Rugg Road, Boston, Massachusetts
Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Köln, Germany
- 1985 Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York
Galleria Capricorni, Venice, Italy
Mayor Gallery, London, England
Crown Point Press, New York, New York
- 1984 McIntosh/Drysdale Gallery, Houston, Texas
Brentwood Gallery, St. Louis, Missouri,
"Robert Kushner: Mixed Media on Fabric and Paper"
Galleria Giulia, Rome, Italy
Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York,
June 1984, Lobby Installation
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York,
"Paintings on Paper"
- 1983 Dart Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York
- 1982 Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Domestica Exotica"
Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne, West Germany
University of Colorado Art Gallery, Boulder, Colorado
American Graffiti Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands,
"Grafiek"
Studio Marconi, Milan, Italy, "Souvenirs"
The Hellen Lindhurst Gallery, University of Southern
California, Los Angeles, California,
"Robert Kushner at USC"
Castelli-Goodman-Solomin, East Hampton, New York
- 1981 The Mayor Gallery, London, England,
"New Works"
Galerie Bischofberger, Zurich, Switzerland
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Some Recent Acquaintances"
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Dreams and Visions"
Asher/Faure Gallery, Los Angeles, California
Akira Ieda Gallery, Nagoya, Japan
Barbara Gladstone Editions, New York, New York,
"The Question, The Answer, Another Question"
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"The Cupid Prints"
- 1980 Dart Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
- 1979 Daniel Templon Gallery, New York, New York,
"The Dance, The Kiss"
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York
- 1978 Lunn Gallery/Graphics International, Ltd., Washington, D.C.,
"Mere Decoration"
The Mayor Gallery, London, England

- 1977 Thorpe Intermedia Gallery, Sparkill, New York
Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,
"One Size Fits All"
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Paper and Cloth"
- 1976 Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Persian Line Part II"
- 1975 Rasdall Gallery, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky,
"Recent Works"
Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Tie and Pie Boutique"
- 1971 Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego, California,
"Costumes for Moving Bodies"

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 Groninger Museum, The Netherlands,
"Americana"
The Fabric Workshop, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,
"The Fabric Workshop: A Decade of Pattern"
The Holly Solomon Gallery, New York, New York,
"Early Concepts of the Last Decade"
- 1986 Whitney Museum of American Arts, Fairfield, Connecticut,
"Connecticut Collects: American Art Since 1960"
Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton, Florida,
"Homeworks/Public Works"
The Queens Museum, Flushing, New York,
"After Matisse"
Organized by MOMA/Art Advisory, New York, New York,
"Gold"
Organized by MOMA/Art Advisory, New York, New York,
"Figuration"
Organized by MOMA/Art Advisory, New York, New York,
"Made in India"
University of North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, 22nd
Weatherspoon Annual Exhibition, "Art on Paper 1986"
International Contemporary Art Fair, Los Angeles, California,
"ICAF"
- 1985 Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York,
"A New Beginning"
Grey Art Gallery, New York University, New York, New York,
"Precious: An American Cottage Industry of the Eighties"
The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York,
"Biennial"
Edward Totah Gallery, London, England, "Seven Artists
from New York"



Apollo and Artemis, 1985-86
Acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric
on canvas, 117 x 98"

PREVIOUS EXHIBITIONS AT THE ART GALLERY

- 1975** FACULTY EXHIBITION
1976 MICHELLE STUART
 RECENT DRAWINGS (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION OF
 ARTS EXHIBITION)
 SALVATORE ROMANO
1977 MEL PEKARSKY
 JUDITH BERNSTEIN
 HERBERT BAYER (AN AMERICAN FEDERATION
 OF ARTS EXHIBITION)
1978 LEON GOLUB
 WOMEN ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK
 JANET FISH
 ROSEMARY MAYER
 THE SISTER CHAPEL
1979 SHIRLEY GORELICK
 ALAN SONFIST
 HOWARDENA PINDELL
 ROY LICHTENSTEIN
1980 BENNY ANDREWS
 ALEX KATZ
 EIGHT FROM NEW YORK
 ARTISTS FROM QUEENS
 OTTO PIENE
 STONY BROOK 11, THE STUDIO FACULTY
1981 ALICE NEEL
 55 MERCER: 10 SCULPTORS
 JOHN LITTLE
 IRA JOEL HABER
 LEON POLK SMITH
1982 FOUR SCULPTORS
 CECILE ABISH
 JACK YOUNGERMAN
 ALAN SHIELDS
 THE STONY BROOK ALUMNI INVITATIONAL
 ANN McCOY
1983 THE WAR SHOW
 CERAMIC DIRECTIONS: A CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW
 CINDY SHERMAN
 THE FACULTY SHOW
1984 BERNARD APTEKAR: ART AND POLITICS
 ERIC STALLER: LIGHT YEARS
 NORMAN BLUHM: SEVEN FROM THE SEVENTIES
 EDWARD COUNTEY 1921-1984
 CARL ANDRE: SCULPTURE
1985 LEWIS HINE IN EUROPE: 1918-1919
 FRANCESC TORRES: PATHS OF GLORY
 HOMAGE TO BOLOTOWSKY: 1935-1981
 FREEDOM WITHIN: PAINTINGS BY JUAN SANCHEZ/
 INSTALLATION BY ALFREDO JAAR
 ABSTRACT PAINTING REDEFINED
1986 KLEEGER: METAL SCULPTURE
 TOBY BUONAGURIO: SELECTED WORKS
 YANG YEN-PING AND ZENG SHAN-QING
 EIGHT URBAN PAINTERS: CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS
 OF THE EAST VILLAGE
 TV: THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
 WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT
1987 HANS BREDER: ARCHETYPAL DIAGRAMS
 MICHAEL SINGER: RITUAL SERIES RETELLINGS
 JUDITH DOLNICK/ROBERT NATKIN
 MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE: THE HUMANITARIAN VISION
 MEL ALEXENBERG: COMPUTER ANGELS
 STEINA AND WOODY VASULKA: THE WEST
1988 THE FACULTY SHOW '88
 ROBERT WHITE: SELECTED WORKS 1947-1988
 LEE KRASNER: PAINTINGS 1956-1984
 EDGAR BUONAGURIO: PERMUTATION AND EVOLUTION
 1974-1988
 JOAN SNYDER COLLECTS JOAN SNYDER
1989 THE M.F.A. SHOW '89



Judith and Holofernes, 1988
 Oil and collage on canvas,
 95½ x 115"

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Works are listed in chronological order. All dimensions are given as height preceding width. All works are lent courtesy of Holly Solomon Gallery, New York City.

1. *Danaë*, 1986, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 117 x 60"
2. *Hylas*, 1986, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 117 x 61"
3. *Goddess*, 1986, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 117 x 37"
4. *Apollo and Artemis*, 1985-86, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 117 x 98"
5. *Fallen Angels*, 1986, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 114 x 225"
6. *Love Crowning the Lovers*, 1986, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 115 x 172"
7. *Sirocco*, 1986, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 116 x 174"
8. *Artemis*, 1987, acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric on canvas, 96 x 96"
9. *Judith and Holofernes*, 1988, oil and collage on canvas, 95½ x 115"
10. *Weeping Angels*, 1988, oil and metal leaf on canvas, 90 x 110"



Danaë, 1986
Acrylic, metal leaf, and fabric
on canvas, 117 x 60"