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## The Kippenberger Conundrum: How the Wildly Prolific Artist's Artist Became an Eight-Figure Auction Darling

BY *Nate Freeman* POSTED 01/08/18 12:40 PM

Martin Kippenberger.  
COURTESY TASCHEN

It was the peak of the 2014 fall auction season in New York, and though nearly two decades had gone by since Martin Kippenberger's death of liver failure in 1997, the artist's market had never been hotter. Prior to its bellwether postwar and contemporary evening sale, Christie's had set the estimate for a prized 1988 Kippenberger self-portrait in its November sale at \$20 million—an aggressive estimate, but one that paid off. It was bought by dealer Larry Gagosian, hammering at \$20 million for a with-premium total of \$22.5 million.

The sale capped a run of seasons where the Kippenberger market rose precipitously—an irony for an artist who lampooned both “try-hard” artists who sucked up to the market people and the market people who got suckered into buying any of it.

All of Kippenberger's top ten highest-selling works at auction have come in the last five years, and after the one-two punch of 1988 works sold at Christie's in May and November 2014—the \$22.5 million picture nabbed by Gagosian, but also another work from the same



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series that sold for \$18.6 million—the same auction house sold two more Kippenbergers in May 2015: another 1988 self-portrait for \$16.4 million, and one of his 1996 paintings of Jacqueline Picasso for \$12.5 million.

The “Picasso Paintings”—or, as they’re sometimes called, the “Underwear Paintings”—are perhaps Kippenberger’s most beloved series, based on photographs taken of Picasso, his hero, but self-effacing in tone. There are seven of them. Another celebrated series is his “Hand-Painted Pictures,” which first debuted at Galerie Max Hetzler in Cologne in 1992—and which occupy three of his top ten auction spots. Last month, New York’s Skarstedt Gallery closed a show that wrangled 15 of the original 23 works in the Hetzler show.

The gallery declined to comment, but sources said that while not all of the works in the show were for sale, some of those that were had price tags north of \$10 million—a figure that advisers indicated was perfectly reasonable for the artist, as some of his work regularly commands seven figures.

Such was not the case when Kippenberger was a misfit globetrotting artist’s artist in the 1980s and 90s, attracting adoration but hardly any big-ticket sales.

“The main problem was that his work is so different, and so big, that maybe it just took some time, but now people are looking for a certain part of his practice,” Lisa Franzen, a director at Galerie Gisela Capitain, told me over the phone.



Martin Kippenberger, *Obne Titel* (1992),  
from the Hand Painted Pictures series.  
COURTESY SKARSTEDT GALLERY

That Cologne-based gallery represented Kippenberger in his hometown during his lifetime, and Franzen now works there helping to oversee the estate. She specified that the part of his practice that is now so coveted are his large self-portraits, the same self-portraits that sold for record numbers at auction.

The demand for these, she said, has hit a fever pitch.

“The market in a way has made its decision,” Franzen said. “And now there are these works that enter the market that are super, super expensive.”

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While the sharp uptick in prices for certain Kippenberger series did not begin in earnest until this decade, the market has long been simmering—despite the artist’s clear intention to sink it himself before his death. In addition to making difficult work that openly mocked anyone who might consider buying it, he flaunted the game in numerous ways, including by making willfully mediocre paintings despite his finely-honed skills as a draftsman, and producing so much work that no dealer could orchestrate any kind of price stabilization.

“Martin didn’t behave according to any rules, whether the rules of my parents, the punks, or the art world,” his sister, Suzanne, told the *Paris Review* in a 2012 interview. “Max Hetzler later got upset because Martin didn’t work strategically. He did a lot of shows, which upset Hetzler. You know, you have to make yourself scarce. But Martin had a sense, always, that he didn’t have much time.”

He did have fans among his fellow artists, and among more adventurous European and American dealers. New York gallery Metro Pictures had a show in 1985, and Hetzler brought Kippenberger to Los Angeles in the early ’90s, when he opened a short-lived branch there in collaboration with New York gallery Luhring Augustine.

(Kippenberger took to Los Angeles, to the extent that he bought a 35-percent stake in a popular Venice Beach restaurant called Capri. Naturally, his performances involved mocking the customers and trying to get them to leave. The restaurant is now under a new name, but it is still an art-world pilgrimage.)



An untitled self-portrait from the “Picasso Paintings” series, from 1988.

COURTESY CHRISTIE’S

Kippenberger made his grand debut at auction in 1987, when a collage sold at Sotheby’s Amsterdam for the commanding total of . . . \$833. A year later, in the south of Spain with fellow artist and compatriot Albert Oehlen, he began to finally hit creative paydirt with images of a beer-gutted, slack-faced Kippy in the place of the heroic Pablo. Hetzler was able to sell one of them to another artist in his stable, Jeff Koons, who was simpatico with

Kippenberger. Koons promptly hung it above the fireplace at his West Village cottage (an apartment now, as it happens, owned by Michael Werner Gallery director Gordon Veneklasen) but by 1993, he was hard up for cash after a punishing divorce saga, and sold it, through Hetzler, to art book publisher Benedikt Taschen.



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Despite a prodigious output, and a reputation that preceded him, Kippenberger's sales were relatively rare during the last years of his life.

“He was a major artist and it was an incredible moment in Cologne that got noticed by and included exhibitions of the work of many working at that time—but not so much major by the market,” said Thea Westreich Wagner, the collector and advisor who was friendly with Kippenberger and hung out with him in Cologne, and when he stayed at New York's Chelsea Hotel. “Kippy knew that he was an artist who had an amazing following in the art world, and by other artists, but he lived his life his way and for the most part ignored the market.”

Through the '90s his self-portraits in underwear remained a focal point for Kippenberger devotees, and in fall 1999, two years after his death, Christie's put one in its postwar and contemporary evening sale. A decidedly abject scene of the flabby Kippenberger staring at himself in an ovular mirror, as a sour-apple-green balloon floats beside him, it was consigned by the SoHo gallery Nolan-Eckman—which lives on today as Chelsea's David Nolan Gallery—and Christie's gave it a pre-sale estimate of \$40,000, which seemed ballsy considering the artist's auction record at the time was just \$19,000. But the bidding exploded out of the gate, with auctioneer Christopher Burge fielding bids from specialists until Simon de



Martin Kippenberger, *Zuerst die Füße (Feet First)* (1990).

COURTESY CHRISTIE'S

Pury bid \$500,000. At this point, as Carol Vogel wrote in the *New York Times*, “the audience began laughing in disbelief.” And then it went up to \$560,000 on the Christie's specialist's gambit, stalled there, and then was pushed higher. The price with fees was \$717,500, more than four times the estimate, hoisting the late Kippenberger into an art market echelon he tried so desperately to never reach.

The sale marked the end of an era Kippenberger had scoffed at. As Peter Schjeldahl put it in his review of the artist's 2009 retrospective, which traveled from MoCA in Los Angeles to MoMA in New York, “Kippenberger both epitomizes and burlesques the art game's pell-mell institutional, commercial, and academic expansion in the biennial-bedizened nineteen-eighties and nineties.”

That Christie's sale opened the floodgates, and over the next five years, Kippenbergers came to the block with more frequency, with 11 offered during the New York sales in the fall of





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2004; four of those sold in the six figures. The activist investor Dan Loeb began stockpiling Kippenbergers until he reportedly had 60, and proudly displayed Kippenberger's controversial sculpture of a crucified frog at the offices of Third Point, his hedge fund. When Loeb began selling off his Kippenberger holdings in 2005, some feared a drop in the market—only to learn that the buyer was Charles Saatchi, the influential English advertising executive whose patronage thrust the YBAs into ascension a decade earlier. In May 2005 a Kippenberger broke the million dollar mark when an untitled work from 1991, estimated at \$800,000, sold for \$1.02 million at Phillips de Pury.

Even after the recession hit in 2008, the auction houses were hungry for Kippenberger, spurred on by the MoMA retrospective. For its May 2009 contemporary evening sale, Sotheby's got a 1988 Picasso-inspired self-portrait that Greek shipping magnate Dakis Joannou had been holding onto for 15 years. Sotheby's so badly wanted the painting—which was untitled like the other 1988 self-portraits, but remarkable for its two striking, waxy yellow balloons—that the house guaranteed it themselves, breaking the moratorium on financing work set just the November prior. It sold squarely within the estimate, for \$4.1 million, bought in the room by Iwan Wirth—who, according to Sarah Thornton, reporting for *Artforum*, could have been acting on behalf of German collector Mick Flick. A few months later, at Christie's London, an American collector, bidding by phone through a Christie's rep, beat out dealer Jeffrey Deitch and German collector Ingvild Goetz to get *Paris Bar*, a 1991 rendering of Kippenberger and crew's favorite Berlin watering hole, for \$3.7 million.

“An artist goes unrecognized, and then all of a sudden—snap, crackle, and pop! He gains attention,” Westreich Wagner told me over the phone. “But I was as surprised by the prices as much as anyone. And I would have love to have seen Kippy the day he saw his work commanding those prices—I think we would have been drinking more wine than usual!”

Kippenberger's work made its next price leap after the global economy recovered. At the London Frieze Week auctions in 2012, Christie's sold a self-portrait from the “Hand-Painted Pictures” series—showing Kippy dukes-up, ready to barrel head-first into a drunken brawl—that was consigned by a friend of the artist, who bought it at Metro Pictures in 1997. It sold for \$5.1 million, a new record.

In May 2014, Christie's chairman Loic Gouzer fought to get on consignment a work from that same celebrated 1988 series—the artist cosplaying Picasso in unflattering underwear. Gouzer was scheming to get it into his themed sale at Christie's, “If I Live I'll See You Tuesday,” but it cost him a pretty penny to secure it, and he set the estimate at a risky \$12 million high. The artist's previous auction record was just \$6.4 million.

But after some back and forth in the Rockefeller Center sales room, specialist Xin Li sold it to her client on the phone, the Chinese restaurateur Zhang Lan, for an astounding \$18.6 million.

Six months later, Christie's sold the untitled 1988 self-portrait for \$22.5 million, at its postwar and contemporary sale in New York—and Per Skarstedt, a secondary market maven



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who built a business by seizing upon the oeuvre of once-overlooked artists and estates, took notice. The dealer organized the ambitious exhibition of the “Hand-Painted Paintings” to stage at the end of 2017, and chose for the catalogue’s cover shot that tragic portrayal of Kippy as a doomed boxer that sold at Christie’s in 2012—it could be seen on flag ads hanging on lampposts up and down Madison Avenue. It’s unclear whether or not the work was for sale, but regardless it was a coup to have it on view, and the depth of the show was admirable, even if it was missing the painting from the series that Budi Tek’s Yuz Museum purchased at Sotheby’s in London in 2014 for \$3.7 million.

As for the Picasso paintings, they are unlikely to be reunited anytime soon. When one of the seven came up for auction in May 2015 at Christie’s, it was catnip for Kippenberger fanatics, despite the \$15 million estimate. One person who had his eye on it was Jeff Koons—it was the same work that once hung above his fireplace on Macdougall Alley, the one he parted ways in with in 1993 for \$40,000. Now was his chance to buy it back from Benedikt Taschen.

The only problem, as Koons told Linda Yablonsky before the sale, was that Kippenberger was once again getting the last laugh.

“When I heard it was coming back up, I did think it would be fantastic to have it again,” Koons said. “But the paintings have become expensive.”

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