



The New York Observer
January 10, 2000

Müller and Thompson: Adjuncts in Art
By Mario Naves

The paintings of Jan Müller (1922-1958) and Bob Thompson (1937-1966), the subject of the exhibition “Search for the Unicorn” at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, are so striking in their similarities that one initially assumes they were colleagues working in intimate correspondence towards a common goal: the establishment of a post-Ab-Ex school of painting that embraced the Arcadian, the mythic, and the figure. Coming upon “Jan Müller’s Funeral” (1958) at Bookstein, we presume that this somber canvas was Thompson’s homage to his mentor. Which is, in a sense, precisely the case, as is the notion that both men were adjuncts in art. Yet, in actuality, Müller and Thompson never met, a fact that comes as a surprise when comparing their respective work.

Thompson did eventually befriend Müller’s widow, Dody, who sternly advised the young artist not to “ever look for your solutions from contemporaries—look at Old Masters.” He would heed this advice—Thompson’s paintings are replete with quotations from Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Poussin and others—but did not ignore the juggernaut that was the New York School. This mix resulted in densely packed canvases that are flat and bright, cluttered and hasty, electric and ambitious. Thompson can’t be considered, as the painter Jay Milder described him, “a great synthesist;” the work is too unfocused to earn such a moniker and is notable more for its promise than its attainment. But the paintings Thompson left behind upon his untimely death of a drug overdose in 1966 do form one of the most tantalizing, and frustrating, “What if’s?” in recent art history.

Müller, too, died young: A childhood illness damaged his heart, and coronary surgery in 1954 only bought him so much time. But his art, while less prominent and forward-looking than that of Thompson, is the more complete. Müller was a student of Hans Hofmann, so his exposure to the verities of the New York School was at the root. Yet the movement’s influence on his work is less easy to parse. His canvases—with their dense woods inhabited by wraithlike nudes and ominous figures on horseback—are less in tune with Abstract Expressionism than with German Expressionism, as well as the art of pioneering modernists like Robert Delaunay and Marsden Hartley.

While much has been made of his break with Hofmann, Müller's art is inconceivable without the older artist's example. This is particularly evident in the weight Müller gave to his palette; in the superlative "Untitled (Landscape with Equestrians)" (circa 1955-58), he saturates the pictorial field with a crystalline checkerboard of greens, yellows, reds and blues. The gloomy nostalgia of Müller's medievalism isn't always offset by a formal resolve, and his primitivism can be willful and by the book. Yet these lean and moody dreamscapes are deserving of a fuller accounting.

The Whitney Museum of American Art recently gave us an overview of Thompson's work; we shouldn't hold our breath waiting for them to do the same for Müller. Still, if some erstwhile institution should see fit to organize such a retrospective, it would be inconceivable without the chunky facture of "Untitled (Three Figures in Landscape)" (circa 1952-54), the aforementioned "Untitled (Landscape with Equestrians)" and two or three other pictures included here.