

Modernism Gallery and the Late Mark Stock: Art, Friendship, and Feeling

May 13, 2014

By Pamela Feinsilber, SF Fine Arts Examiner

Martin Muller, who owns and runs San Francisco's esteemed Modernism art gallery, was preparing for a new show of work by one of his longtime artists. Barnaby Conrad III, who wrote the artist's biography in 2000, was flying to San Francisco to interview him and update the book. Neither man had any idea that Mark Stock—best known for his feeling-infused paintings of a tuxedoed, white-gloved butler, most famously *The Butler's in Love: Absinthe*—would be dead before they could see him again. When he died this past March, he was only 62.

The gallery show, which runs through June 21, is now titled *Mark Stock: Lives of the Butlers: Memorial Exhibition*.

Among his other figurative works, Stock created more than 100 paintings featuring butlers in poses suggesting repressed pain and longing. They are like little stories the viewer helps write with Stock's narrative hints, such as the bend of the butler's body and tilt of his head as he looks at the lipstick traces on an empty glass. An early painting, titled *Sunset*, shows a man lying on his back on thick grass enclosed by a low barrier, oblivious to the sky's fiery glow as he intently reads a one-page letter. What does it say, and who wrote it?



The Butler's In Love - Minute Significance,
2004-13, oil on canvas, 19 1/8 X 15 inches

Early on, Stock worked as a lithographer at Gemini G.E.L., a renowned fine arts publisher in Los Angeles. Here he worked with artists such as Jasper Johns and many others who do abstract work. In the art world, abstraction is the novel to figurative painting's short story, by which I mean it is generally considered more important, at a higher level somehow, simply by virtue of its form. Some critics almost disdain figurative, or realist, work of any kind.

But Stock stayed true to his own inclinations—just as Muller has since he opened Modernism in 1979. Among the 40-some living artists whose work he shows, Muller represents some whose work is as abstract as they come, such as James Hayward's ultra-thick layers of color on canvas, which look like frosting through which someone could not avoid artfully running a finger, or Charles Arnoldi's often moody geometrics.

Muller also represents artists such as Gary Baseman, with his lively cartoonlike figures, and Gottfried Helnwein, whose almost surreal, serious children make Stock's protagonists look positively cheerful. Then there's the uncategorizable Jonathon Keats, about whom I wrote when he opened his show Epigenetic Cloning Agency at Modernism in 2012. I would say there's no gallery in town quite as eclectic as Modernism. (You may see work as varied and original at newer galleries, but I doubt any also show works by L.A.'s famed Ed Ruscha, Le Corbusier, and the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1930.)

As for Stock, Muller felt the emotion in his work even in a newspaper image he spotted in the mid-eighties, after which he spent a long time seeking Stock out. He then commissioned Stock to create a painting inspired by an earlier book of Conrad's, *Absinthe: History in a Bottle*, for a black-tie publication party. The party was at Bix, down an alley near Jackson Square, where Stock's most famous painting still hangs in the elegant bar.

This tells you something about the world of art and friendship that Muller has created over the years. The announcement for this new gallery show reads: In great sorrow on the passing of our dear friend and artist Mark Stock, August 4, 1951– March 26, 2014.