

← Back to Original Article

ART

The Master of L.A. Modernism

Emerson Woelffer has been making art for half a century, and his mentors and friends read like a Who's Who of the times.

May 31, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

For 35 years, artist Emerson Woelffer has lived in the hills near Glendale in a house crowded with tribal masks, photographs of friends that include Man Ray and Robert Motherwell, and objects gathered on his world travels. Shelves sag with books and records. "I've had quite a life," sighs the gray-bearded painter, wearing a black cowboy shirt. Gesturing at a few of the pictures on his living-room wall, he says, "Miro, Matta and Motherwell, the three M's. But I like them as much for their philosophy as for the work itself." he says.

Woelffer, 83, has been called the "Grandfather of L.A. Modernism." He rises every morning at 5:30, feeds the birds and squirrels gathered outside his kitchen door, has a little breakfast and begins drawing on paper at the table. Later, he goes downstairs to his studio to paint on canvas. Dozens of abstract pictures completed in the past year are currently on view at the Manny Silverman Gallery in the artist's first solo exhibition since 1996, "In the Studio." In addition, a retrospective of Woelffer's work is scheduled for next spring at the Fresno Museum of Art, which will then come to the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University in the fall.

All of Woelffer's recent work is distinguished by bold white slashes on black backgrounds, whether done with oil stick on paper or white oil paint on black canvas. Though striking, the impetus for the style is unfortunate: "I can see white on black better than black on white," confesses Woelffer, who suffers from macular degeneration. "It's difficult, but as long as I have white on black, I'm all right."

There are, he says, other ramifications to the condition: "No driving. That's an awful thing." Once the daring owner of a British A.C. roadster, Woelffer was an amateur road racer until a 1952 accident crippled his knee, leaving him with a limp.

Woelffer was born in Chicago, and his father was an insurance and real estate salesman who wasn't thrilled when a teacher informed him that his only son was a dreamer. Woelffer's mother was supportive of his drawing, however, and sent the boy to classes at the Chicago Art Institute.

At 20, Woelffer formally enrolled at the art institute, with its formidable collection of Impressionist painting, and was a student there from 1935 to 1937. Evenings were spent playing drums in combo at the club Jazz Ltd., where he befriended Dizzy Gillespie. Thoroughly grounded in figurative art, Woelffer went on to paint murals for the federal Works Progress Administration, which funded artists' work on public art during the Depression.

Around that time, he also began working for Chicago writer and art dealer Katherine Kuh, hanging shows in her gallery of modern art, including the work of the Spanish Surrealist Joan Miro.

"I don't know why, but it meant something to me," recalls the artist. "Sometimes, when you know the answers, it kills something. After seeing the abstract painters in her gallery, the figurative painters of the Chicago Art Society looked kind of boring to me."

After serving in the Air Force during World War II, he returned to Chicago and married photographer Dina Anderson. They were together for 45 years, until her death in 1990.

From 1942 to 1949, Woelffer taught at the Institute of Design in Chicago, under the direction of Constructivist Laslo Moholy Nagy. "His stuff was too hard-edged and severe for me," Woelffer says. Woelffer developed his own brand of psychic automatism after meeting the Chilean artist Matta. "I saw his show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York. It was fabulous. I went back to the Institute of Design and who was there but Matta, giving a talk. He came over to my studio and said, 'Really American painting.' He turned me on to a free association kind of painting and drawing."

Nevertheless, because Woelffer had been trained in the technique of academic Realism, Woelffer found it difficult at first to make abstract work. As for many of Woelffer's generation, the Surrealist approach to automatic drawing, where an artist's subconscious dictates form, was a tool of liberation. Hence Woelffer's love for Miro. "Miro used to paint his pictures flat," Woelffer says. "One day, he was eating a sandwich and a piece of jelly fell onto the canvas. That was the impetus to go on from there. That's what I do. There is no idea to begin with. I just start and it works or it doesn't. It's not about anything like a tree or an apple. I put down a line. That line suggests something else. If it doesn't work, I turn the paper over and use the other side because it costs two dollars a sheet. French arches [paper]."

In 1949, Woelffer was invited by the visionary architect Buckminster Fuller to teach at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Willem de Kooning was teaching at the time. De Kooning told Woelffer: "If you want to draw a chair, you draw the space around the chair and then you have the chair." Looking today at a painting of a white circle on a black ground, Woelffer says the lesson still applies: "The space in between forms is so important."

During the early '50s, while teaching at Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Woelffer met another artist who was to remain one of his closest allies: Robert Motherwell. "After meeting De Kooning and Motherwell, I didn't have to ask too many questions of myself. The sky is the limit. That's the feeling I got from them. I was no kid when I started doing abstract painting. I was in my 30s. It was difficult for me to break out, but I did."

Although Woelffer attempted to move to New York in the '40s, he found it was "too much." "There were lots of painters around, talking about sales and shows. It was too competitive an atmosphere for me. I've always moved where the movement wasn't," he says.

In the late '50s, he and Dina lived for three years in Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples, Italy. On the way there, he stopped in New York to see his friend Franz Kline. When Woelffer invited the Abstract Expressionist painter to join them, Kline protested, "Hell, no. I just bought a silk suit and a T-bird. If you leave this town for more than a month, they forget all about you. You gotta be here."

Woelffer, however, remained his own man and in 1959 returned to the U.S. to teach at Chouinard Art Institute--which would later become California Institute of the Arts--until 1973. From '74 to '89, he taught at Otis Art Institute, now known as Otis College of Art and Design. Although he has taught painting for many decades, he has never seen teaching as integral to his own work. "Teaching was the best way to be a painter because you only had to do it two or three days a week. When I left the school each day, I went into myself. I couldn't merge them together."

Despite being a widower, Woelffer is hardly alone in his house: An army of carved wooden figures from Africa, New Guinea, Mexico and other countries stand

at attention in every room of the house including the bathroom where they are clustered together in the tub. Woelffer explains, "It began at the Field Museum in Chicago. Art classes were taken there to draw the stuffed animals. I would go into the next corridor to look at the New Guinea and African art. I never thought of it as primitive, I thought it was fabulous."

The artist bought his first piece in Chicago. "I saw that club in a shop and the owner said it was a dollar and a half. I gave him the money and said don't wrap it. I didn't know what it was but knew it was something. It is from the Solomon Islands."

The collection became more serious after the artist moved to Los Angeles. When a U.S. State Department grant took Woelffer to Turkey in 1965, he returned with rare vessels and Cycladic figures. Living in Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1967, he purchased African and Oceanic pieces. Woelffer believes that being surrounded by carvings produced in support of spiritual beliefs has affected his own art. "I don't do those images in my painting, but maybe the attitude might be similar, a kind of belief. I think my stuff is very spiritual."

'Some people can put spirituality into words. I do it with a stick of wood with pig hair on the end and some paint," he adds. "These so-called primitive things I have here, they give me a glow. It's almost like a religion."

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"EMERSON WOELFFER: IN THE STUDIO," Manny Silverman Gallery, 619 N. Almont Drive. Dates: Open Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Ends June 27. Phone: (310) 659-8256.