

SKARSTEDT

 BROOKLYN RAIL

Martin Kippenberger: *Paintings 1984–1996*



The first thing to understand about Martin Kippenberger (1953–1997) is that he is incomprehensible. Accept that, and his career becomes plausible, if not totally coherent. The quintessential artist of the final decades of the twentieth century, Kippenberger was a jack of all trades—and master of all.

A few moments in his rollercoaster career. Florence, 1977: first painting show. 1978: stops painting, creates Kippenberger's Office, organizes exhibitions of his own work and that of others. 1978: founds rock group Luxus, performs, records. 1979: creates disco SO36 performance, music, film; Grugas, punk rock band. 1981: starts painting again. 1982: works with Albert Oehlen; makes record, *The Revenge of Memory*, with Jörg Immendorff, A. R. Penck, Oehlen, and others. 1984: publishes with Oehlen and Werner Büttner *Truth is Work*, statements about artistic production, poems, Lord Jim Lodge. 1986 Brazil: the Magical Misery Tour, buys gas station, renames it *Martin Bormann Gas Station*. 1987: begins Hotel Drawings series, which runs until 1997. 1988: publishes novel *Café Central*, gossip and

esthetic pronouncements, *Laterne* series (misshapen streetlamps), sculpture, begins Picasso parodies. 1989 Los Angeles: restaurateur. This dizzying list, incomplete of course, may give an idea of what following the work of this esthetic anarchist was like.

Kippenberger would have been seventy years old on February 25, but the idea of a geriatric Kippenberger is clearly absurd. The eight works now gathered at Skarstedt, from the final twelve years of his life, are in fact a mirror held up to his painterly career. Missing are the drunken streetlamps, the impromptu metro entrances, and other sculptural objects, but what we do have makes us realize that each piece has infinite possibilities. In other words, these eight paintings are a valid sample of Kippenberger at his outrageous, parodic best.

Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures) (1992) is a painted collage. In the upper background we find a series of letters beginning with BAZ, followed by a series of letter groups that might be nonsense or, according to some, a shorthand version of the query “What’s up with this?” The upside-down figure on the left side of the painting, taken in conjunction with the BAZ above, makes reference to Georg Baselitz and functions as a parody of his predilection for upside-down images. The right hand of the inverted, shirtless figure extends to a white mass he may well be drawing, so what we have is a portrait of an upside-down Baselitz at work. But does it ultimately matter to the viewer that the image is thus inscribed on the heart of the post-War German art



SKARSTEDT

community? For those determined (or doomed) to find ultimate meanings, it may. For those who enjoy zany juxtapositions in art it may not be so important.

The parodic impulse is more overt in *Untitled (from the series Jacqueline: The Paintings Pablo Couldn't Paint Anymore)* (1996). By the time Kippenberger painted this caricature, Picasso had been dead for twenty-three years and Jacqueline Roque for ten, so the idea that this was some sort of assault on Picasso is difficult to believe. Rather, it is Kippenberger working his way into Picasso's portraits of Jacqueline, which are more composite portraits of himself and Jacqueline than actual likenesses. As with the allusion to Baselitz, this painting is really about painting itself and how self-referentiality always haunts the representational artist. Kippenberger's Jacqueline is neither Jacqueline nor Picasso but some kind of composite emanating from Kippenberger, a self-portrait as other.

This we also see in *Untitled (from the series Self-Portraits)* (1988). Here the idea of the portrait or self-portrait is rendered ridiculous. In the first place, the brooding, bearded man with close cropped hair presented here in meditative profile does not look like Kippenberger (a youthful Markus Lüpertz is one farfetched possibility). And in the second, the truncated image, cut off at the thigh, rests in a niche, so his absurd monumentality is heightened. The boxer shorts pulled high above the waist, perhaps to dissimulate a pot belly, confirm the figure's nonsensical self-importance. This is Kippenberger's personal rendition of Shelly's *Ozymandias*, the folly of seeking self-aggrandizing immortality in portraiture or self-portraiture.



The grand prize for portraits goes to *Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures)* (1992). A plausible rendition of a “dream portrait,” the male image on the right does have a passing resemblance to Kippenberger, his eyes closed and his mind at work. On the left is an image in the making with disparate, unconnected elements—even, it seems, some shoes. Perhaps this could be a rendition of the old Surrealist notion of the subconscious, liberated in dreams and producing art automatically. Whatever the relationship ultimately is between the left and right halves of the painting, the effect is arresting. We cannot take our

SKARSTEDT

eyes off this enigmatic figure. This gives us an insight into Kippenberger's relationship with a certain facet of modernism: the avant-garde desire to astonish viewers, to provoke them into reacting to the work.

There are only eight pictures in this show, but they inspire innumerable thoughts. Martin Kippenberger was only forty-four when he died, but he managed to live several artistic lifetimes in that short span.

Images:

Martin Kippenberger, *Untitled (from the series Hand Painted Pictures)*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 70 x 59 inches. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Skarstedt, New York. Image courtesy of Skarstedt, New York.

Martin Kippenberger, *Untitled (from the series Jacqueline: The Paintings Pablo Couldn't Paint Anymore)*, 1996. Oil on canvas, 71 x 59 inches. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Skarstedt, New York. Image courtesy of Skarstedt, New York.

Installation view: *Martin Kippenberger: Paintings 1984–1996*, Skarstedt, New York, 2023. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, and Skarstedt, New York. Image courtesy of Skarstedt, New York.