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big-sky country. That's why Roy Orbison loved it. Roy Orbison got his voice from listening to the sound of a dance coming across the prairie from, like, 100 miles away. There'd be a dance in another town, and everything sounded echoey. He wanted to sound like that with his voice.

You once said about Wilson, "He changed my eyes and my ears permanently."

I've worn glasses ever since I met him. He's like an inventor, you know, and he throws down the gauntlet for your own imagination.

Now that there's finally going to be an English-language production, do you wish you were performing in it?

It's just too much work. I think Wilson makes you change the molecular structure of your whole body and then builds you back up in his image. It's like being beamed up in *Star Trek*; you first have to be turned to dust. You know, I do some acting, but I'm not really an actor in that sense. I'm just acting with my songs. I feel safer there.

But you've been in quite a few movies—Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law*, and his new one, *Coffee and Cigarettes*, and *Short Cuts*, and *The Cotton Club*...

Yeah, yeah, but it's another thing to say I also do a little acting. I do a little car repair; I do a little lumberjacking. I'm a rock hound, or whatever. I would love to have Wilson take my songs and then build a world for me to live in for my act. 'Cause we seem to complement each other. There's talk about different stuff. But he's one of those people, he's busier than James Brown. He's a globe-trotter.

So he doesn't really live any particular place.

I think he lives in his head most of the time. When I worked with Wilson, I think I started understanding that there are portals you can pass through when you are working in the theater. He's always had visions and been different... and made a world for himself.

Meaning that with artists, there can be a blurring of the lines between reality and—

Insanity.

It's a fine line, isn't it? If you can understand that your visions are visions—if you can use them as an artist would as opposed to fearing them or letting them drive you mad...

Yeah, if you were in Pago Pago years ago, you might be a shaman. In another country, you'd be elected president. ●

ADVENTURES IN ART: **Martin Muller (with Alexander K. Bogomazov's *Ondulatory Composition*, 1914) brought an international sophistication to the San Francisco art scene.**

Dare You to Look

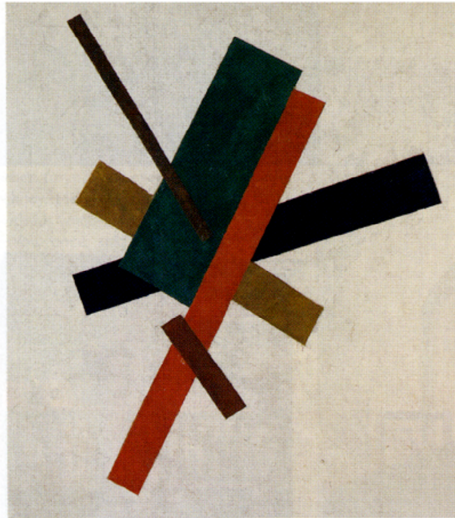
How one man's ideas about art gave San Francisco a taste for risk—and about time. BY JONATHON KEATS

Modernism's 25th-Anniversary Exhibition, SEPT. 9–OCT. 30, 685 MARKET ST., S.F., (415) 541-0461.

In October 1979, a couple hundred people climbed a creaky staircase in an Eighth Street warehouse to attend the opening-night party of a new art gallery, called Modernism. If the South of Market address seemed daunting to the downtown collecting crowd, the art was beyond the pale: a whole room of Erik Saxon's geometric abstractions, painted on a simple nine-square grid, that fit the local collecting fashion about as comfortably as a tuxedo on a hippie. In other words, it was an apt beginning for a gallery that has, over the past quarter century, consistently countered the parochial tendencies of a city with a history of hyping its own art without wholly trusting it.

Back then, you could have found a few Picassos at the San Francisco Museum of Art—still awkwardly housed above Herbst Theatre—and prints by Matisse or Jasper Johns at the John Berggruen Gallery, on Grant Avenue. Beyond that, art was largely

Photograph by Rashi Birla



DIFFERENT STROKES (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): **Kasimir Malevich's *Magnetic Suprematism* (1917–18), John Register's *Office* (1982), and Aloys Lolo's *Quickette and Flupkette in America* (1991) illustrate Modernism's eclectic sensibility.**

a neighborhood affair: Whether at one of the city's few other galleries, in a corner coffee shop, or at the de Young Museum, you'd most often see halfhearted presentations of hometown favorites such as Bruce Conner and Robert Arneson.

Something was lacking in those days—a stylistic and geographic eclecticism, a sense of adventure, a taste for risk. Modernism brought all that to the Bay Area, not entirely in the grids of Erik Saxon, but certainly in the staggering range of art that followed in some 300 exhibitions, first on Eighth Street and then, beginning in 1986, on Market near Union Square.

In the United States, Muller met an exiled Russian prince whose network of friends gave him his first clientele.

A generous sampling of that past can be seen in the gallery's 25th-anniversary exhibition. Modernism gave Andy Warhol his first major Bay Area show, provided underground comix artist R. Crumb his first gallery exposure anywhere. Owner Martin Muller has shown James Hayward's solid white paintings, 100 layers in the making, as well as John Register's meticulous depictions of hauntingly empty diners. Clearly, in both interest and technique, these artists have little in common. Galleries tend to specialize. How did Muller bring so many genres together so successfully?

The answer to that question begins in 1971, when Muller left his home in Geneva for a semester in the Soviet Union, where he could immerse himself in Russian language and literature. Then 18, he planned to devote his life to Dostoyevsky. But one day he came across an unillustrated description of a picture painted in 1913 by a Russian artist then seldom shown in the West, and utterly suppressed behind the Iron Curtain. A simple black square on a white background, it was the masterpiece of Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich, and just reading the description wiped out every assumption young Muller had about art. Fifty-eight years later, it still carried the shock of the new.

Muller started seeking out work by Malevich and others in the Russian avant-garde—all suppressed in the Soviet Union and underpriced abroad. Along the way, he met a Greek magnate in Moscow who'd hoarded so many banned masterworks that any misstep in his bathroom could have had major art-history repercussions. Following Muller's move to the United States (where he planned to enter the art business) in 1975, he also met an exiled Russian prince whose network of friends gave Muller his first clientele, which facilitated his transition, by age 27, from independent scholar to private dealer to gallery owner.

Twenty-three major exhibitions of Russian avant-garde artists—including the first one on the West Coast, in 1980—have not only provided the gallery with a financial foundation but also grounded its curatorial mission. Consider Malevich's monochrome squares or circles on plain ground, several of which Modernism has shown over the years. These pictures are neither landscapes nor portraits; unlike even the most advanced work of the Impressionists and the Cubists, they have no outside subject. Rather than serving as a springboard for illusion, the paintings illustrate nothing but themselves, demonstrating that in art, the world of flesh and blood is no more substantial, no more "real," than pigment in its own right.

Erik Saxon's work is an extension of that insight, exploring the visual potential

NOT CHILD'S PLAY: **Muller has shown Gottfried Helnwein's "difficult" work, such as *The Resurrection of the Dead Child* (1997), almost a dozen times.**

of the grid, which was historically used, and erased, by artists seeking to delineate a portrait's proportions. Hayward's work presses even further. Gradually layering the canvas with every color on his palette, carefully sanding down each coat, to achieve a luminous white surface, he shows us that emptiness is a paradox, that no slate is truly blank.

To Muller, the ideas behind an artist's work are as important as the execution. "In true art," he believes, "whether someone is a minimalist or a photo-realist, what matters at the end of the day is what he or she has to say. The rest is just a means of delivery."

So it seems only natural, in retrospect, that within several years of opening his gallery, he was showing Max Almy's videos, which shrewdly satirize campaign advertising in its own sound-bite vernacular, and Mel Ramos's Pop Art nudes, posed with all-American candy bars and cigarettes, slyly commenting on our skin-deep consumer culture. It's no surprise that on occasion Muller shows conceptual art, in which the idea is paramount and the work often dispenses with objects and images altogether.

Naturally, Modernism has shown work that hasn't withstood the test of time. Cork Marcheschi's neon light sculptures, for instance, are more datedly eighties than a Pink Floyd concert. But the anniversary survey shows that the majority of Muller's artists have grown along with his gallery.

"Modernism isn't one of those galleries that just provides a West Coast outpost for artists with New York representation," notes Robert Flynn Johnson, curator-in-charge of the Achenbach Foundation for the city's Fine Arts Museums. "Martin Muller has nurtured artists onto the national stage."

A vivid illustration of the gallery's achievement is Johnson's own exhibition of paintings by Gottfried Helnwein, on view through November 28 at the Legion of Honor. Muller started showing Helnwein—an Austrian-born artist whose discomforting depictions of violated children have inspired public outcry and vandalism—12 years ago, and has stood by him with almost annual exhibitions ever since. Over that time, Helnwein has stripped his art of overt references to Nazi atrocities, rendering his horrors anonymous and evoking the blind spot in our own society. Look at his inexplicably damaged children, often painted in a midnight monochrome, and you can't help but try to fill in the story, and take a degree of responsibility.

Helnwein's work is what the art world likes to call "difficult," often as an excuse to look the other way. Modernism brings to this city a different vision. ●

Jonathon Keats is *San Francisco's* art critic and a conceptual artist. On September 29, he'll be transforming Modernism into a laboratory, attempting to genetically engineer God from flasks of cyanobacteria.

[open book]

OH, THE HUMANITY!

Vermeer in Bosnia

by Lawrence Weschler
PANTHEON BOOKS

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER

Vermeer? Bosnia? Why, you may ask yourself, would I want to read about a 17th-century Dutch artist and a post-Communist hot spot bumped from the headlines by more recent ugly events elsewhere? Then again, it is Lawrence Weschler, one of the best writers in the country, who is linking the two. So I'm there. Weschler to me is like Ray Charles; he puts his own soulful stamp on anything that beckons him, and something moves me in almost everything he does.

Of course, he's a good reporter, but so is Seymour Hersh. And lots of people write engaging nonfiction, just as many performers play keyboards and sing. What sets Weschler apart is the utterly fresh and unexpected connections he makes as he digs ever deeper into a subject (sometimes, one no one else would think to write about): the antipathy to photography that lies behind David Hockney's intricate photo collages; the way themes from Roman Polanski's personal life inhabit his films, though Polanski disavows it. Indeed, Weschler says he finds the living world so crammed with interrelationships and consequences, he couldn't possibly think about writing fiction. What fascinates him is "taking any single knot and worrying out the threads... following the mesh...establishing the proper analogies..." And telling a heck of a tale in the process.

This book, his 11th, collects 22 stories written over the past two decades for the *New Yorker*, where he was a staff writer, and other publications. In the title piece, it's 1995, and Weschler is at the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal, in the Hague, near where Vermeer lived. To escape the harrowing testimony, Weschler spends time with the paintings, and unlike some others, he doesn't see Vermeer's subjects as representative milkmaids or wives. "No, his paintings all but cry out, this person is not to be seen as merely a type, a trope, an allegory." What each represents is "a unique individual human being, worthy of our own unique individual response." Weschler sees Vermeer's observations of his home and its citizens—themselves painted during years of ongoing warfare—as an attempt to move viewers away from such a depersonalizing perspective. If that had happened in Bosnia, of course, there would be no War Crimes Tribunal.

Weschler, who now directs the New York Institute for the Humanities, is speaking in Berkeley this month: Nine years later, he's still worrying the strands of that Vermeer-Bosnia knot. He's been thinking that rather than universal virtues, artists more often promote a romantic nationalism, glorifying the homeland above humanity. Just as in his written work, he has something new to say. ● SEPT. 29, DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES, UC BERKELEY, (510) 643-9670.