

Classic SF



Martin Muller among paintings by Charles Arnolli in his SoMa gallery space.

MULLER'S MODERNISM

BY KENDRA BOUTELL

Recently, **Martin Muller**, the owner of Modernism gallery, was raving about the French *décollage* artist **Jacques Villeglé**, whom he represents. "He is such an important artist! He is, at 92, the only member of the *Nouveau Réaliste* movement still alive," he says of Villeglé and peers such as **Raymond Hains**, **Mimmo Rotella** and **Yves Klein**. "He had a major retrospective at the Centre Pompidou museum in Paris, with great critical acclaim."

Muller, a 60-something Swiss native, celebrates the 40th anniversary of his San Francisco gallery next year. His scholarly enthusiasm for esoteric art attracts numerous devotees. These include **Diane Dorrans Saeks**, the San Francisco-based author of design books, *The Style Saloniste* blogger and arbiter of taste. "I've admired Martin, his gallery and his artists for years," she says. "He has a strong following among serious art collectors around the world who are obsessed with one or many or all of his artists."

What lured the cosmopolitan gentleman to the Bay Area? "Originally, dear family, friends, the proximity to outstanding academic opportunities — and of course, the charm and the beauty of the city," he muses.

Friends introduced Muller to the Russian art collector **Prince Nikita Lobanov-Rostovsky**, who in turn connected him with other art patrons. When he first opened his gallery, Muller chose a converted warehouse on 8th Street. At the time, South of Market was not the urban mecca it is today but an industrial wasteland. But he recognized the neighborhood's potential. He also felt it was time to elevate San Francisco's art scene from provincial to international. The Bay Area had been rich with regional art, yet lacked a global presence. Muller helped introduce SF to

the worldwide art world in 1980, when he showed the first West Coast exhibition of Russian avant-garde artists, from the years 1910–1930. "Collectors who pounced on the **Kazimir Malevich** and **El Lissitzky** paintings in those early days now own treasures museums are desperate to acquire," says Saeks.

As an art dealer, Muller championed the Russian avant-garde, mounting a total of 18 retrospectives. Other movements exhibited at Modernism include Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, Vorticism and German Expressionism. Last year, the gallery produced a museum-quality showing of legendary Norwegian Surrealist artist **Edvard Munch**'s works on paper titled *Breathe, Feel, Suffer and Love*. In the 1990s, Muller showcased Abstract art in the exhibition *Four Abstract Classicists*, which recreated the landmark show presented by LACMA in 1959.

Modernism's contemporary offerings are equally impressive, often foreshadowing an artist's future success. Muller was the first gallerist to debut **Andy**

Warhol's works here in 1982, selling only one painting for \$20,000. Decades later, in 2017, he continued to challenge the viewer with provocative art, choosing **Gottfried Helnwein**'s *Red Harvest* to launch his new Tenderloin space. The Viennese-born conceptual artist's monumental, hyperrealistic paintings

depicted innocent children wrapped in bandages, smeared with blood or wielding automatic weapons.

Muller relocated Modernism to Ellis Street following a 30-year tenancy at the Beaux Arts Monadnock Building. He is as passionate about his new gallery and neighborhood as he is about art and artists. The mid-century building, formerly the home of Diebold Safe & Lock Co., was transformed by Aidlin Darling Design. "The move has been very exciting

and rewarding for us in many ways," Muller says. "First, to be in our own building, designed for our specific needs, this by great architects. Then, to participate in the cultural development of a historic part of San Francisco, neglected for too long, is a meaningful challenge."

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