

New York Magazine  
February 26, 2009

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Artist Who Did Everything

MoMA's Martin Kippenberger retrospective takes him back from the academics.

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Published Feb 26, 2009



An untitled Kippenberger painting from 1981.

(Photo: Courtesy of MoMA and © the Estate of Martin Kippenberger/Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne)

Midway through “Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective,” a show I expected to be good but uneven, I found myself stunned. I had just been through several galleries

filled with his early work—a painting of a fragmenting Guggenheim Museum, a photo of Kippenberger holding a bomb with the World Trade Center behind him, a brown Ford sprinkled with oat flakes, a mannequin of the artist standing in a corner, and what looks like a self-portrait bearing the title *The Mother of Joseph Beuys*. Then, in a room packed with *The Peter Sculptures*, a tremendous installation that looked like a storeroom or a swap meet, I understood. The curators, Ann Goldstein and Ann Temkin, were shutting down the awful academic echo chamber that has tried to turn Kippenberger into one cutout caricature or another: cagey gamesman, aesthetic tinkerer, fun drunk, anti-hero. They let his insurrectionary freedom and radicalism come out.

Kippenberger, who died in 1997 at the age of 44 from cirrhosis brought on by his prodigious drinking, was a live wire. He spoke in pungent aphorisms. He called exhibitions “a running gag.” Art schools were “the most stupid of all educational institutions.” The art market was like “screwing your dick to the wall.” (A nude photo of the artist suggests this would have been an extensive task.) He referred to himself variously as “a woman,” “an alky,” “a sales representative,” and “the holy Saint Martin.” He led a peripatetic life. Early in his career he settled in Florence, trying to become a film actor. Then he moved to Berlin, where he co-founded the gallery/crash pad “Kippenbergers Buro,” ran a nightclub, and started a punk band. In one memorable incident, he went into a bar and acted like a Nazi until patrons beat him up. Then he painted a picture of himself, battered and bandaged. (Another aphorism: “You may behave like an asshole, but you must never be one.”)

Later on, he grew wealthy, having inherited 700,000 Deutschmarks from his mother, who had been killed by a pallet falling off a truck. (After which Kippenberger started making art out of pallets.) From then, he moved among multiple residences, in Paris, Cologne, L.A., and Spain; opened the “Martin Bormann Gas Station” in Brazil; founded an art museum on a Greek island; and turned a Gerhard Richter monochrome into a cheap coffee table. If Robert Rauschenberg was the American Picasso—constantly innovating and working, and also prone to churning out crud—Kippenberger is the German Rauschenberg.

For the past decade, the world has been dominated by a chilly mix of Warhol's use of culture as material, Richter's ideas about photographs and abstraction, and Richard Prince's notions of appropriation. It's an international style that too many people use to produce art that looks like other art. Kippenberger's work is powerful enough to scatter that aesthetic weather system. It's deeply imprinted with received theories about reproduction, popular culture, and photography, but it never feels like it comes out of a cookie cutter. He created his own theory and then blew it to bits. Skepticism was his weapon of aesthetic destruction.

In "The Problem Perspective," the curators give us Kippenberger the bacchanalian art-making machine, hanging several hundred works, some in dim nooks or high on walls. A lamppost sculpture with a Santa hat occupies the space usually held by Rodin's *Balzac*. This is the most alive the new MoMA has looked, and it puts the overriding content of Kippenberger's work into sharp focus: inner necessity, a frenzy against control, the need to pulverize clichés, and desperation built upon the fear of a short life. Most important, he was comfortable holding seemingly contradictory positions at once. Kippenberger instinctively grasped that ideologies and hierarchies were moribund, that formalism and technique are flexible, and that one can be idealistic without being utopian. These are keys for young artists looking for ways around pessimism and gamesmanship.

Although there's much here that comes off as garish or schlocky, I left loving Kippenberger more than ever. People often complain that he never made a single great artwork. On the contrary: In his paintings he's obviously battling with art history, especially the German variety, but his canvases are visually intense and physically and materially alive, establishing their own powerful conceptual orbits. In his sculpture, he is absolutely free, setting his own agenda—it's impossible to imagine today's sculpture without Kippenberger. A grid of 55 early black-and-white canvases of postcards and photos (done while he was in Florence) already shows his sense of subject matter and skill, and his artistic wrestling match with Richter. His 1988 self-portraits—showing himself as big as a blimp, in underpants pulled high—parody macho male painters. The

latex paintings with stuff jutting from them are amazements; a 1984 abstraction with a hint of a swastika, provocatively titled *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika*, sees that one generation of Germans was trying to forget the symbol while a younger one was coming to terms with its elders' willed blindness. Either way, the painting is some kind of late-twentieth-century masterpiece.

In the final two series, we see Kippenberger posing like Picasso's last wife, Jacqueline, subtitled the piece *The Paintings Pablo Couldn't Paint Anymore*. Then he poses like figures from Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, inserting himself into (and once again tangling with) art history. He was burning as bright, hot, and fervid as he ever had, proving that he wasn't going complacent or scared. "An artist who opposes himself still has the best chances to reach some result," Kippenberger said. "The Problem Perspective" reveals just how deeply divided he was—and how powerful internal opposition can be.