

Arkansas Life

CULTURE NOVEMBER 28, 2018

The One-Of-A-Kind Eye Of Collector Martin Muller

A closer look at the Arkansas Arts Center's *Independent Vision: Modern and Contemporary Art from the Martin Muller Collection* reveals a master collector's love of ideas—and of Little Rock.

BY KATIE BRIDGES

THE HENRI Matisse lithograph hangs next to the cubist tea kettle which hangs next to the Le Corbusier collage. Across the way, the primary hues in a blurred photo of a streetscape echo the rainbow-hued geometry in an enormous David Simpson canvas, while an almost life-sized nude by Mel Ramos holds court over a wall of Pop Art icons. There's a Picasso etching over there, next to Damian Elwes' rendering of the artist's studio, all Mediterranean-blue moulding and half-finished canvases and paint smears on a herringbone parquet floor. There are photographs and comic-book covers, realist canvases and gestural abstract works. All told, there are 89 works spanning a century and several continents, but there's one name on the wall that links them together: INDEPENDENT VISION: MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART FROM THE MARTIN MULLER COLLECTION.

Walk into someone's house, and the objects held within will give you an insight as to who the person is: the books on the shelf, the photos on the mantel, the dog-eared magazines on the coffee table. If the same can be

said of the art that a person collects over a lifetime, walking into *Independent Vision* has to make you wonder: Who's the person—this Martin Muller—at the center of all of this? Who's the person who could convene so many international provocateurs in one so very middle-of-America space?



And why on earth is that middle-of-America space *this* one?

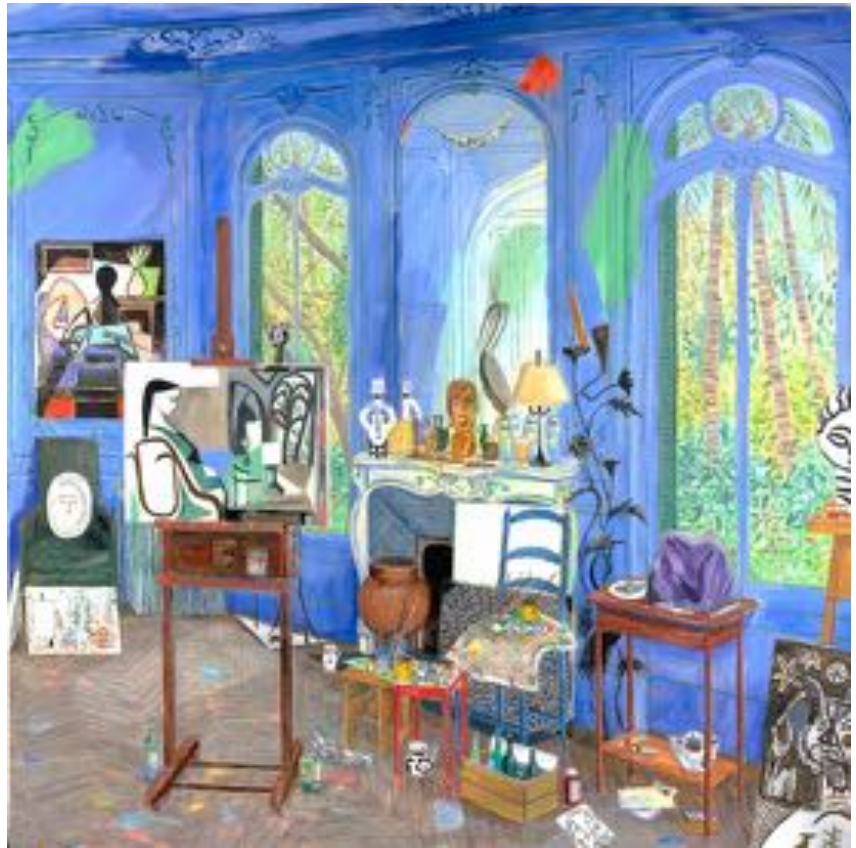
SPACE.

That's what Martin Muller remembers as his first impression upon arriving in Little Rock from Geneva, Switzerland, back in 1978, almost 40 years to the day that we find ourselves sitting in the Arkansas Arts Center's lobby, 20 yards from where the crew is putting the finishing touches on the exhibition that bears his name.

"I had come many times to the United States, but primarily to New York, and sometimes San Francisco, Los Angeles, but I had never been to what we call in French *l'Amerique profonde*—the deep heartland America," says Martin, clad in a navy corduroy suit and his trademark bow tie and gold-rimmed glasses, his European accent still noticeable but softened by four decades in America. "And my fascination to this day—each time I come, and I come to Little Rock at least once, if not twice, a year—is with the *space*. I remember arriving and saying, *Whoa, all this openness. No walls!* To me, that was a reflection of the mentality. It's open—feel free. To me, the important component of that is how it reflects in people's mentality—that's the more interesting part of it. And I picked up on that upon arrival."

He was in his early 20s at the time, with a degree in 19th- and 20th-century Russian literature and a hunger for the American experience. He was in Little Rock at the behest of a Swiss hotelier, Jacques Tréton (you may know his name as one half of Jacques & Suzanne, the French-accented restaurant that was the darling of the Little Rock restaurant scene from 1975 to 1986). Martin found a warm welcome in Little Rock and a place among what he calls a "quasi-salon" of folks—folks with names such as Fred Poe and Paul Bash and André Simon and Louis Petit, folks who enjoyed "libations served and overserved and who would get on the piano and play Scott Joplin's music and talk about theater and the avant-garde."

He also found a place at the Arkansas Arts Center—or, to be more specific, in the center's windowless library. A self-proclaimed bibliophile, someone who is, as he says, "pathologically book-obsessed" (he owns over 30,000 titles), Martin



Independent Vision: Modern and Contemporary Art from the Martin Muller Collection is on view at the Arkansas Arts Center until Dec. 30. For more info, visit arkansasartscenter.org | Damien Elwes, British (London, England, 1960 -), Picasso's Painting Studio in Cannes, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 66 inches. Image courtesy of Modernism Inc.,

took refuge in the stacks, combing through the latest editions of art periodicals for scholarship on artists of the Russian avant-garde, which he'd grown fond of during his studies in Moscow.



This almost-6-foot-wide oil painting by California Pop artist Mel Ramos hangs in Martin's home in San Francisco. "I love the space," he says. He also appreciates the artist's subtle mocking of his New York City-based contemporaries, noting that many West Coast artists didn't receive their due. | Mel Ramos, American (Sacramento, California, 1935 – 2018), *Ode to Moe #1: Oakland, 1978-79*, oil on canvas, 70 x 80 inches. Image courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco.

"I loved the smell of that room," he says of the place where he spent his off-duty hours during his year in Little Rock. "It might be slightly off-color to some, but to me, for any book lover, there's a smell: books, humidity—it's a library smell. There was pretty much always nobody in that room. I was always alone."

It might've been those afternoons in the library, it might've been the friendship Martin struck up with the director of the Arts Center at that time, Townsend Wolfe, but whatever *it* was, Little Rock was the place where Martin decided his future would be in the arts, somehow, some way. He just didn't know how—as a scholar? A dealer? He

knew *where*, though, or at least where he'd start: San Francisco, where he had close family friends. A year and some extremely fortuitous encounters later (namely with Prince Nikita and Princess Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky, a pair of wealthy Russian collectors), Martin's gallery, Modernism, was born, and his first show mounted: *The Russian Avant-Garde (1910-1930)*.

"I had to put together a show, and there was a minor detail I overlooked: the economics," he says, laughing at his 20-something naiveté. "How about the money? How about paying the bills? That requires one to sell some artworks. But to who? All my friends in

America were in Little Rock. So, what do I do? I start flying back to Little Rock, and say"—and here, Martin does a Swiss-tinged Southern impression—"Hey, y'all, you want some artworks?"

And, truly, that's where it starts. That's where the man behind the 89 works being hung in the gallery behind us—a small percentage of his 40-some-year collection, which numbers upward of 2,300 pieces by 600-some artists—found his footing in the art world.

As he finishes bringing me up to speed, Martin notices me sneaking a peek over his shoulder at the gallery behind him.

"You want to go and look?" he asks. "Do you have time?"

Do I ever.

“IT’S MY babies,” Martin says, holding the glass door open to the Townsend Wolfe Gallery. “Some people have babies. I have artworks. It’s best to have both, but my dad told me you never have it all.” We step into the exhibition’s anteroom, stopping beneath the wall text bearing his name.

“Well,” he says, clearly unsure how to define his life’s work—or at least the small slice of his life’s work—laid out before us. “First, I should say I have all the medium: paintings, drawings, prints, photography, sculpture, very little sculpture. Then within this, there are different facets which I cover: I cover art about art, I cover art with political or social issues, I collect art that is conceptual in nature, some art that would lean toward spirituality, some that would lean toward contemplation, some that would lean toward humor, some that would lean toward sensuality, meaning there are kind of pockets within ...”

He pauses. “How about if I let you look and ask, because I don’t want to put you to sleep—I could go on for a month about each artwork.”

I guess if they have something particular, I start to say.

“They *all* have something particular.”

As we walk into the exhibition hall, passing a piece by Alexander Bogomazov on our left, among others, he steers us, as if on autopilot, to a photo taken by Julian Wasser of Dadaist Marcel Duchamp. “Duchamp,” Martin says, somewhat reverently. “He’s one of the grand fundamentals of my journey. I’m very partial to him bringing about the fact that art nowadays is about *ideas*—that you find beauty in ideas, not just the object, not just the *pretty picture*, but about how beautiful is what is said, what is coming about.”

I follow him closely, the student to his teacher, reaping the benefits of seeing these works, his babies, through his eyes. We walk quickly past his Warhols, pausing instead in front of a wall-sized canvas swathed in cotton-candy pink, fringed by palm trees. “Ah, this one,” he says. “This is hanging at home. I love, *love* that painting. It’s by Mel Ramos, who’s from California, and he’s kind of mocking New York—mocking the abstract expressionists. It’s tedious and tight, where it’s supposed to be just very physical. And again, I just love the *space*. I live with this painting. I love it.”



Kazimir Malevich— that’s one of his drawings above—is an artist central to Martin’s primary scholarly interest: the Russian avant-garde. It was this movement that he was studying at the Arkansas Arts Center library back in 1978. | Kazimir S. Malevich, Russian/Ukrainian (Kiev, Ukraine, 1878 – 1935 St. Petersburg, Russia), Study for Guardsman, 1913/14, graphite on paper, 4 x 3 7/8 inches. Image courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco.

My education continues as he points out a Robert Crumb drawing here, a Diane Arbus print there, a Kazimir Malevich—the Russian avant-garde artist who was his obsession 40 years ago as he pored over journals in this very building—over there. “What you see here is a suprematist painting, a school developed by Malevich,” he says, “and again, a recurring theme of *space*. You see this? *Space*.”

He says the word often, letting it roll off his tongue in a way that draws out the vowel sound, as if the word itself were a sigh, an exhale, a letting go. An unburdening.

It’s around the time that we get to the wall of Paris-themed works—“Paris, it’s my playground,” he tells me with a wink—that it starts to set in: Walking through the gallery with Martin, I realize his collection isn’t so much a mashup of disparate works as it is a methodical curation reflecting who this human is and what makes him tick. He’s an impassioned intellectual, one who’s moved not by art that’s trendy—art that’ll “sell”—but by art that provokes a feeling. Art that makes you think. He is, as his dear friend Jonathan Keats writes in the essay he penned for the exhibition catalog, someone who buys with his eyes instead of his ears, who collects with his head and his heart.

It makes sense, then, why, as we tour the space, he’s quick to pass by the Picasso and the Le Corbusiers, the Matisse and the Hopper, preferring to linger on a piece by Shawn Huckins—the youngest artist in the show, one he says is “going to go places.” So, too, does it make sense why, back in 1982, he mounted the first West Coast solo show of Andy Warhol’s silkscreens (and why only one sold—to Martin Muller). And it makes sense, ultimately, why these works have found a home at the Arkansas Arts Center, if for only a while, at the place that in many ways opened the door to



The youngest artist in the show, Shawn Huckins, 34, creates work that merges traditional figurative painting with digital culture. “I’ve just commissioned a piece from Shawn that says WUUUURD,” laughs Martin, who collects art that plays with the idea of language. | Shawn Huckins, American (Laconia, New Hampshire, 1984 –), *The Trappers’ Return: So, Now What?*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 42 inches. Image courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco.

each and every work on these walls, and all the others back home in San Francisco: It’s a place in both his head and his heart.

And in return, Martin’s played a role in shaping the Arkansas Arts Center into the place that it is today. Of the artists on view in the show, I’ll learn, 23 of them are represented in the permanent collection, which is less a coincidence and more of a product of those semiannual cigarette-fueled tête-à-têtes between Martin and Townsend. I’ll also learn that the arts center has the largest public collection of work by Ukrainian artist Alexander Bogmazov—one of the artists Martin has championed since the early days of Modernism—of any U.S. museum, and that the institution’s collection “is the

envy of many museums for its quality and depth of holdings in Russian avant-garde art,” according to curator Brian Lang says. It’s a symbiotic relationship—one that’s endured for 40 years.

AN HOUR’S passed, and Martin’s still introducing me to his babies when he’s told that he’s needed elsewhere, leaving a handful of works unexplained. This discomforts him, knowing that some pieces will not receive their due. “That’s Samuel Beckett over there,” he says quickly as he walks toward the gallery doors, pointing to a black-and-white photograph, “and that’s the surrealist poet Paul Éluard photographed by Man Ray, and oh, there’s a *looong* story on that one, but we don’t have time. Next time?”

Next time, I nod, and as he takes his leave, I cast one final glance around the space, curious as to how my impression will have shifted now that I know what I know about the man who was but a name to me before.

And here’s the thing: Everything’s different. Looking around, all I see is Martin: Martin the Russian scholar, Martin the francophile, Martin the aspiring pianist, Martin the jokester, Martin the thinker. The Martin who could never forget the place and the people who knew him way back when—the people who gave him the *space* to become who he is.



Martin became close friends with artist Mark Stock, who painted a series of paintings Mark called “the butlers in love,” which focuses on the theme of unrequited love. “Mark thought, How can I express love that I cannot have?” And he thought the butler, because the butler works for the lady of the house, and you know, ain’t gonna happen,” Martin says. “He’s thinking about her, dreaming of her, but what, then? It’s very intense.” | Mark Stock, American (Frankfurt, Germany, 1951 – 2014, Oakland, California), *The Butler’s in Love #25*, 1987, oil on canvas, 56 x 48 inches. Image courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco.