

Overview

Robert Kushner

During camellia blooming season in 1993 and 1994, Robert Kushner was in San Francisco. He has lived in New York for more than twenty years, but grew up in Southern California, where he was born in 1949. Every year in February, he told me, he misses the camellias. "You never see them in New York, since the blooms are too fragile to travel."

Kushner's February, 1993, trip to San Francisco was for an exhibition of his paintings, and wasn't intended for printmaking. But he became so excited about the camellias blooming in Golden Gate Park that he stopped by Crown Point and picked up some copper plates, which he took to the park to draw on. Later we etched the plates and sent him proofs. When he came to work at Crown Point a year later, by coincidence, the camellias were blooming again. *Camellia White*, is one of three relatively small, lush and colorful etchings which celebrate them.

While he was working on the camellias, Kushner also did a very large etching which he titled *May*. Since it was too large for our press bed, we printed it on two sheets of paper, which are shown together as a tall, narrow print. Two full-flowering irises with a white, skirt-like peony below them seem to be almost bursting with the pleasure of impending summer.

Kushner's drawing style is fresh and spontaneous, but he spends a lot of time planning and reworking images.

Our printers love to work with him, partly because of his wit and enthusiasm, and partly because he thinks things through and delights in economy of means. Eight plates were used to print *May* — five in the top half, three in the bottom — but it's an image that easily could have used more if the artist hadn't thought about the organization. Organizing is natural to Kushner, because he always structures his work, often by using repetition and symmetry.

The underpinnings of Kushner's art are in the 1970's, a time when Minimal artists talked about every form, and Conceptual artists used

every material imaginable to make art. "Here we are in 1980, struggling to maintain the idea of the avant-garde, but with nowhere else to go," Kushner said in the first year he first worked at Crown Point. "It just seems much more comfortable to say, Well, I don't care."

But Kushner couldn't help caring about form and materials. What he rejected was the idea that originality, or newness, was the main ingredient of good art. Kushner didn't want to reject the past. He wanted to work traditionally, using forms which have been used through history. "Decoration" was taboo in avant-garde art in the seventies, so Kushner decided to use it. He became a theoretician for the art movement called "Patterning and Decoration." But he has outlasted the movement. His art comes out of his temperament and his experiences.

"Sometimes I think I was born to paint," he told an interviewer. "My mother is a painter and I have two aunts who are artists. I was always attracted to the freedom and the intellectual thrill of artistic pursuit." He visited New York City for

works, which exist in almost any Muslim city, I really became aware of how intelligent and uplifting decoration can be."

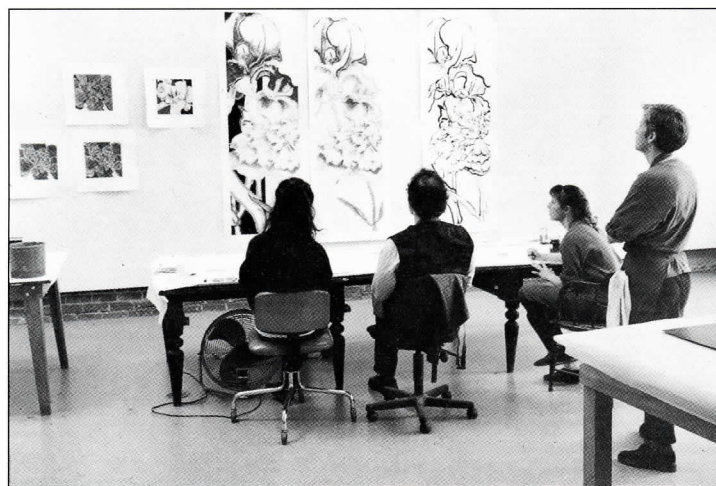
In the months preceding the trip, Kushner had been doing a great deal of drawing, trying, he says, to teach himself to draw. He had taken only one drawing course in college. "You weren't supposed to draw; drawing was arty, you know. You were supposed to do very formal things, and things that didn't require the artist's hand at all." After 1975, drawing became the main emphasis of Kushner's art. His paintings depend on the drawing in them.

In 1980, at the time of our first project together, Kushner was, as he said, looking at the decorative content of modern painting, particularly that of Matisse. In the etching studio, he set out to learn all the platemaking processes right away. To do this, he made a portfolio of twenty small black and white prints called *The Joy of Ornament*, in which he used a lot of different etching techniques to draw patterned images of fruits, flowers, leaves, birds and profiles of people.

At Crown Point we have worked with Kushner approximately every other year since 1980, so through the prints we can track his style as it changed and grew. He spoke about style to Robin White when she interviewed him for *View*: "Just look back at pictures of yourself ten years ago, when you felt perfectly normal. Now, you think you looked strange! You think, How could I have dressed like that, or worn my hair like that?" Contrast *Climbing Roses*, an etching of flowers from *The Joy of Ornament*, with *May*, done fourteen years later, and you'll see what he means. *The Joy of Ornament* work seems a little stilted compared to the flowers in *May*. But the later work clearly continues the earlier.

When Kushner participated in our Japan program, and we traveled together, I learned something about taste and style from a game we played. Any number can play this game, the more the better. Looking in a store window, at a signal, everyone points to the item he or she thinks is the best (or sometimes, by agreement, the worst). Occasionally we would all choose the same thing, but usually not. We'd get into heated discussions defending our choices. In the window of a Kyoto lighting store, for instance, Kushner by-passed the paper lanterns and tasteful cylinders to choose as best a gargantuan chandelier, dripping crystals. "I love things that are overdone," he explained, to our laughter, then identified details in the chandelier that dated it and showed the workmanship.

"An art of happiness? Preposterous! Necessarily insignificant today. How can one



Robert Kushner in the San Francisco studio with printers and proofs of *May*, 1994.

the first time in 1970, the year before he graduated from the University of California, San Diego. Two years later, he moved permanently to New York.

In 1974, Kushner traveled to Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. Before the trip, he was already involved in decorative ideas, mainly making costumed Performance Art and experimental decorative collages. But, he says, after his trip to the Near East, his attitude changed dramatically. "I was making decoration because you weren't supposed to," he says. "Then, on this trip, seeing incredible works of genius, really master-

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Robert Kushner

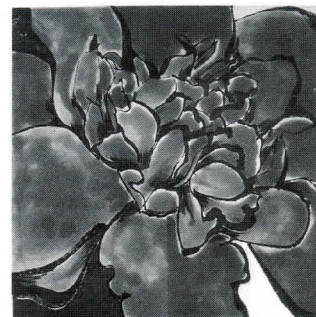
Selected Works



Robert Kushner, *May*, 1994, sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with aquatint, paper size (diptych): 85 x 32½"; image size: 75 x 24½", edition: 35.



Robert Kushner, *Camellia Pink*, 1994, sugar lift, spit bite, and soap ground aquatints with aquatint, paper size: 21 x 20"; image size: 12 x 12", edition 35.



Robert Kushner, *Camellia Red*, 1994, sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with aquatint and drypoint, paper size: 21 x 20"; image size: 12 x 12", edition 35.



Robert Kushner, *Camellia White*, 1994, sugar lift, spit bite, and soap ground aquatints with aquatint, paper size: 30¼ x 28½"; image size: 19½ x 19½", edition 35.

(Kushner continued from front cover)

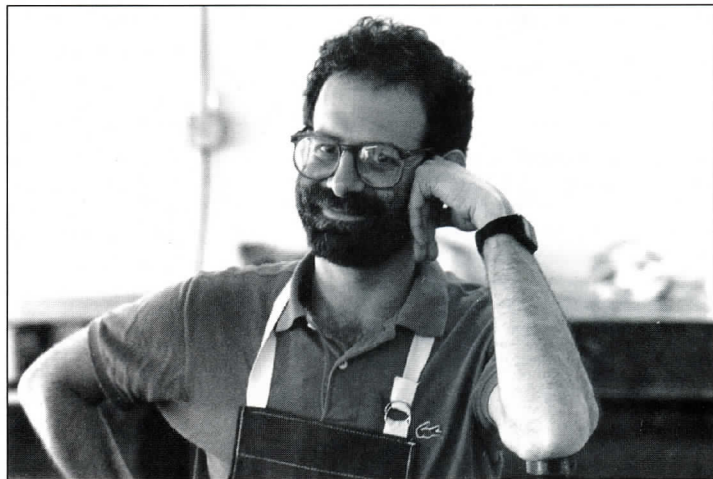
dare be happy, or produce art that dares make us happy, in such a wretched world?" critic Donald Kuspit wrote about Kushner's art in 1987. Kuspit went on to say Kushner's work was such a pleasure and a challenge to him that he was "forced to rethink my sense of what is at stake in modern art; in effect to re-evaluate it."

"I think there's a commonly held misconception that if you make things that are about happiness or joy, it's mindless or dumb," Kushner has said. "And that certainly couldn't be further from the truth. Witness Matisse; witness, at his best, Dufy; at his most optimistic, Gauguin; many, many Islamic artists and many Asian artists."

In 1991, Charles Hagan wrote in the *New York Times* about Kushner's "luscious images" and an "apparently effortless beauty" which he says is a "characteristic these works share with much Asian art." But Kushner's work doesn't look Asian. It could only have been done by Robert Kushner, who takes life seriously, and loves every minute of it.

—Kathan Brown

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Robert Kushner in Crown Point Press Oakland studio, 1982.



Robert Kushner, *Red Anemone*, 1989, watercolor woodcut on silk mounted on rag paper, paper size: 41 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 16 $\frac{5}{16}$ "; image size: 33 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{16}$ ", edition 75.



Robert Kushner, *Climbing Roses* from *The Joy of Ornament*, 1980, hard ground with flat bite and aquatint, paper size: 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 6"; image size: 9 x 4", edition 35.



Robert Kushner, *Black Jade*, 1989, watercolor woodcut on silk mounted on rag paper, paper size: 38 x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ "; image size: 38 x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", edition 35.

Chinese Woodblock Printing and Li Lin Lee's *Lucky Life*

Liulichan is a narrow street in the center of Beijing. Cars are prohibited, so you must make your way down Liulichan on foot. There are red and green painted wooden carved balconies, and wide, sparsely furnished interiors filled with glass-enclosed cases and paper covered boxes. Members of the aristocracy once shopped here for paper, brushes and ink to use in the art and writing which occupied a great deal of their time. The shops still sell those goods, but Chinese citizens no longer buy. The customers are mostly from Japan or Taiwan, with a Westerner appearing now and then.

On Liulichan, the venerable publishing company, Rong Bao Zhai, occupies two buildings, the first for its book publishing and offset printing, the second for its art gallery and woodcut printing workshop. Soren Edgren, who is a scholar with a special interest in Chinese printing, introduced Crown Point Press to Rong Bao Zhai, and on my first visit, in 1987, I followed him up a long, dark flight of cement stairs, and a door at the top was flung open. I blinked my eyes and was transported to another age.

We faced a long room in front of a wall of narrow windows from which light streamed in palpable rays. Silhouetted against the window were more than a dozen people at tables piled with small irregular pieces of wood and rectangular stacks of paper. The people sat still, only their arms moving, lifting sheets of paper sideways, making fluttering motions. As my eyes adjusted after being in the dark corridor, I saw potted plants, thermos pitchers and little ceramic dishes, some full of colors. Almost everyone was wearing blue clothes. I realized the rays of light were visible because the whole room was filled with mist coming from a pipe running along the ceiling.

The water mist, which is released periodically, is to keep the room always at the same humidity, since paper takes on the moisture of its surroundings. Because the ink is water-based and is absorbed into the paper, it won't look the same from one printing session to the next unless the paper is reliably always the same dampness. And since paper expands and contracts as it becomes damper or dryer, controlling the room's moisture makes accurate registration possible.

The blocks are flat little hunks of pear wood which still look to me like parts of trees. Each block holds part of an image, and the printer assembles a number of them side by side and fastens them to the table-top with wax. The short Chinese name for block printing, *douban*, literally means "assembled blocks." The other name is *muban shuiyin*, woodblock water print.

The printing techniques used here were developed during what Edgren called China's golden age of printing, the Sung Dynasty, which lasted from 960 to 1279 A.D. Woodblock printing was invented in China and is the oldest printing method in the world. It has been in continuous use since around 600 A.D. Though working in China is difficult for us, I am fascinated not only by the beauty of the prints, but also by the idea of working with a process which has been practised in the same way for more than a thousand years.

In 1989, when Chicago artist Li Lin Lee was preparing to travel to Beijing to participate in Crown Point's woodcut project, he mentioned to his mother the name of the shop where he would work. "When I was a little girl," she told him, "I used to go with my father to Rong Bao Zhai to buy paper for his calligraphy." Brian Shure, the Crown Point printer who accompanied Lee on the trip, remembers that on their visit to the Forbidden City, Lee remarked that his mother had once lived within those walls.

Lee's maternal grandfather, Yuan Shikai, in 1911 was elected China's first premier, leader of a republic replacing the last dynasty, the Qing. In 1915, however, Yuan Shikai tried to reinstitute elements of Confucian beliefs and, at the Temple of Heaven, made himself the center of ancient ceremonies once performed by the emperor. On January 1, 1916 he was declared emperor by the state assembly, but he was discredited by public outcry and in March canceled the monarchy. Three months later he died of illness.

Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1955. His father, who was a

physician, was imprisoned in Indonesia for political reasons, then exiled. "We traveled throughout Southeast Asia before settling in Hong Kong, where my father became a Christian evangelist," Lee says. "He was interested in the body. And then he began studying philosophy, which is the mind. And finally he became interested in the spiritual." The family came to the United States in 1962, where the senior Lee studied at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Lee recalls that throughout his childhood his father, whose classical Chinese education had included painting and calligraphy, conducted family painting sessions. "My father would have us painting all around. Although he was very serious when we were painting and demanded that we be likewise, in the end he would always say, 'It's just painting.' That stayed with me. When you come from a background of being on the run, the world seems like such a frightening place. 'It's just painting,' was important. We always sensed the world as potentially dangerous. Even coming to this country—this country didn't seem like a haven of peace and stability to us. It seemed unstable. When we first moved here we lived in a ghetto. We were very poor. Then we moved to a blue-collar town of coal miners, near Pittsburgh. During the Viet Nam War things were not stable. There were hostilities. Our family painting sessions were a way to stay close to each other. And so the act of painting was much more important than the painting itself. 'It's just painting,' my father said."

Lee began seriously painting in 1986 after studying biochemistry at the University of Pittsburgh. He paints on wood panels with household spray enamel. "Since the paints come in standard colors and premixing is impossible, I found that spraying different colors in layers and then sanding them produced an endless variety of color and hue," he wrote in a statement for one of his regular exhibitions at the E.M. Donahue Gallery in New York. "I chose wood as the surface to paint on for its rigidity and appearance. All the shapes are painted through a basic stenciling technique."

Stencils are traditionally used in Chinese folk art, to make New Year's greetings, for example. When I asked Lee to participate in our woodcut program in China, he hadn't ever done watercolors, and was uncertain if he could be successful without being able to spray and sand. Then he remembered his father used sponges to ink through stencils, and that was how he



Li Lin Lee, *Lucky Life*, 1989, watercolor woodcut on silk mounted on rag paper, paper size: 30 3/4" X 29 3/4"; image size: 23 3/4" x 23 3/4", edition 35.

(Chinese Wood Block Printing continued from page 4)

prepared the maquettes for the first woodcuts we produced. About *In the Rainy Season*, illustrated below, he says, "Where I was born in Indonesia, there was a lot of rain," Lee says. "And in Hong Kong, where we lived later, there was a monsoon season. Rain was a big part of my childhood and I love the rain."

His paintings, Lee says, usually have a simple starting point like loving the rain. "When I put an image down, it looks incredibly boring to me. It's not something I sat down with and thought about and tried to come up with a very polished image with rhetoric or philosophy behind it. The actual image, I think, is probably just a residue of the experience of working on the painting."

"The basic idea of what I am trying to say is that you're pretty much at the mercy of whatever happens. I always feel like I'm waiting. That's the feeling I get when I'm working. There's a lot of impatience, and I finally put a form down. It's awful! But maybe divine awfulness! It's close to my experiences when I was young and I would pray. I would pray for hours. I don't think any six year old kid does that anymore. But I would spend hours praying and the prayer always felt like I was waiting and waiting. For what?"

Critic Jed Perl in a 1989 *Vogue* Magazine article mentions Lee as connected to "the new biomorphicists, who expect developments to be loopy and circuitous." Perl sees in art "at the end of the eighties, a widespread

desire to re-embrace — without irony — lost forms of transcendence and spirituality."

Lee went to China for the first time in November, 1989, to work on the Crown Point woodcuts. "Although I had never been there," he told interviewer Karin Victoria for *View*, "Over and over my parents had talked about it. So, arriving there, it felt like I had been before. I recognized it. But of course what I was recognizing were my fantasies for years. I pretty accurately dreamed up what it was like, what the feeling was like."

"By feeling, you mean not just the physical surroundings?" Victoria asks Lee.

"The feeling is the mood, the smell, the light. People say your homeland is inside you. That's maybe what I was feeling. I felt like I was returning."

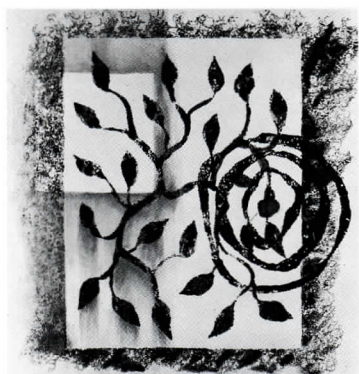
"Was that comforting?"

"No, it wasn't comforting at all. In fact, I felt sad. I could see that so much was lost."

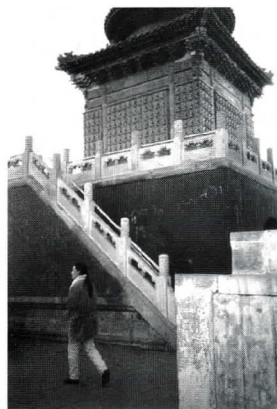
"He was shaken at first by the fact that he felt so American in China," remembers Shure, our Crown Point printer who traveled with Lee. "He said he had always imagined China as his homeland, but in fact, China turned out to be the only place he had ever felt completely American."

Shure recounts an afternoon walk he and Lee took in a Beijing neighborhood near Tiananmen Square. "We could see scraps of people's

(continued on page 6)



Li Lin Lee, *In the Rainy Season*, 1989, watercolor woodcut on silk mounted on rag paper, paper size: 23 x 21½"; image size: 13 x 12½", edition 25.



Li Lin Lee at the Temple of Heaven, Beijing, 1989.



Li Lin Lee with printer Cai Yan, Hangzhou, 1989.



Li Lin Lee, *Sacrament and Sorrow*, 1989, watercolor woodcut on silk mounted on rag paper, paper size: 23 x 21½"; image size: 13 x 12½", edition 25.



Li Lin Lee, *Mirror Image*, 1989, watercolor woodcut on silk mounted on rag paper, paper size: 23 x 21½"; image size: 13 x 12½", edition 25.

Notes

Pat Steir will be having an exhibition at Cabinet des Estampes, Geneva, Switzerland opening April 21.

Wayne Thiebaud will be showing new paintings at the Allan Stone Gallery, May 7 - June 30.

Joel Fisher is showing sculpture at Lawrence Markey, New York, through May 27.

John Baldessari, Artist's Choice, is at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, through May 10.

William T. Wiley is showing new paintings at the Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, through May 17.

Jannis Kounellis will be showing at the Galerie Lelong in Paris, May 19 through July 31.

Robert Kushner will be showing works on paper at the Gallery APA, Nagoya, Japan, opening June 3 and new paintings at Yoshiaki Inoue Gallery, Osaka, Japan, opening June 6.

Art 1994 Chicago:

The New Navy Pier Show

If you are visiting the art fair this year, please join **Karen McCready**, Director of the Crown Point Press gallery in New York, for a private viewing of new editions by **Li Lin Lee**, **Robert Kushner**, **Wayne Thiebaud**, and others at:

The Drake Hotel

140 East Walton Place
Chicago, Illinois 60611
(312) 787-2200

Thursday & Friday, May 5 & 6, from 9 AM to 1 PM
Saturday, May 7, from 10 AM to 2 PM

(Chinese Wood Block Printing continued from page 5)

lives in the courtyards and alleyways, and we walked for hours mesmerized by the stark simplicity and barren harshness. I'm sure I stood out as a Caucasian, but Li Lin drew more piercing glances because of his long hair."

Each morning Lee and Shure and Professor Yang, who coordinates our program in China, went together to work at Rong Bao Zhai. Lee had told me he spoke "kitchen Chinese" but it turned out his Mandarin is fluent and, as Shure says, "he was able to explain his color choices and even the emotional content (of great interest to the Chinese printers) of his imagery directly to the block cutters and printers." I was pleased to hear Lee was actively working with the craftsmen, since until this time our work had been through the director, who relayed our requests for changes to the printers. This time, Shure says, "they told Li Lin that they had accepted his project because they wanted to work directly with him in developing the images, an exciting change for them from working with art from past centuries. They showed us a horizontal scroll they had been working on for months. It was six feet long and about a foot high, black ink on tea-stained silk. It had required over a hundred extremely complex blocks to obtain all the nuances. They were very proud of their work, and Li Lin showed delight at their extraordinary skill."

The drawings for the four prints Lee made had been sent ahead of time, but Lee had also brought with him to China a new drawing, a watercolor, for a print to be titled *Lucky Life*. Rong Bao Zhai didn't want to take on another project, saying they were too busy, so Shure called me and we decided to give it to Cai Yan, an independent printer we had worked with in Hangzhou. After flying from Beijing to Shanghai, Lee and Shure went by train to Hangzhou to de-

liver it to him. Lee talked with Cai about the print, but Cai is an artist himself and subsequently got a big government commission and gave up work on *Lucky Life*. He sent the drawing back to Rong Bao Zhai in 1991. Now, in 1994, after proofs were sent back and forth several times, *Lucky Life* finally is finished. With this issue of *Overview* we are releasing it to you.

—Kathan Brown

Calendar of Events and Exhibitions

New York

May 21

International Fine Print Dealers Association Print Symposium. **Kathan Brown** will speak on **John Cage's** approach to printmaking.

April 29 - June 18

Opening April 29, 5-8 PM

John Cage: On the Surface

In conjunction with Rolywholyover, a Circus, at the Guggenheim Museum, SoHo.

San Francisco

May 5 - June 18

Robert Kushner

New Etchings

New York and San Francisco

June 23 - July 30

Christopher Brown

New Etchings.

Design: Brent A. Jones

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