

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2014

Datebook, Section E

By Jessica Zack

Muller in awe of art, Modernism's 35-year gig

Even after 35 years, and a staggering 500 exhibitions, gallerist Martin Muller sounds positively awestruck when talking about the way being in a room with a Russian avant-garde masterpiece by Kazimir Malevich or a geometric Barnett Newman can “provide a mental escape from reality, free your psyche from its limitations.”

Offering art lovers “those essential opportunities for artistic discovery has been the guiding force of this gallery from day one,” the dapper, Swiss-born Muller, 61, said on the occasion of his Modernism Gallery's 35th anniversary season in San Francisco.

When Muller — a passionate educator, publisher and provocateur — opened Modernism in the fall of 1979, he brought an intellectual sophistication and appetite for aesthetic risk-taking to the city's art scene that hasn't waned in the ensuing decades.

Modernism's 1982 Andy Warhol exhibition — the first time the Pop artist's work was shown in San Francisco — has gone down



Swiss-born art lover Martin Muller goes face to face with “Gray Mouse 7,” by Gottfried Helnwein, in his gallery Modernism, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary in San Francisco this year.

in local cultural history as emblematic of Muller's tendency to be at least one step ahead of the city's artistic leanings. (Unfathomably, despite relatively low \$20,000 price, only one Warhol from that show sold — to Muller himself.)

In addition to mounting 18 retrospectives of the Russian avant-garde, Modernism was the first California gallery to show the works of architect Le Corbusier, fashion photographer and Dada collagist Erwin Blumenfeld and Viennese conceptual artist Gottfried Helnwein, whose paintings are currently on view.

Muller has championed the work of artists as varied as the realist John Register, narrative painter Mark Stock, and sociopolitical urbanist Jacques Villeglé.

In conversation, Muller explains that, rather than specialize, he has ventured instead to “always seek art that is significant. ... It can't be just decorative, and never trendy. I am into this for the long haul.”

Q: What comes to mind when you reflect back on San Francisco and its art scene when you launched your gallery here 35 years ago?

A: I came here from Switzerland and was immersed in early 20th century European avant-garde movements and very interested in minimalism.

Arriving in San Francisco in the '70s, I found a regional art scene that addressed the California zeitgeist. I knew nothing about Bay Area art or the meaningful activities that had taken place at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Very slowly, we developed a vibrant international cultural scene here that is far from provincial. It took some time, but by the late '90s things went global.

Q: Why have you chosen not to specialize as many galleries do?

A: As a young, naive beginner, I thought serious art could only be within the realm of formal, geometric abstraction. Imagine, that was all I showed during the gallery's first year.

I rapidly grew out of that mind-set by coming to grips with what Duchamp made us see, that art is really about ideas. And ideas are not equal. Some can best be conveyed with a photograph, and others with an installation, a narrative painting or in a hybrid like Naomie Kremer's videos on paintings.

I thought I should have the broadest range of art to create the richest educational program there is. The challenge is to find ideas that are worthwhile exploring.

Q: Is it any harder now to find those worthwhile, well-executed artworks?

A: There are always new ideas and visionaries, and along with them come the less interesting and the pretentious. But talent always takes the lead. Just like a book editor or film producer, the art dealer's challenge is in finding it, and then sharing it.

There are endless numbers of artists who fake it, but in painting you just

can't cheat. One of my contemporary art heroes is John Register. I can't tell you how many people do wannabe Registers now, but I have yet to find one person who gets close to it. Art is like desire. If you fake it, it is screamingly obvious.



Martin Muller with Anna N. Kagan's "Suprematist Composition" (left) and "Ondulatory Composition" by Alexander K. Bogomazov

Q: Your list of first major West Coast exhibitions is remarkable. Thinking back to your 1982 Warhol show, can you believe people weren't interested and sales were dismal?

A: Well, it's a cycle that is as old as the history of the art world. When you read about the first performance of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" in Paris in 1913, people were hysterical and broke seats. They went crazy. And think of Duchamp exhibiting his urinal on the wall. Time goes by, and now these works of earlier scandals are the foundations of our society.

Q: Have your criteria changed over the years for determining what art you want to show?

A: No. I've always had three criteria: I want to make sure that the work is emotionally charged, visually strong and fully defensible critically. The criteria are subjective, but it's a methodology that is as scientific as anything can be within the art world. I have tried to always take that path and never get sidetracked by trendiness.

Q: There is a lot of discussion in San Francisco of tech fortunes. Has Modernism seen an influx of younger buyers?

A: We are in one of the most creative, dynamic new eras with the dot-coms. The one generalization I can make about the younger buyers today, and it's good for commerce but not necessarily satisfying philosophically, is speed. They don't want to build a collection over a lifetime, which was the old-fashioned, scholarly approach. They want to build it now.

And their interests are more commercial. Branding matters. People want to know, how did this artist do at auction? And not, what is the idea this artist is expressing? What gets lost is the experience of looking, thinking, analyzing the art itself.

Q: You recently hosted a dinner for your stepsister Diane von Furstenberg, who was in town celebrating her two new books. Does she turn to you for art collecting advice?

A: Diane has some wonderful works, including by one of the leading women of the Russian avant-garde, Alexandra Exter. But she does not consider herself an art collector per se. She is an extraordinarily successful artist in her own right.

Diane came to New York about 10 years before me, and we have both shared a path since then that has one thing in common: giving it 100 percent. There is no "sort of," no "kind of" for us.

Jessica Zack is a freelance writer.

Modernism: "Duncan Hannah: Foreign Affairs" and "Andreas Nottebohm: Electrical Ether." Jan. 15-Feb. 28. 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. 685 Market St., Suite 290, S. F. (415) 541-0461.