

*Jules Kirschenbaum, a modern American artist whose work integrates inscriptions and figurative painting, studied in New York under masters belonging to the abstract expressionist and to the purely abstract school, yet he exhibited at the Whitney Museum with Cadmus and other protagonists of "magic realism." Later, his work took a wholly different turn; it became an art about meaning and about the 'meaning of meaning.' Kirschenbaum writes: "One contemporary concept is 'what you see is what you see.' In contrast to that, I am for an art in which what you see is only the beginning of an endless chain of illusions. . . ."*

## *On the Verbal Art of a Modern Painter: the Work of Jules Kirschenbaum*

*Claude Gandelman*

### *Biographical crumbs.<sup>1</sup>*

Jules Kirschenbaum was born in New York City in 1930, the son of an art dealer in rare books and prints. He studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where his principal teacher was the figurative painter, Xavier Gonzales. In this period of aggressive avant-garde modernism, paradoxically, Kirschenbaum was drawn to figurative art, to "old art," primarily the art of the Italian quattrocento, that of Mantegna, Uccello and Piero della Francesca.

Yet there was no element of reactionary conservatism in his attitude. Through another master, Hans Hoffman, Kirschenbaum became intimately acquainted with the experiments of the abstract expressionists. During the mid-1950s, Kirschenbaum exhibited several times in the "Whitney Annuals" and found himself classified under the heading of "magic realism" together with painters such as George Tooker and Paul Cadmus. Indeed, Kirschenbaum shared these artists' fascination with existentialism and, like them, read Sartre, Camus and Kirkegaard, as well as Dostoyevsky and Kafka, their common "ancestors." With them he shared also an affection for a very specific painting technique—egg tempera. It had been used widely by pre-Renaissance and Renaissance artists, and it remained Kirschenbaum's favorite medium during the late fifties.

It was at the end of this period, that is, at the beginning of the 1960s, that Kirschenbaum and his wife, fellow painter Cornelia Ruthenberg, moved to Meshoppen, Pennsylvania, a small town near Wilkes-Barre. There, they found a ramshackle old church which they bought and repaired. It was in this church that they lived in "productive seclusion" at the beginning of the 1960s. Yet, in 1963, they had to leave Pennsylvania, Kirschenbaum was appointed artist-in-residence at the Des Moines Art Center, a position he held until 1967 when he was offered another teaching position at Drake University.

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*Visible Language* XXIII, 2/3  
Claude Gandelman, pp.296-306  
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In 1983, the Des Moines Art Center organized a Jules Kirschenbaum retrospective exhibition.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by another showing of his art, in February 1985, at the Forum Gallery on Madison Avenue, in New York City. Recently, the Jewish Museum in that city also commissioned a work on a cabalistic subject.

Now that figurative painting is making a “comeback” on the international scene and the craze for minimal abstraction has subsided, the work of a great representational painter like Jules Kirschenbaum is also coming back, to be viewed and appreciated.

### *Painting Words*

I have mentioned the importance of the literary background behind the paintings of Kirschenbaum. I should also add that this literary aspect comes to the fore in the textuality which characterizes many of his paintings. A great number of canvases, indeed, not only represent objects or people, but also integrate texts within the representation. Usually, these texts are significant quotations culled from the work of great authors, authors whose work is dear to the painter’s heart. Kirkegaard, mentioned above, is a case in point. But writers who wrote about the creative process itself, such as Paul Valéry or Stéphane Mallarmé are also frequently quoted, so that inscriptions are of primary importance for an understanding of Kirschenbaum’s work. Thus, the series of pictures entitled *Meditation of Death: Paul Valéry* actually reproduces a typescript that is the English translation of Valéry’s reflection on art in *Monsieur Teste*. Similarly, the painting entitled *Skull* incorporates a quotation from a letter by Mallarmé concerning artistic creation. Inscriptions (Hebrew inscriptions) are also significant in *Our Ancestors the Alchemists*, *Dream of the Golem* and in the first picture in the series *Auto-da-Fe*, subtitled *Søren Kirkegaard*.

### *Cabalistic Reflections*

Before discussing individual paintings and the inscriptions they contain, it is proper that Kirschenbaum himself should present his own thoughts on the subject.<sup>3</sup>

*“The first painting I exhibited when I was nineteen years old contained a long quotation and writing has remained an important part of my work ever since. The way I use writing has changed but it remained a significant source of imagery for me. I have no theories about it; each painting evolves in its own*

way and words appear as a figure or still life object appears and are altered or done away with as the design begins to take shape. It sometimes happens that a text is so important for me that it is the first thing I put down, as in the Tomb for Antonio Machado. Often however, a word or text only seems necessary late in the process. It is all very subjective and ambiguous.

A lot of my work comes from literature. Words conjure up images not necessarily related to the text. I do not try to illustrate, and the text might not seem to have much to do with the objects. I use words to add another dimension to the painting just as carefully painted details can do. A painting makes an impression from a distance but when viewed up close the paint itself and details that were not visible when seen far off, provoke new responses.

Reading a sentence or word can intensify the metaphorical aspect of a painting. I like the idea of many-layered meanings. Art is not one thing like so-called minimalist structures, those deadly forms of modernism. One contemporary concept is that 'what you see is what you see.' In contrast to that, I am for an art in which what you see is only the beginning of an endless chain of illusions. I like works which allow you the freedom to do whatever comes to mind, the ideal being early Christian crucifixes. Although they might seem confined to rigid limits, they use shaped panels (in the form of a cross), collage (raised and carved gesso), foreign material (gold leaf), free use of scale (large figure of Christ, small figures of saints), distorted drawing of figure, modeled forms against flat patterns, decorative color and the significant use of letters which are both meaningful literally and important to the design.

As a formal device, letters or words reinforce the two-dimensionality of the surface and push forward any modeled forms seen against them. They also serve as a means for introducing flat patterns of color. But there is a more important factor for me, especially with the paintings that deal with cabala and certain mystical ideas that have interested me for some time now. The Hebrew language is considered sacred, 'God-given' not the meaning, but the letters themselves. It is said that the proper combining of letters made up the heavens and the earth, and the combining and forming of letters is a traditional mystical exercise. In a recent painting of mine in which the permutations of the tetragrammaton YHVH is used as in some ancient texts, the mere writing of it seems charged with significance.

*Any writing seems to give a work more than just personal significance. Unfortunately, there is no way to know for sure that what we do is in any way significant. I don't know what my work means. I only know how to do it.*<sup>3</sup>

It is proper that the end should recall the beginning. "In my beginning is my end," perhaps the most significant Christian "inscription," is also full of significance for this special issue of *Visible Language*, which began with some summary reflections of mine concerning the meanings of *letters* for the cabalist. Those reflections were written at a time when I had not received any response from Kirschenbaum and did not know whether he would answer me at all. Though I knew some of his paintings, I did not know then how deeply he had been influenced by cabalist writings on the question of language.

When I received his response, I realized that the problematic put forward in this whole issue was somewhat brought into question by the statements of this painter. I have placed this issue on "Inscriptions in Paintings" under the aegis of "subversion," "contrast," "discordia concors," etc. Yet, can we say that the paintings of Kirschenbaum represent a corpus of works in which there exists a fundamental split and contradiction between inscriptions and representation?

His art seems to be based on a harmonic relationship between the texts he quotes and the images in which they are integrated—unless it is the images, the pictures, that are integrated into the painted texts. At this juncture, a survey of the inscriptions themselves seems necessary.

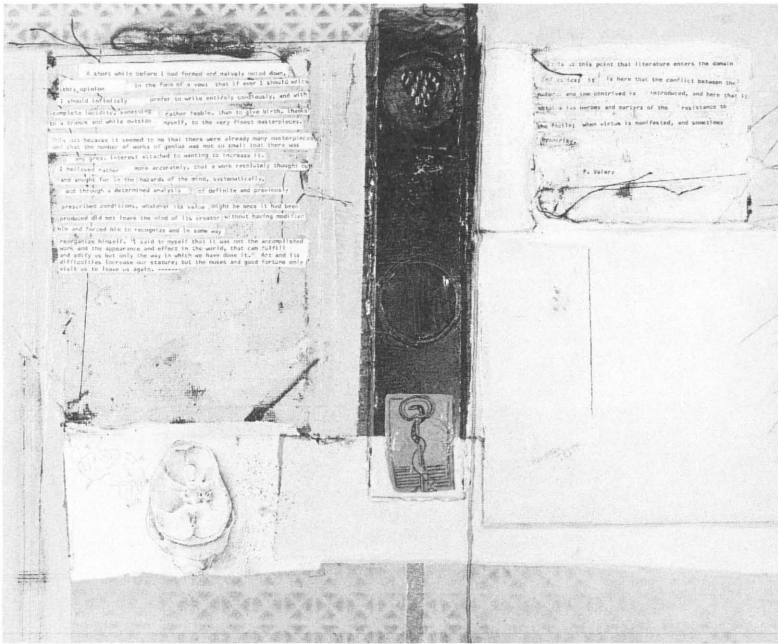
### *An Art of Quotation*

Here is the full text of the Paul Valéry "mediation" in the first painting in the *Meditation of Death* series (figure 1):

*A short while before, I formed and naively noted down this opinion in the form of a vow: that if I ever should write, I should infinitely prefer to write entirely consciously, and with complete lucidity, something rather feeble, than to give birth, thanks to a trance and while outside myself, to the very finest masterpieces. This was because it seemed to me that there were already many masterpieces, and that the number of works of genius was not so small that there was any great unrest attached to wanting to increase it. I believe rather more accurately, that a work resolutely thought out and sought for in the*

FIGURE 1

Jules Kirschenbaum, *Meditations on Death*, 1972



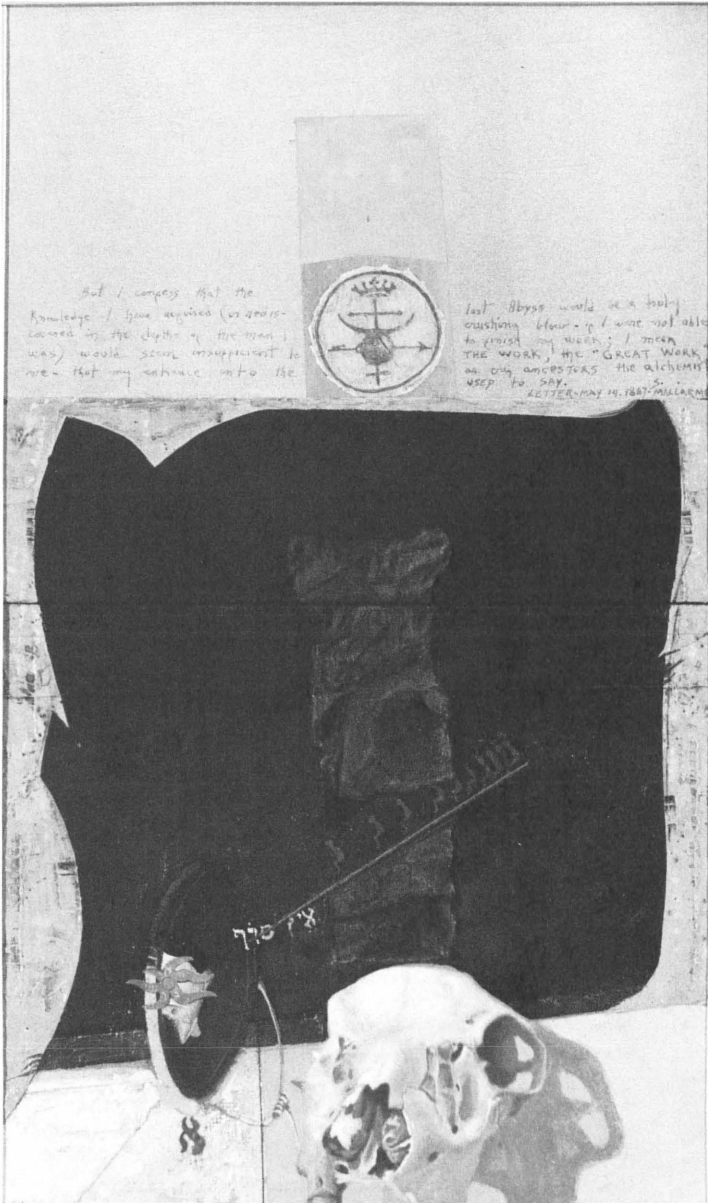
By permission of the artist.

*hazards of the mind, systematically and through a determined analysis of definite and previously prescribed conditions, whatever its value might be once it had been produced did not leave the mind of its creator without having modified him and forced him to recognize and in some way reorganize himself. I said to myself that it was not the accomplished work and the appearance and effect in the world, that can fulfill and edify us but only the way in which we have done it. Art and its difficulties increase our stature, but the muses and good fortune only visit us to leave us again. . . It is here that the conflict between the natural and the contrived is introduced and here that it obtains its heroes and martyrs of the resistance to the facile, when virtue is manifested, and sometimes hypocrisy.*"<sup>4</sup>

This is an extremely long and complex quotation. Reading the painting in a proper manner means submitting this quote to a veritable *explication de texte*. I shall be content with bringing forward the basic objective of the quotation, namely, that it is essentially directed against the facility of the abstract expressionist "dance and trance," against the surreal-

FIGURE 2

Jules Kirschenbaum, *Skull*, 1976



By permission of the artist.

istic dogma that it is the unconscious in us—that is the artist. Kirschenbaum is for an art in which everything is controlled, if not by reason, at least by aesthetic intention; he is against chance or “noise” in the work of art.

And yet, artists are far from dry rationalists; *painters are alchemists or cabalists* in their own very specific way. *Skull*, 1976 (figure 2), is inscribed in the following manner:

*“But I confess that the knowledge I have acquired (or rediscovered in the depths of the man I was) would seem insufficient to me—that my entrance into the last Abyss would be a truly crushing blow if I were not able to finish my work; I mean THE WORK, the “great work” as our ancestor the alchemists used to say.”* Stephane Mallarmé <sup>6</sup>

Painting is a means for describing infinity and, perhaps, also an object for infinite contemplation. But this achieving of a vision of infinity has nothing to do with random creation or the pure gesture of action painting. It is the result of patient work and of the patient craft of draftsmanship seen as an “alchemy of vision.”

I shall conclude this presentation of the work of a modern “inscription master” with the painting, *A Tomb for Antonio Machado* (figure 3), which contains a long quotation from a poem by the Spanish poet. The inscription is an excerpt from the poem “Commentary,” written after the fall of the Spanish Republic, in 1939, when the poet, ill and without any means of support, had set out on the long road of his French exile:

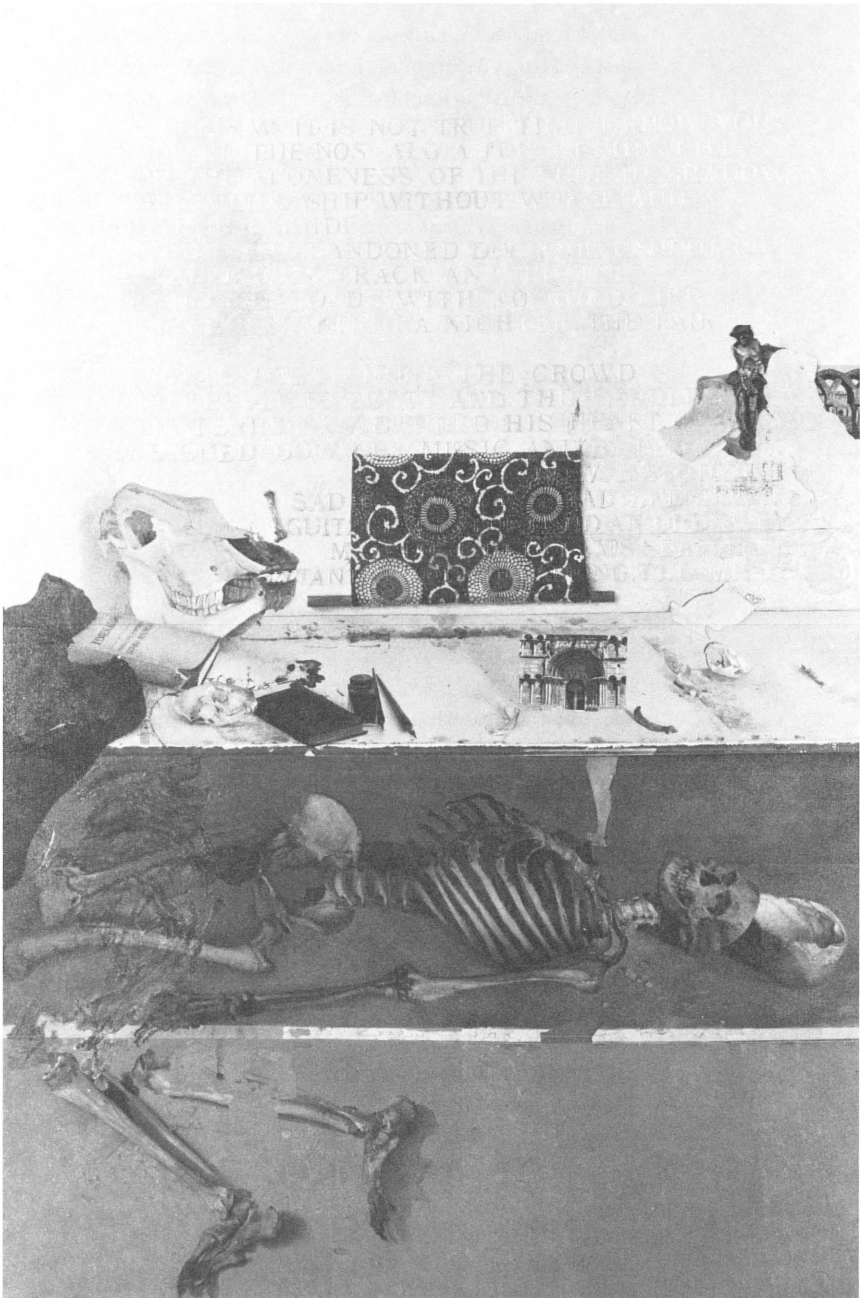
*Sorrow, it is not true that I know you:  
you are the nostalgia for a good life,  
and the aloneness of the soul in shadow,  
the sailing ship without guide.*

*Like an abandoned dog who cannot find  
a smell or a track roams  
along the roads with no road, like  
the child who in a night of the fair*

*gets lost among the crowd,  
and the air is dusty, and the candles  
fluttering—astounded, his heart  
weighed down by music and pain:*

FIGURE 3

Jules Kirschenbaum, *A Tomb for Antonio Machado*, 1986



By permission of the artist.

*That's how I am, drunk, sad by nature,  
a mad and lunar guitarist, a poet,  
and an ordinary man lost in dreams,  
searching constantly for God among the mists.*<sup>7</sup>

In the work of Kirschenbaum, the subversion is directed against modern trendiness, against the assumption that a work of art “should not *mean* but be.” The paintings of Kirschenbaum represent a reversal of this sentence. They show us how pictorial works can be literary without losing their pictoriality and how pictures can be beautiful through their very readability.

Endnotes

1 I chose a somewhat Kirkegaardian subtitle because of the painter's love for this author.

2 *Jules Kirschenbaum, Painting Survey: 1950-1983* (Des Moines Art Center Publication, January 17 - March 18, 1984).

3 Letter to author from Jules Kirchenbaum, October 1988.

4 Item No. 13 in the Des Moines Art Center *Catalogue*, entitled *Meditations on Death. Paul Valery*, 1972. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. 37" x 45" (94 x 114, 3 cm.).

5 The *Catalogue* of the Des Moines Art Center adds the reference: Paul Valery, *Analects*, n.d.

6. Des Moines Art Center *Catalogue*, *ibid.*, No. 19. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 71 1/2 x 71 1/4 (50,8 x 30, 5 cm.).

7. The Spanish original reads thus:

Y no es verdad dolor, yo te conozco,  
tu eres nostalgia de la vida buena  
y soledad de corazón sombrío,  
de barco sin naufragio y sin estrella.

Como perro olvidado que no tiene  
huella ni olfato y yerra  
por los caminos, sin camino, como  
el niño que en la noche de una fiesta

se pierde entre le gentío  
y el aire polvoriento y las candelas  
chispeantes, atónito y asombra  
su corazón de música y de pena.

así voy yo, borracho melancólico,  
guitarrista lunático, poeta,  
y pobre hembra en sueños,  
siempre buscando a Dios entre la niebla.