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Course of Nature and Faust

FINE ART | By James Panero



Above, Jan Müller's 'The Concert of Angels' (1957)

Faust and Other Tales: The Paintings Of Jan Müller

◆ Lori Bookstein Fine Art
138 10th Ave., (212) 750-0949
Through June 23

In 1954, the 31-year-old painter Jan Müller (1922-1958) received a pacemaker, version 1.0, which kept him alive for a few desperate years and provided the drumbeat for his urgent artistic output. With a broken heart, he produced a heartbreaking series of paintings based on "Faust." Praised in their day, they are now largely, and sadly, forgotten. Lori Bookstein has brought them back for an exhibition that includes significant work from the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art.

Mr. Müller's last museum retrospective took place in 1962 at the Guggenheim; his reconsideration is long overdue.

Born in Hamburg, Mr. Müller fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s and emigrated with his family to the U.S. in 1941. From 1945 to 1950 he studied under Hans Hofmann, the godfather of New York School abstraction. But Mr. Müller soon synthesized the influences of German Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism, becoming one of the first Hofmann students to return to figuration.

In "The Concert of Angels" (1957), more than 12 feet wide, white ghosts reach down from the canvas edge. A row of figures with terrifying faces sing. Despite the gothic subject matter, the paint handling and composition reveal a modernist sensibility.

The blocky figures are mosaics writ large; the angular spirits are brush strokes—Abstract Expressionism meets animus.

Mr. Müller energized his final paintings with a life that could survive even death.