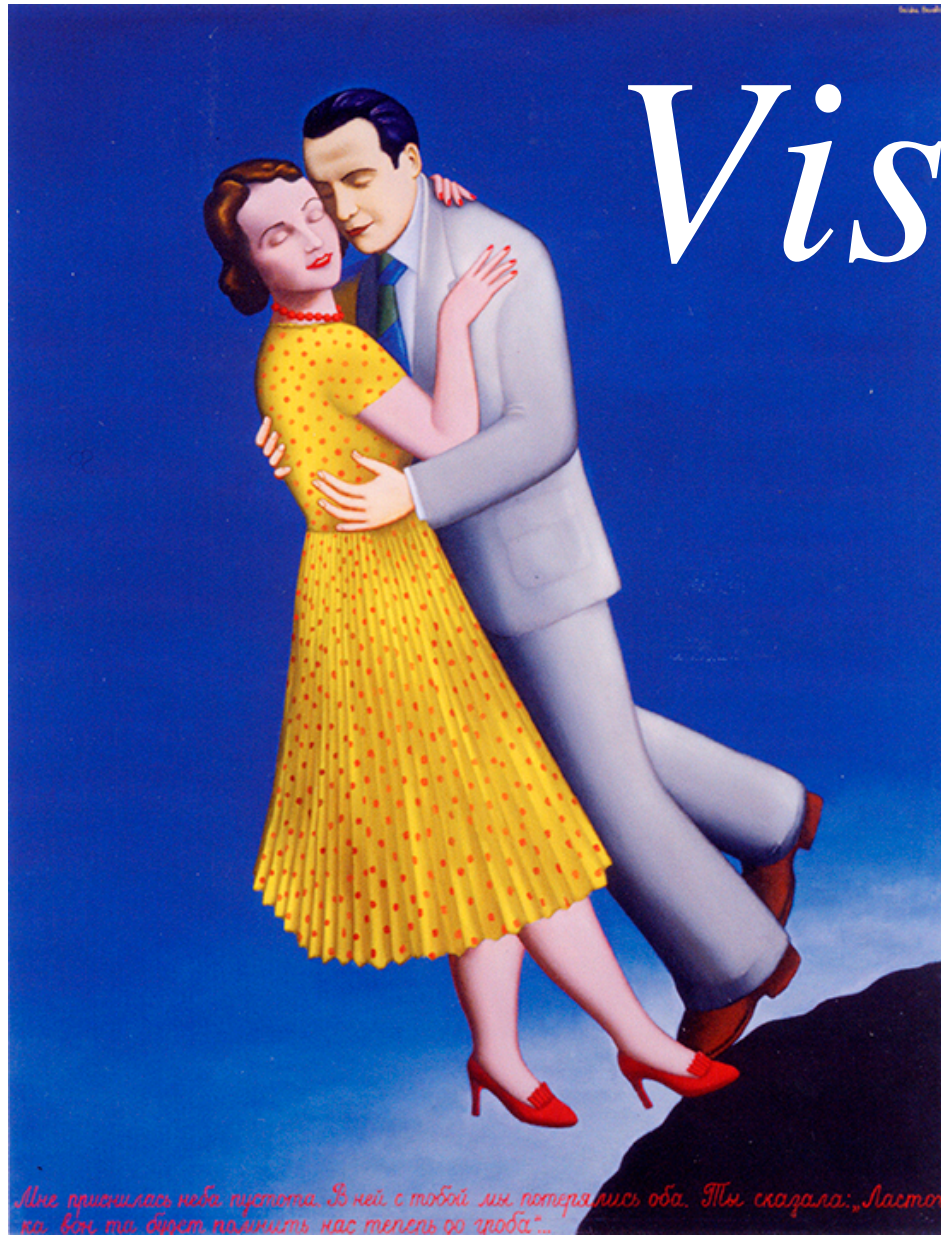


STYLE

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Grisha Bruskin's dreamy Blue Sky is part of the exhibition "Independent Vision: Modern and Contemporary Art from the Martin Muller Collection" at the Arkansas Arts Center.

Vision to *behold*

Art from the Martin Muller Collection hangs through Dec. 30 at the Arkansas Arts Center

Ellis Widner

"Independent Vision," the title of the current exhibition at the Arkansas Arts Center, seems about perfect. It's a spot-on description of the guiding intelligence behind a well-known art collector/gallery owner's thought-provoking philosophy.

Martin Muller, owner of the influential Modernism Inc. gallery in San Francisco and a native of Switzerland, credits his time in Little Rock in the mid and late 1970s as pivotal to his development into one of America's leading art brokers.

"I love the openness, the physical and mental space in Arkansas," Muller says. "To arrive at a place so vast, compared to what I was used to in Switzerland, gave me a lot of mental space. The people were amazingly friendly and welcoming; the experience remains with me to this day. I felt the freedom one gets from this space, this generosity of spirit topped with a certain warmth one finds in the middle of the United States."

Muller, who was working for a Swiss-American company based in Little Rock, says he was stimulated and nourished by the time spent in the Arts Center's library. By 1978, he was selling art to friends in Little Rock "which gave me my start."

Among those friends was longtime Arts Center director Townsend Wolfe.

That friendship led to an association with the Arts Center that helped build the museum's Russian and modern art holdings and led to the current exhibition "Independent Vision: Modern and Contemporary Art From the Martin Muller Collection." It hangs through Dec. 30.

The exhibition includes works by Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Diane Arbus, R. Crumb, Edward Curtis and Henri Matisse, along with a fascinating array of lesser-known contemporary and modernist masters.

"We have a rich history of collaborating with Martin and Modernism Inc.," says Brian Lang, curator of contemporary craft at the museum. "The collection of Russian artwork we have is in large measure due to Martin and local patrons. We have the largest collection of Alexander Bogomazov's works of any U.S. institution."

Muller, who usually visits Little Rock twice a year, also helped the museum acquire works by Mark Stock, Naomie Kremer and Mel Ramos, among others. Some two dozen artists in "Independent Spirit" are also represented in the Arts Center's collection.

As a student in his late teens, Muller made a trip to Russia related to his study of Russian literature.

"I was invited into homes and saw Russian avant-garde art, which started my fascination with it on an academic and emotional level. That had a profound impact on me."

His first purchases of art (on time, he says) were a drawing by Ukraine's Alexander Bogomazov and German artist Joseph Beuys' silkscreen *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated*. His collection has grown to more than 2,300 works by 625 different artists.

Muller explains what it means to have an "independent spirit."

"If you look at the vast majority of good collections in the U.S. and internationally, there is a pattern. People seem to go through a checklist of artists to collect and we are in an art market that has increasingly turned artworks into securities. People assemble names, not art.

"My approach has always been about the art, not collecting brands. I don't play that game."

He advises prospective buyers of art to embrace that view.

"Buy what moves you, buy with your eyes and your heart, not what people tell you you are supposed to buy. Buy what will bring you joy and make you think. Don't treat it as a commodity. Quality art, over time, always prevails. If it's trendy, once that trend fades, valuations go down."

Art, he says, must be strong visually, emotionally charged. "It should be coherent, not redundant. It should have well thought-out ideas and a sense of place in art history."

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When entering the gallery, viewers come face-to-face with a large canvas titled *The Descent*. It is a chaotic painting of books in disarray, as though the shelves had collapsed. Upon closer examination, something is missing. No words on the pages, no titles on the cover. Blank.

Cuban artist Joel Besmar's oil on canvas startles, challenging the viewer for an explanation.

"A descent into what," Lang asks. "Into knowledge? Censorship?"

Books, he says, are central to Muller's identity. The art dealer has more than 30,000 volumes, many about art and philosophy.

Other highlights:

Man Ray's exotic and romantic gelatin silver print *Paul Eluard Kissing Nusch's Forehead*, Hannah Hoch's edgy, sci-fi surreal collage *Fleeing From Disaster*; Russian painter Grisha Bruskin's fabulous and dreamy *Blue Sky*, an oil on linen of a couple in an embrace as they float in the sky; Glen Baxter's absurdist color pencil and ink on paper *It Was Tom's First Brush With Modernism*, of a cowboy facing art, depicted as a blank canvas. Erwin Blumenfeld's gelatin silver print might make you gasp. *Lisa Fonssagrives on the Eiffel Tower, Paris*, depicts the woman throwing a leg skyward, sending her dress flying as she hangs on to the tower. Edward S. Curtis is well-known for his photographs of North American Indians. During the Depression, he worked in Hollywood as a studio photographer and movie camera operator. *Aphrodite* is a stunning blue-toned silver print of a woman floating in water, evoking the Greek goddess of love.

Among the works by Warhol displayed, *Marx Brothers*, a silkscreen on paper, is immediately appealing for its style and subject material. And that's just scratching the surface of this wonderfully rich, thought-provoking and inspiring exhibition of modernist and contemporary art. Don't miss it.