



ROBERT ERNST MARX

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November 4 – December 3, 2011

DAVIDSON GALLERIES
Seattle, Washington

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Front cover image: *Mary, Mary* {p.10}

Back cover image: *Sheila* {p.25}



Legion of Loose Ladies

2011, oil on linen, 28 x 26 inches

ROBERT ERNST MARX

Recent Works: Brilliant, Rebellious, Indefatigable

Four figures stand stiffly against a dark and divided ground. Three face forward, with their eyes, ears, and foreheads alternately highlighted. The fourth is backed up against a wall, symbolically gagged, and stares at the barely visible outlines of a distant bishop. Overhead floats a sightless, wingless bird in white – a mythical apparition, beautiful and foreboding.

This is *Be Careful* (2011), a large-scale oil on linen that is quintessential Robert Marx. As visually striking as it is pivotal in its message, the painting demands that we look, listen, think, and then speak up – or suffer the consequences.

Robert Marx has constructed his career on a foundation of social, political, and psychological observation, using caricature and allegory to explore humanity's baser side, as well as its innocence: the arrogant statesmen and the indifferent clerics versus the wounded, the fragile, and the confused.

Having earned his place in the company of the likes of Hieronymous Bosch and Leonard Baskin, Marx's work is widely recognized and prized by collectors – and owned by major museums including the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), and the Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, D.C.).

Marx himself has always struck me as an unusual man, though he would probably deny it. He is a devoted teacher and a natural storyteller. In an ego-driven world, he remains refreshingly self-effacing while in complete command of his creative voice. He is comfortable with ambiguity and tells us as much, encouraging us to wander through his world and interpret as we will. To that end, he furnishes the space to maneuver – literally and metaphorically – and provides us a pictorial lexicon to do so: cords and strings, ropes and tethers, bird-like beaks and carnival masks, hats and helmets to identify the players. Restraints proliferate in this landscape: circles form the noose, the ringer, the prison guard's keys, the acrobat's apparatus.

In Marx's universe, a precarious tension is the norm, as a tender touch anoints subjects that bristle with import. Eyes are frequently vacant and speech is systematically silenced. Drawings and etchings are painfully delicate and full of frailty. Cast bronze reliefs and sculpture combine their curvaceous shapes with meticulous details. Marx's painterly palette is both brooding and arresting, its browns and blues punctuated by burnt orange, while surfaces, whatever the medium, are deceptively complex – built and abraded, marked and layered – heightening our desire to approach and explore. The artist surely seeks to provoke and disturb us, and he succeeds.

In these most recent compositions, Marx continues to rely on personification as well as on portraiture, yet his depiction of decay reflects its increasingly insidious

spread. Noting that corruption is filtering down to the rank and file, he presents the pastor and the proctor rather than the prelate, the cagey collaborator as well as the hapless general.

In fact, *Collaborator* (2011) is a startling image, as the traitor's face peers awkwardly from a roiling surface, set adrift in a space that holds dangers of its own. *Scholar* (2010) cuts a sorrowful profile as a once learned man finds himself reduced to placid acceptance. Eyes half-shut – he is neither a conduit for information, nor a source of vision.

But this isn't entirely a darkening story. *Justice* (2011) appears as a jarred but amiable personality, his wig askew but his color, vigorous. *Mary, Mary* (2011) is a glittering creature – two-faced and irresistible, shuddering and evolving, inexplicably magnetic in the uncertain outcome of dueling selves.

Gus (2011), the jester, is an approachable character, and his role remains a familiar theme for Marx. Yet he isn't fearful or frightening as in past portraits. He sports a dandy dunce cap as petal-like swirls flutter out its top. He is masked, but not blindfolded, and free to speak as the monarch's confidante.

If Robert Marx schools us in history, it is for us to apply its lessons to contemporary culture. We may well agree that divisive forces are part of human experience – the desire for power and the aptitude for abusing it, the futility of war and the devastation that results – but Marx explicitly instructs us to take the next step. If lines effectively divide us, couldn't they also serve to save us? If we are in possession of our senses, shouldn't we exploit them?

Ultimately, I take hope in the portrait of *Gus* – poised to exert his influence. I take hope in *Mary, Mary* – who suffers the soul-searching of indecision. I take hope in the portrayal of *Justice* – attempting attentiveness and flush with enthusiasm. I view the *Scholar* with resigned skepticism, and I heed the warning implicit in *Be Careful*.

While these recent works form a clear connective thread in Marx's oeuvre, I also sense a distinct and empowering departure. Robert Marx is pumping up his visual volume – reds are richer, plums more luxurious, jeweled blues and greens enliven his usual somber palette. Vision is sharpened; vacuous eyes are replaced with focus. This is Marx the rebel, Marx the tireless purveyor of cautionary tales, Marx in the brilliant blossoming of his insistence: We must bear witness to ignorance and its legacy. We may follow deafly, wait dumbly, act blindly. Or, we can open our eyes, opt for intelligent exchange, and in place of constraints - establish connections.

– DEBRA WOLF

Debra Wolf is a freelance journalist and collector of contemporary art. She has written for *ARTnews*, *Raw Vision*, and is a former art reviewer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

PAINTING

The people I draw, paint and sculpt personify the human condition. They are the people around us...every day.

I have favorite themes: I am troubled by the arrogance of power, the exclusivity of the institutions of church and state, abuse by and of both spouse and child, and our own and others' personal fears and insecurities. We are also to some degree trapped by conventions we impose upon ourselves. While painful to express, these themes desperately need expression, and I do it visually.

I have created my own visual language, building upon the insights of my artistic ancestors. For example, Picasso was the first to paint a dismembered human body to convey a sense of futility. I also use symbols, such as manikins, masks, dangling limbs and puppet strings, as my visual "shorthand" for the forces which frustrate us all.

I work not only for myself, but also to make a connection with you. I do so as elegantly as possible and with an ambiguity that invites you to join me through your own interpretation.

If I am successful, my people will make eye contact with you, and our dialogue will begin.

ROBERT ERNST MARX



Cymbeline
2011, oil on linen, 13 x 11 inches



Mary, Mary
2011, oil on linen, 20 x 16 inches



Costanza
2011, oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches



Baroness Antoinette
2010, oil on linen, 26 x 20 inches



Tired Helen
2010, oil on linen, 9 x 8 inches



Ghost of Eloise
2010, oil on linen, 13 x 11 inches



Collaborator
2011, oil on linen, 24 x 20 inches



Be Careful
2011, oil on linen, 34 x 46 inches



Justice
2011, oil on linen, 12 x 9 inches



Fawkes
2011, oil on linen, 8 x 8 inches



Gus
2010, oil on linen, 24 x 20 inches



Dear Prudence
2010, oil on linen, 12 x 10 inches



Isabella
2011, oil on linen, 9 x 8 inches



Scholar
2010, oil on linen, 24 x 20 inches



Within My Darkest Days
2011, oil on linen, 14 x 11 inches



Sheila
2010, oil on linen, 12 x 10 inches

I met Robert Marx in 1970 after my recent arrival at Ferdinand Roten Galleries in Baltimore, Maryland. He was delivering an edition of his etchings the gallery had purchased. Impressed by the images, I asked the directors about him. I learned of his publishing with his Black Bird Press and the antiwar activist Berrigan brothers. From fellow New England artist Sigmund Abeles I learned of his many animals, (one black ram in particular), that shared the barn with the Press.

When I left Roten Galleries to establish Davidson Galleries in Seattle in 1973, Marx was the first artist I approached. Generously, in spite of my lack of financial wherewithal, he agreed to allow me to represent his work.

It has been a great honor to show Robert's work as the artist moves effortlessly between his etchings, drawings, sculpture and paintings. Unswayed by topical trends in the art scene, he follows a personal compass to explore a figurative language built on solid drawing. Marx's sensitivity to the human form, gleaned from a lifetime of observation, derives from his appreciation of the human condition. His paintings share the same interest in surface that made his etching platework so rich. His process of sanding, scraping and over-painting on a canvas mimic his frequent return to the surfaces of the copper plates. The figures that populate his more than sixty years of drawings find full form in the relief and three-dimensional sculpture. A large scale cast bronze chess set, from 2004, in particular gave a unique expression to many of his favorite subjects - Bishops, Pawns, and Queens.

As a teacher, Robert Marx was highly respected and honored, but it is his steadfast commitment to his ideals that has guided his consistent development as an artist. One show, of the many exhibitions we did together, gave me more insight into his work than all of the thirty-eight years of conversations we shared. It was a show of his broadsides - each single etching was done in response to a single quote by a poet, theologian, philosopher or writer. The range and depth of his convictions manifested through these pairings was deeply revealing and succinctly expressed. If each work is 'about' something in particular, these broadsides come closest to expressing it.

The work of Robert Marx will endure beyond the present because its foundation is sound and it consistently presents the truth as understood by a thoughtful man.

SAM DAVIDSON
9/22/2011

SCULPTURE & DRAWING



Bailiff

2008, cast bronze relief. Edition of 10, 3-1/2 x 2-3/4 x 1 inches



Knightly Angel

2009, cast bronze mounted on wood. Edition of 10, 6-1/2 X 5 X 2-1/2 inches



Gemini

2009, cast bronze relief. Edition of 10, 5-1/8 x 4-1/4 x 1 inches



An Eye For an Eye

2009, cast bronze relief. Edition of 10, 3-1/2 x 2-3/4 x 1 inches



Double Dealer

2007, cast bronze relief. Edition of 5, 16-1/2 x 13-5/8 inches



Prelate

2006, cast bronze. Edition of 10, 13 x 4 x 4 inches



Alienor
2011, graphite on paper, 16 x 14 inches



Madge
2011, graphite on paper, 8 x 7 inches



Would-Be
2011, graphite on paper, 9-1/2 x 7 inches



Specter
2011, graphite on paper, 16 x 14 inches



Proctor
2011, graphite on paper, 16 x 14 inches



Pastor
2011, graphite on paper, 16 x 14 inches

ROBERT ERNST MARX

Education

B.F.A., University of Illinois, 1951
M.F.A., University of Illinois, 1953

Solo Exhibitions (since 1991)

2011 Davidson Galleries (2009, 2007, 2004, 2002, 2000, 1998, 1995, 1993, 1991)
2010 Mason Murer Fine Art, Atlanta, GA (2009)
2009 Williams Gallery, Rochester, NY (2006)
2008 Alan Avery Art Company, Atlanta, GA (2007, 2006, 2005, 2004, 2003)
2005 Udinotti Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ (2001, 1999, 1998)
1999 The Gallery at Gateway, Rochester, NY
1998 92nd St. YMHA, New York, NY
1991 Gallery 500, Elkins Park, PA

Selected Public Collections (sample)

Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY
Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Dallas Museum of Art, TX
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Los Angeles County Museum, CA
Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Seattle Art Museum, WA
Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY

Rare Book Libraries

Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, IL
Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT
Bodleian Library, Oxford University, United Kingdom
Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Academic Appointments (since 1985)

1990 Distinguished Professor Emeritus, State University of New York (SUNY)
1989 Distinguished Professor, SUNY
1985 Fulbright lecturer, Delhi University, New Delhi, India



DAVIDSON GALLERIES