

SKARSTEDT

Forbes

Martin Kippenberger, You Can't Fool Me

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© Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
*Martin Kippenberger, Ohne Titel (aus der Serie Hand Painted Pictures), Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures), 1992,
oil on canvas, 70.87 × 59.06 inches*



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It seemed fitting that I was reading *Charming Billy*, the 1997 book by Alice McDermott about a charming man who died from alcoholism, when I went to go visit “Martin Kippenberger: Hand Painted Pictures,” an exhibition of 12 paintings open through December 16 at Skarstedt Gallery on the Upper East Side. Martin Kippenberger was a renowned alcoholic, a man whose art making was often a sidebar to his relentless partying. The paintings in the show are self portraits made in 1992 on the Greek island of Syros. They depict Kippenberger, beer gut forward, taking on the poses of a boxer, a dancer, Adam facing God in an imitation of Michelangelo’s famous Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco.

Many things can be read in the work, and the gallery is happy to provide materials that outline the various recurring motifs – eggs, Greek lettering spelling out clever phrases in German such as "enfant terrific" and "Pocket money is in," Kippenberger’s black and neon orange elastene shorts. But what I saw most was a friend of mine who is a heavy drinker; whose life seemingly has no bottom to reach. Whose talents as an artist have been reduced to filter-less photographs posted from desolate subway stops on his Instagram page that my sister recently declared: “Look like absolute shit.”



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Martin Kippenberger, Ohne Titel (aus der Serie Hand Painted Pictures), Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures), 1992, oil on canvas, 70.87 x 59.06 inches

Mostly, there is a physical resemblance — both Kippenberger in the portraits and my friend are balding with beards. And there is of course the alcoholism. But Kippenberger's self portraits are resolutely not absolute shit. In fact, they are stubbornly beautiful. Massive in scale, and loose in brushstroke, the works are marked most by their balance of color — the orange of the shorts is drawn forth by splashes of red, purple, blue and yellow — creating canvasses that feel visually rich despite their attempts to be grotesque and silly. The lines are balanced. The works are eminently collectible.

“He never worked in a drunken state,” said Gisela Capitain, who first met Kippenberger in Berlin in the late 1970s, and remains the representative of his estate. “He might have had a little hangover in the morning. He never started painting when he was under the influence. He was in a very clear state of mind.”



© Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
Martin Kippenberger, Ohne Titel (aus der Serie Hand Painted Pictures), Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures), 1992, oil on canvas, 70 7/8 x 59 1/8 inches

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I called Gisela in Cologne, where she runs an eponymous gallery focusing on contemporary German and American art — she was more serious than I expected, given that the first photograph that comes up in a Google search of her name is one in which she is dancing with Kippenberger, whose pants are around his ankles. Gisela is sassily pursing her lips. “Martin knew that he wanted to become famous, and he wanted to put his foot on the ground and make a mark, and say ‘Here I am, this is what you have to deal with,’” she said. “On the other side when you had lived with him, or stayed a while with him, he was quiet, not shy, but introverted. There were these two extremes.”



© Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
Martin Kippenberger, Ohne Titel (aus der Serie Hand Painted Pictures), Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures), 1992, oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 94 1/2 inches

It’s hard not to see Kippenberger giving himself a way out of his own work — “Oh, you took that self portrait seriously, and hated it, but you’re the fool because I was just fucking around with my ugly face,” he seems to say. “Look at me, I’m revolting.” The portraits are full of fear, but not of death, or of the decline of Kippenberger’s own physical beauty as he aged; but rather, that his paintings won’t be considered “good,” that they won’t be taken seriously by the art world. You can tell because the dissemble. They are so stubbornly beautiful.

“He had a direct and very fearless working attitude which I found extremely impressive, and stunning,” Gisela told me. She said that on Syros, he lived in his friend Michael Würthle, who owned a bar Kippenberger frequented in Berlin. In the mornings, Kippenberger

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painted in a free standing studio on the property. Würthle had a Greek wife who helped Kippenberger translate the German phrases into Greek lettering. It's easy to see their days there. Sun soaked; wine at lunch. Liquor in the evenings. Good days, and then bad ones. Fights at night, and the Greek wife growing increasingly irritated. The sense that one was being forced to live in Kippenberger's coffin with him.



© Estate Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne
Martin Kippenberger, Ohne Titel (aus der Serie Hand Painted Pictures), Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures), 1992, oil on canvas, 70 7/8 x 59 1/16 inches

Kippenberger died of liver cancer at age of 44 in 1997, five years after the self portraits were made. Some of his obituaries said that the cancer was alcohol related. Having been close to alcoholism, the end must have been ugly. Kippenberger had a young daughter. A new wife. One does not drink oneself to death in a vacuum. The shame of the self-portraits is that they don't show the real man, but instead, the man who wanted to be remembered as a famous artist. I yearned for something truly grotesque while looking at them — I yearned to see what Kippenberger was really like as a person.

