

T H E

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Underworlds: Jan Müller at Lori Bookstein

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We all live in the constant presence of death, and if we're lucky we can draw from it a kind of existential clarity. But for most of us, this presence is rather more hypothetical than it was for Jan Müller. After an artistic childhood in Hamburg, the removal of his socialist father to a concentration camp for several years, a long, slow flight through Europe, a rheumatic fever that gravely weakened his heart, study in New York at the Art Students League and then with Hans Hofmann, and a number of mosaic-like not-quite-abstract paintings—paintings intriguingly suggestive of where Mondrian might have ended up if he'd lived longer (and been German)—Müller underwent surgery, in 1954, to implant a plastic pacemaker with an audible tick. And an audible tick, to judge from the evidence assembled in *Faust and Other Tales* at Lori Bookstein Gallery, calls forth a more visceral



Jan Müller, *Untitled (Temptation of St Anthony)*, c. 1957, Courtesy Lori Bookstein Gallery. Photo: Etienne Frossard.

response than existential clarity—it calls forth a manic, narrative, compulsive fascination in which it is impossible to disentangle fear from desire.

Müller's abbreviated squares of color lengthened into jagged, overlapping strokes and those overlapping strokes formed figures. And as is not surprising for figures constructed from such oracularly abstract beginnings, they're figures with eerie emotional resonance and literary names, in vivid but archetypically still poses. (One naked demon in *The Temptation of St. Anthony* does the backstroke against a rainbow

sky like the Egyptian firmament-goddess Nuit.) The panoramas they inhabit have the ragged and seedy but fully loaded, claustrophobically seamless quality of dreams.

The 10-foot-wide *Walpurgisnacht—Faust I*, on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, shows Faust and Mephistopheles in the garish, morbidly colored company of nine naked witches. There's lots of black; the witches' flesh is rendered in bloodless paper-white over icy, inhuman gray; and greens and yellows are tilted toward blue and red, respectively, as if to suggest that the sun itself has been extinguished. (A rosy burst of fuchsia in the center shows where its energy has been redirected.)

In dreams, exposure doesn't always mean clarity. Faust's vague brown outfit, or Mephistopheles's sharp black habit, are simple and easily read, but the witches' naked bodies, partially outlined in black, with well-modeled legs but blocky chests and arms, and breasts tacked on like Mr. Potato Head pieces, get at the unsettled ambiguity of the human condition—not only the provisionality wrought by constant ticking, but the tense fear that removing our social roles and masks would reveal neither clearer spiritual truths nor even starker animal truths, but only amoebic incompleteness. One featureless witch crouches in the corner holding a green face away from her at arm's length; above her, two mad witches share a single broomstick, their arms and bodies impossible to tell apart.

But if it doesn't always mean clarity, exposure can be counted on, at least, to lead to further exposure: Another system of divination that assembles meaning from jagged fragments is psychoanalysis. *Walpurgisnacht—Faust II*, *Untitled (The Temptation of St. Anthony)*, *The Concert of Angels* and several other pieces all rage alongside *Faust I*, but there are three bits of Freudian nightmare in the gallery's back room particularly worth looking at.

In *Search for the Unicorn*, a white-faced figure sits on a black horse rearing back over a naked woman lying supine, with her knees bent, on the grass. Similar figures appear in *Phantom Riders (Study for The Search for the Unicorn)* and *Untitled (Rape of Europa)*. The unicorn bait has no sexual organs, her breasts are afterthoughts, and a tree seems to grow up out of her knee; while the horse's forelegs curl back like a ballerina's toes, and its face is drastically foreshortened, so that it suggests a punitive amputation. The ghostly rider sits uneasily on its equine flesh. Müller's pacemaker lasted about four years; *Faust and Other Tales* is up till June 23.