

November 9, 1993

**ROBERT KUSHNER** *Holly Solomon Gallery*  
**LARRY MANTELLO** *Jose Freire Fine Arts*

LET'S TALK ART and "decoration." Decoration takes quote marks because it is an idea that goes all strange when linked to the idea of art. The strangeness is a modern malaise. Before the 20th century, it was just assumed that art would be decorative along with everything else it was. Art made anything pretty. Then came avant-garde ambivalence about sorts of people that art had been pretty *for*. Artistic seriousness got associated with values hostile to mere visual pleasure. Abstract painters were notably gruff on this score, given their work's at times perilous resemblance to fabric design. But art's divorce from decor kept coming undone.

It was comical, how art tried to quit the job of glorifying upper-bourgeois parlors or penthouses or, at length, lofts. As adaptable as cockroaches, decorative fashion kept reforming around "difficult" aesthetics to the point, reached with Minimalism, of accepting the bare white space that is a passive adjunct to art — a pocket museum — rather than a domestic bower that art enhances. That point brought a real break. It was observed that the pocket museum, like the big kind, confers art-ness on anything within it. People started decorating with objects — stuff in space — in ways that subjected art and non-art to mutual contamination. By the '80s, artworks were name-brand accessories. You had your Sony entertainment system. You had your Kiefer.

Now back up to the 1970s and the misfired but intriguing movement, mainly in New York, called Pattern-and-Decoration. Among its leaders was Robert Kushner, whose present show at Holly Solomon seems to me his best. I will give Kushner credit and then salute the debut of a young Californian, Larry Mantello, who exalts a pointedly neo-'70s sensibility with post-Jeff-Koons, social-aesthetic cunning. Mantello shows where prettiness is now.

Pattern-and-Decoration rebelled against the visually grim avant-gardism of the early '70s. It sought a happy new deal, at once democratic and deluxe, with art's long-suffering public, a sybaritic communion keyed to an era when everybody seemed to be having sex with everybody else all the time. Embracing the

decorative also struck many as a tonic for the beleaguered art of painting. But the upshot was often a mishmash of overrich fabrics, ceramics, and so on and impoverished painting. P-&-D proved less successful in seriously elevating decoration than in insouciantly debasing art. It bore somewhat the relation to art that a lot of sex in the '70s did to love. It was accelerated fun with a depressing aftertaste.

Kushner was a '70s Pan. He was known to get naked and have others do the same, traipsing in swatches of cloth adorned with Matisse-y designs and sequins. Eventually he subsided into painting. It was a diminishment of ambition, but it turned out to be the right move. Kushner's painting has made ever stronger and subtler expression of a hedonism once glibly precious and gruellingly evangelical. What with floral motifs, gold leaf, and glitter, his current work is the same-old in a way, but the same-old with surprising gravity.

Kushner's big new paintings are divided into multiple rectangular areas, each area sharply different in color and painterly treatment. The pictures are unified by sprawling floral designs often in the form of overlay drawing. So intense are the disjunct local sensations that the unity of the work is rather miraculous — a miracle-in-progress that we are let in on, free to construct or deconstruct the image depending on how we regard it. The effect is generous and very sophisticated, a rewarding test of skill in looking at paintings. The more sensitive and discerning your gaze, the wilder your ride.

The pretty and its moody sister, the lovely — triggered by passages of elegiac darkness — are a consuming project for Kushner. You see him toiling at it. He uses the resources of painting as a toolbox, with great respect for the tools. The respect is an advance on P-&-D giddiness. You feel that Kushner knows the capacities of each technique, every brooding impasto or lyrical wash, to make meaning, even as he limits it to the task of pleasing. Decoration requires that every visible element pay its way in easy, immediate satisfaction. Kushner submits to that requirement with winning humility. He burns all manner of mastery to feed a little flame of bliss.

By being contained in painting, Kushner's decorative paradise is hypothetical, a theme park of the imagination. He thus

accepts the defeat of the P-&-D fantasy of flooding life with visual splendor. Larry Mantello suggests why the defeat was inevitable: life at this end of the 20th century is already awash in visual splendor, though of a kind as likely to upset the stomach as to elate the eye.

Mantello has filled the Jose Freire Gallery with thousands upon thousands of giftshop and marketing-display tchotchkes. The ambience is complete with imprinted wallpaper, window scrims, and ceiling-hugging helium balloons; flashing colored lights; recorded disco music; and why go on? Simply, there is every useless thing you can and cannot think of that would be overpriced if given away. Here is the known universe of the tinselly in assemblages thematized by holiday (Christmas, the Fourth of July) and "exotic" locale (jungle, island), kitsch taxonomies within kitsch taxonomies up the gazoo. There is no irony. The artist plainly adores all of it. The effect is astonishing: absolute aesthetic weightlessness. Not lightweight. No weight.

Mantello's handling of contempo kitsch reveals its essence: colored air. The plastic or paper substance of these things only locates their surfaces in space. It occurs to me that something like this effect figured in Clement Greenberg's theory of last-word modernist sculpture such as Anthony Caro's. No wonder that theory felt laggard. Its mass-produced avatar had already begun to upset trade balances with Taiwan. Call it toxic modernism. The polymorphous product that Mantello celebrates is to art as carbon monoxide is to oxygen: a gas that the body thoughtlessly prefers, incidentally inducing the sleep of death. Being dead has advantages. As Woody Allen said, you can't beat the hours. Mantello's show is a seductive preview.

Fetishy junk assemblage is an old story. Its last generational hero was Kenny Scharf. Updating the story, Mantello dispenses with Scharf's druggy, funky Eros. In its place, he practices a Koonsian worship of immaculate newness (newicity? newitude?), the magic elixir of commodities before they are bought. I noted from dots on the gallery checklist that Mantello's assemblages are selling briskly. Good luck to their collectors. The first speck of dust will obliterate the art's defining perfection. Like Koons, Mantello recognizes newness as any commodity's aesthetic surplus value. Unlike Koons, he takes no pains to make mint condi-

tion durable in his work. He is true to the perishable reality of contemporary visual enchantment: here today, gone later today.

Like painting's loss of representational function to photography, art's loss of leadership in decoration is a modern given. Modernist scorn of the decorative, as of the representational, was always partly sour grapes — rejecting a role closed to artists in any event. To get over the scorn is to face head-on the juggernaut of industrialized aesthetics. Art in this fix has two choices. Dream in splendid isolation, like Kushner, of an impossible world. Or, like Mantello, exploit art's edge of self-consciousness to freeze what is the case in a spectacle of horrible gratification.