



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

JULES KIRSCHENBAUM (1930–2000)

*Without the Hope of Dreams*

Oil on canvas, 84 1/8 x 36 1/8 in.

Signed and dated (on the skull in the lower right): Jules Kirschenbaum / 1953

RECORDED: Howard Devree, "Round-Up And Solo: "The Whitney Opens its Painting Annual—One-Man Shows and a Group," *New York Times*, October 18, 1953, p. 9X // Thomas Worthen, *Jules Kirschenbaum: The Need to Dream of Some Transcendent Meaning* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Museum of Art, 2006), p. 9 no. 16 illus.in color

EXHIBITED: The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting*, October 15–December 6, 1953, no. 70

EX COLL.: the artist; to his widow, Cornelis Ruhtenberg, Des Moines, Iowa; to private collection, Cincinnati, Ohio, until the present

Jules Kirschenbaum was a young artist when he painted *Without the Hope of Dreams*. It is clearly intended as a “statement” work, physically large and enigmatic enough to assure the viewer of hidden layers of meaning. Kirschenbaum was sufficiently pleased with the painting to send it for exhibition to the 1953 *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art on West 8th Street in the heart of Greenwich Village. It was a dramatic calling card, announcing his arrival as an up-and-coming young American artist. As it happened, however, the 1950s witnessed the establishment of Abstract Expressionism as *the* American style. Kirschenbaum went on to enjoy a long and successful career as an artist and a teacher. But his choice of representational visual language and his longtime residence in the Midwest conspired to removed him aesthetically and physically from the center of the American art world. Only with the turn of a new millennium and the benefit of historical hindsight has his considerable oeuvre begun to attract renewed attention. *Without the Hope of Dreams*, though an early work, embodies concerns and strategies that continued to characterize Kirschenbaum’s creative output over decades of life as a working artist. (For a full discussion of Kirschenbaum’s life and career, see Thomas Worthen, *Jules Kirschenbaum: The Need to Dream of Some Transcendent Meaning* [Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Museum of Art, 2006].)

Jules Kirschenbaum devoted his career to creating images that examine the human condition. Although he worked in an era that celebrated abstraction, Kirschenbaum chose to continue in the Western tradition of representation, drawing inspiration for his subject matter from philosophy, literature, art history, and religion. An accomplished draftsman and colorist, Kirschenbaum painted meticulously realized compositions with a precision and splendor, deliberately recalling the art of his venerated artistic forebears, the European Old Masters. These, however, were not conventional

pretty pictures. Kirschenbaum offset his beautiful scenes with incongruous subjects, creating disconcerting contradictions intended to provoke emotional and spiritual responses.

Kirschenbaum was a native New Yorker. His father, Louis Kirschenbaum, a dealer in books, manuscripts, and prints, instilled in his son a lifelong love of fine arts, literature, and music by regularly taking him to museums. As an adolescent, Kirschenbaum continued museum visits on his own, spending hours alone in a gallery consumed by a single painting. He graduated from the High School of Music and Art (now Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts) in 1948 and continued his studies at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where he trained under Xavier Gonzalez (1898–1993), Arthur Osver (1912–2006), and Charles Seide (1915–1980). Kirschenbaum was particularly influenced by Gonzalez and spent several summers as Gonzalez’s assistant during the professor’s summer art program in Wellfleet, on Cape Cod. By 1951, Kirschenbaum had stopped attending classes regularly. Since the Brooklyn Museum program was not a degree-granting institution, Kirschenbaum’s formal education ended with high school. He was an intellectual by nature, though, who read and studied voraciously, developing a wide-ranging knowledge of literature, philosophy, and art history that inspired and informed his life and his art.

In 1951, Kirschenbaum toured Europe. He traveled through Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Austria, and Switzerland reinforcing his existing passion for fifteenth-century Italian and Netherlandish painting. (See, for example, *Portrait of the Artist’s Father*, 1950; Worthen, p. 4 no. 5 illus. in color.) Later in his career, Kirschenbaum, speaking about Mantegna’s *Saint Sebastian*, recalled, “When I was a kid I never wanted to be president. I thought I would much prefer to draw a foot as well as Andrea Mantegna” (as quoted in Worthen, p. 5). The artist’s work of the early 1950s reveals a

Renaissance vocabulary, with an emphasis on line and form. This hews closely to the Vasarian emphasis on *disegno*, that is, not only the skill to draw, but the ability to use drawing as the foundation of a meaningful work of art.

The model in *Without the Hope of Dreams* is the artist Cornelis Ruhtenberg (1923–2008), whom Kirschenbaum married in 1956. She sits forlornly on a rooftop landing of what appears to be a prison, as hemmed in by surrounding rooftops and iron structures as seen as the figure in the prison below, whose hand grips the bars of a small window. Patches of sky, though visible above, offer no chance of escape. The intricate folds of Ruhtenberg's dress are quotations from Mantegna. While Kirschenbaum certainly saw the work of the Paduan master in Europe, he could just as likely have spent hours in front of Mantegna's *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1932.

Kirschenbaum enjoyed early success, receiving his first solo show at the Salpeter Gallery in New York City in 1955 and winning The National Academy of Design's coveted Hallgarten Prize that same year. Shortly after their marriage, Kirschenbaum and Ruhtenberg left New York for two years in Europe where Kirschenbaum studied painting and print making at the Institute of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy on a Fulbright scholarship. On their return, they settled in Meshoppen, Pennsylvania, a small town about 30 miles north and west of Scranton, on Route 6, where a friend of Ruhtenberg owned some property. Meshoppen proved a congenial and thrifty vantage point for Kirschenbaum's continuing career. The couple purchased and renovated a former church as home and studio space. The Salpeter Gallery held another well-received exhibition of his work in 1959, and in 1961, the National Academy of Design honored Kirschenbaum with its highest award, the Benjamin

Altman First Prize for Figure Painting. He was elected Associate of the Academy in 1962. Nonetheless, as a painter committed to figurative representation, Kirschenbaum was aware of his marginal status. In a catalogue statement for his contribution to a group show at the University of Illinois, Urbana in 1959, he characterized Abstract Expressionist artists as “a regular bargain basement in pumped-up egos” (as quoted in Worthen, p. 25).

In 1963, the Director of the Des Moines Art Center offered Kirschenbaum the position of artist-in-residence. With their infant son, the couple moved to Iowa, returning to Meshoppen for summers. Just as they were contemplating a return to Pennsylvania, in 1967, Kirschenbaum was offered a teaching position at Drake University, also in Des Moines. He accepted, thinking it was a stopgap on the way back east. Instead, Drake University became Kirschenbaum’s professional home, where he fully realized his talents as a painter and a teacher. The curriculum he fashioned there recreated his own interdisciplinary and dynamic education. Kirschenbaum introduced his students to the study of art history, literature, philosophy, and music, in addition to instructing in painting technique. A beloved professor, Kirschenbaum received a Levitt distinguished professorship from Drake University in 1984 and the President’s Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching in 1989.

Thus, Kirschenbaum’s art had to share his energies with his teaching responsibilities. After Kirschenbaum’s father died in 1970, he worked on a series entitled *Meditations on Death*, in which he explored the concept of mortality. As was his lifelong practice, Kirschenbaum allowed other art forms and practices to inspire his subject matter. He became particularly fascinated by the Kabbalah, a school of thought in Jewish mysticism that seeks to define the nature of the eternal universe in relation to the finite individual. Kirschenbaum had explored this theme in earlier works, but this

religious practice gave him a new framework for his inquiry. He wrote:

Finding that Jewish mysticism existed was important. It made it easier to embrace certain ideas that seemed universal—but that I was only aware of through other religions. It seemed more legitimate to use ideas and symbols that came from my own background (as quoted in Worthen, p. 49).

For the next fifteen years, Kirschenbaum included text and images referring to the Kabbalah in his work. He hoped that his Kabbalistic paintings would inspire the same sense of awe in his viewers that the Kabbalah had excited in him. In 1978, Kirschenbaum taught a group of graduate students to paint with egg tempera and, in doing so, renewed his own interest in the medium. He noted, “Everything fell back into place” once he returned to this fifteenth-century technique that he had employed in the early 1960s. Kirschenbaum believed, in the tradition of early Flemish painters, that the visible world is a manifestation of a greater force, and by carefully studying objects, he and his viewers could aspire to experience these supernatural wonders. Paintings from the latter part of his career feature solidly defined objects and a convincing sense of space. In this mode, he carried on his investigation of mortality and death. He continued to pull imagery from the Kabbalah, but also became interested in the concept of final judgment after reading Elias Canetti’s *Auto da Fe*, whose title references the burning of heretics during the Inquisition. He later created *vanitas* images in the tradition of seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting, in which he skillfully rendered a dense accumulation of objects, skulls, and bones. Finally, Kirschenbaum began including anatomical models in his works. Dividing these bodies into parts, Kirschenbaum explored the qualities that make a body human. All of these themes appear in Kirschenbaum’s final four, and perhaps most powerful, works: *The Manikin Dreams*; *Yamantaka, Me, Oblivion*; *Earthbound Scholar*, and *Skulls II*.

Kirschenbaum died of cancer in 2000. His legacy remains today in public and private collections nationally and internationally. The Des Moines Art Center has held two solo exhibitions devoted to the artist: *Jules Kirschenbaum: Painting Survey, 1950–1983* (1984) and *Jules Kirschenbaum: The Last Paintings, 1992–1999* (2001), which focused on his later work. In 2006, The University of Iowa Museum staged the retrospective, *Jules Kirschenbaum: The Need to Dream of Some Transcendent Meaning*. Kirschenbaum's paintings are included in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Des Moines Art Center, Iowa; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; The National Academy of Design, New York; the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska; and The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio.

Two decades after his death, Kirschenbaum is still an artist whose work defies easy categorization. His purpose is perhaps best summed up in a line from a lecture he delivered at Drake in 1987: "I am for an art in which what you see is just the beginning of an endless chain of allusion" (as quoted in Worthen, p. 114). The artist creates the picture. The viewer comprehends it and intuits additional personal meaning. As with most of Kirschenbaum's oeuvre, *Without the Hope of Dreams* offers a narrative whose story is open to discussion.