

Healing Hurt Pages: Robert Kushner's Scriptorium / artcritical

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Robert Kushner: Wildflower Convocation at DC Moore Gallery

February 3 to March 12, 2011

525 West 22 Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

New York City, (212) 247-2111

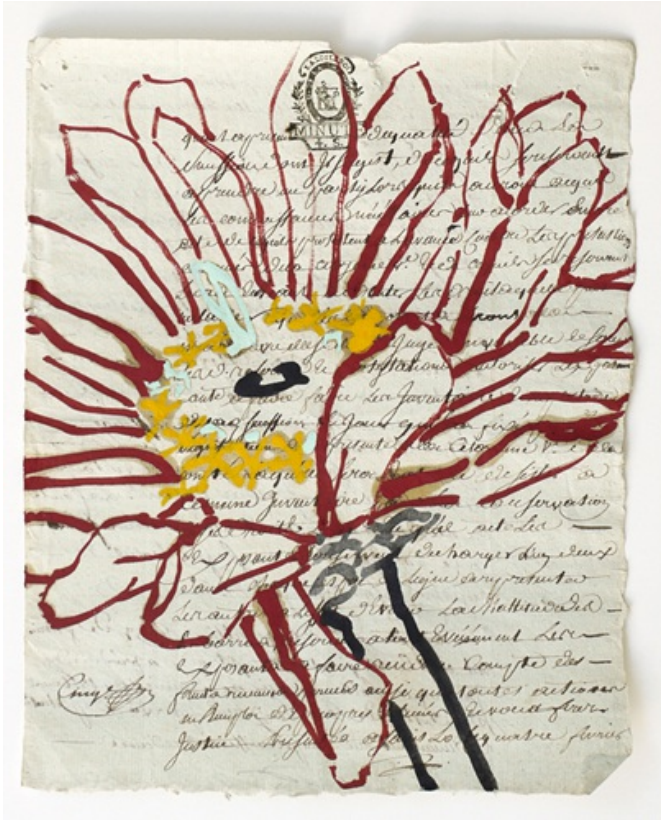


Robert Kushner, *Scriptorium: Devout Exercises of the Heart*, 2010. From a set of drawings on antique book pages, sizes variable. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery

In January, DC Moore Gallery relocated from Fifth Avenue to more spacious premises in way trendier Chelsea. This was a savvy move on the part of the gallery's principal, Bridget Moore: the new galleries, that look to be twice as big as the former gallery with ceilings twice as high, affords a grand and serious space. Six recent paintings by Robert Kushner and a presentation of his amazing "Scriptorium" series, comprising hundreds of renderings of blossoms, plants and leaves inscribed on the pages of antique books, inaugurates the new space, along with a smaller show of Romare Bearden collages in the project room. Kushner's Scriptorium has occupied the artist's complete attention for more than a year. It only serves to confirm me as a deep admirer of an under-celebrated artist often penalized for his devotion to beauty.

"Scriptorium: Devout Exercises from the Heart" takes its title from the room in medieval monasteries where monks copied out books by hand. The work provides compelling evidence that Kushner, for whom drawing is a spiritual as well as an artistic discipline, has become one of our most accomplished as well as original draftsmen. His

study and practice of Chinese brush painting and Japanese calligraphy and his extensive, dedicated, seasonal observations of nature underlie the notable finesse of this of this delicate yet colossal work. Hundreds of individual drawings and paintings are pinned simply to the wall with dressmaker pins. Never installed in the same way twice, this flexible tour de force of extremely varied approaches to depicting flowers and plants marries the diversity of the botanical world to antique artifacts of world literature. The latter is represented by various pages from discarded and damaged books and manuscript pages—often foxed or even charred on the edges—retrieved from French Christmas poems, pages of Noh plays old, handwritten letters and other such sources.



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On each sheet a flower, a branch or a leaf reanimates lost texts and forgotten images. Healing the hurt pages, Kushner reminds us that nature remains the foundation of beauty. Each of the sheets is being sold separately—at reasonable enough prices, in my opinion, to allow a collector to reassemble a smaller version of this installation of their own choosing.

On the other walls, six large, recent paintings are unified through pellucid, melting backgrounds of cerulean blue, sometimes buttressed with panels of gold leaf or oxidized copper leaf. Each is a painting of different seasonal wild flowers. Observed from June through October, the arrangements seems to float against a

perfect summer sky. From Hawkweed to Queen Anne's Lace, Kushner has given his plants a gaiety and grandeur that such humble wildflowers and weeds are usually not awarded. Their radiance defied the cold grey light of a season of ice and snow.

Alexandra Anderson-Spivy is a critic who lives and works in Manhattan. She wrote the monograph, *Robert Kushner: Gardens of Earthly Delight*, published by Hudson Hills Press (1997).



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