

The New York Observer

May 24, 2004

Lessons of Precedent

By Mario Naves

Though Jan Muller's "mosaic paintings"—pictures made up of slow accumulations of discrete and stubby brushstrokes—were created in mid-20th-century America, they could be mistaken as the efforts of an early Modernist painter from Europe. Muller (1922-1958) absorbed the lessons of precedent—Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Orphism and the quiddities of the unclassifiable Paul Klee—with determination and fidelity. He painted as if tradition were a burden he barely had the strength to shoulder. Looking at the 13 pictures at Lori Bookstein Fine Art, you'd never guess that Muller followed in the wake of Abstract Expressionism or his teacher, Hans Hoffman.

If he did have any opinions about the New York School, they probably involved misgivings—about its abandonment of observed phenomenon or its diminished capacity to embody mythical narratives. However far Muller strayed from representation, he never abandoned a subject, whether it is the nude, flowers or the landscape. In the pictures, there's an urgent need to hold onto the world of appearances, of *things*. This quality is evident even in an all-over abstraction painted between 1953-1955; the insistence of the densely patterned dabs of oil offers a vision of something tangible and specific.

Muller's paintings are hard work—his severe-bordering-on-apocalyptic fervor is oppressive and dour, wrapped up in its own mysteries. The moments when Muller's world opens up—in the stern, undulating rhythms of “Untitled (Three Figures in Landscape)” (c. 1955), or in hard-won pockets of beauty here and there—evinced a painter of singular powers. Each time I come across a Muller (a rare occurrence), I wish someone would organize a retrospective. I don't think it would occasion a rewrite of art history, but it just might expand our knowledge of it.