

**Martin Muller has kept the Modernism Gallery thriving for 35 years by staying provocative and never compromising.** By ANGELLA SPRAUVE

**H**e's never owned a computer, and he only recently acquired a cell phone. But **Martin Muller**, the owner of Modernism Gallery, is clearly comfortable on the cutting edge. He was the first gallerist in San Francisco to mount a one-man exhibition of Andy Warhol's work, and was the first on the West Coast to show works of the Russian avant-garde.

After 35 years, more than 500 exhibitions, and overseeing the publication of 40 books, Muller, 61, keeps Modernism moving forward, with his eye for provocative work. Fittingly, he chose to talk about his career at Bix restaurant, one of his beloved haunts, which offers a Martin Muller martini on its menu. He had one.

**What has kept Modernism going since 1979?**

Modernism has stuck with a particular vision: a profound link to art history and an interest in content that comes before what the marketplace or commercialism dictates. It's my unique and eccentric approach. There's no arrogance, but in the end, I do not compromise.

**Which recent exhibitions embody that approach?**

There are many artists that have stirred the debate for the better. **[Gottfried] Helnwein** has been very controversial, with such a powerful social and political set of messages. I've had people threaten me at Modernism because I am showing Helnwein. But I do it to bring awareness to the issues.

**How would you characterize the body of work you carry?**

Art has the virtue to be fulfilling in countless ways, and I want them all. But people think I only have Russian avant-garde, and that's not true. I like outrageous and funny, too. I love the *New Yorker* cartoons. I have carried artists like Picasso, Malevich, Matisse, Kandinsky and Chagall, all of whom are among the giants of modern art. It's an international art gallery because the kind of work sold at Modernism could potentially be attractive for museums in Europe, Asia, and pretty much around the globe.

**Were you ever worried that you might have to close at any point in your 35-year career?**

That was never an acceptable option. I would die before it would fail. This gallery was never a hobby to me. It is the expression of my being. Of course, nothing is eternal, so I'm not saying that it will not ever close. But it will close on my own terms, God willing.

**What tactical changes have you had to make to adapt to the times?**

The obvious is with the emergence of the Internet. On one side, we have to position a quality presence on the Web. Simultaneously, we must increase our presence in the best international art fairs. These two components reflect changes of the past 15 years.



ANDY WARHOL, MICKEY MOUSE, 1981

**Is selling art in San Francisco any different than it is in other markets?**

It isn't. In the big picture, it doesn't really matter where you are; you can sell American art out of Paris and you can sell Russian art out of San Francisco. We have no more barriers thanks to the Internet. An art dealer can be anywhere, providing that he or she has high-quality and important artworks.

**How is the demographic of art collectors changing?**

The market among young collectors is much more active. Things move faster and collectors tend to be somewhat younger, as people in their early twenties are already in a position to buy serious, meaningful art.



MARTIN MULLER WITH A WORK BY LOUIS MARCOUSSIS / PHOTO BY PHILIP COHEN

**We often hear how tech millionaires don't spend money on art. Has that been your experience?**

I see it the following way: We live in an era where the concept of time has drastically changed. In today's society, people want things now. But before the age of the Internet and relentless art festivals, growth as an art collector was a lifetime experience. So why should we expect these young entrepreneurs in their 20s or early 30s, who have been immersed in creating global organizations, to be sidetracked and become instant art collectors? Who is saying that they should rush to buy because they've made their first millions of dollars? I find that misplaced. There is a process, and it goes back to education. Give them a chance to learn!

**You're known for entertaining your guests at fabulous dinner parties. Where do you like to entertain?**



GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN, EPHRAIM II, 1988

For a very casual, small group of people, my restaurant is Florio on Fillmore. Then I adore the Bix jazz club, where I can host about 20 people—it is an institution. My grand dinners are at Modernism West at Foreign Cinema. I do about four or five of those a year. That's

where I give away at least two to three books to each person with my signature red gift wrap.

**What are you most proud of?**

It is probably my first Russian avant-garde exhibition. Think of what it takes to do a show like that: it was mission impossible. Don't forget, we're talking about 35 years ago. To round up 50 works suppressed from the Stalinist era and pre-Gorbachev, pre-Perestroika, was a big deal. Also, I would say I am proud of my early books. Short of your first baby, it's very exciting to publish your first book. All the other stuff is fluff, and I'm not interested in fluff. ■

Angella Sprauve is a luxury lifestyle writer and founder of Auvé Daily, an online destination for beauty and Bay Area lifestyle.