

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Martin Kippenberger at Luhring Augustine, Gagosian and Nyehaus

The German-born painter, sculptor, performance artist and musician Martin Kippenberger (1954-1997) is entrenched in the European contemporary art canon. Though not unknown in the U.S., his legend achieved liftoff here with this trio of shows. Modeling his Kippenberger Büro on Warhol's Factory, he operated in a social arena; his art production was part of an ongoing performance, starring himself. He eschewed a signature style, but the corrosively unflattering, mordantly funny "Self Portraits" that were shown at Luhring Augustine are central to his self-made prankster persona. Lore attaches to every work; the 1981 oil-on-canvas triptych "Berlin at Night" is centered on a brushy depiction of the artist's bandaged head while he was recovering from a brutal beating by hooligans. The image is tenderly titled *Dialogue with the Young*.

A few galvanic images free themselves from the fog of anecdote by their sheer authority. *Martin, go in the corner, shame on you* (1989) is a life-size, fully clothed figure, hands behind his back, cast in clear polyurethane in which float dozens of cigarette butts. The artist hangs like a jaundiced side of beef from a pair of tiny balloons in an untitled oil, nearly 8 by 7 feet, from 1988. Pathetically mimicking a photo of a well-preserved Picasso, he wears enormous white underpants. And in a series



Martin Kippenberger: "Berlin at Night," 1981, triptych, each image 9¼ by 23¼ inches; at Luhring Augustine.

of late lithographs from 1996, Kippenberger renders himself in the exhausted and desperate poses of the figures in Géricault's *Raft of the "Medusa."*

Determinedly out of step with then-dominant Neo-Expressionism, 10 of the 12 paintings in "Dear Painter, Paint For Me," Kippenberger's 1981 exhibition at Berlin's New Society for Fine Arts, were reunited at Gagosian. They were executed by a sign-painter from photographs supplied by Kippenberger; acrylic on canvas, they have the bland surfaces and soft focus of airbrush, heightened with snappy white highlights. All are untitled, most are 78¼ by 118 inches.

In one, the artist relaxes elegantly on a discarded sofa amid bulging bags of trash on a New York street corner, enjoying a cigarette and conflating *l'homme du monde* and homelessness. The breast pocket of a green suit-jacket, nerdily lined with ballpoint pens, is seen from the wearer's angle of view. And rakishly posing in an ostentatious get-up before a bleak souvenir stand somewhere in East Germany, the artist is flanked by

that nation's hammer-and-calipers symbol, which would become the hammer, spider web or sunburst, and pair of breasts of the logo for the Lord Jim Lodge, Kippenberger's imaginary men's club.

That symbol adorns many of the artist's works, including *METRO-Net*, full-scale subway station entrances leading nowhere. "Keiner hilft Keinen," declares a sign at the door: "Nobody Helps Nobody." Three were commissioned in the artist's lifetime; a transportable version was shown at Documenta X in 1997. The project was central to "Bermuda Triangle: Styros, Paris Bar, and Dawson City," at Nyehaus, which included models, working drawings, documentary photos of the sites and personalities involved, and a jumpy, eight-minute DVD of the 1995 opening ceremony of the Dawson City, Canada, *METRO-Net*.

The beautiful, 9-foot-tall *Lantern* (1990), a streetlight with a wanly glowing red bulb teetering atop a pair of curving poles like unsteady legs, established a boozy ambience for numerous exhibition posters, collages and drawings on hotel stationery, such as *Untitled, "Palace Hotel"* (1995), a colored felt-tip pen version of a favorite alter ego, a cartoon frog crucified on stretcher bars.

—Stephen Maine

simply old-fashioned paintings. Instead the artist enlisted his legion of assistants to create a set of deliberately uninflected images based on morbid and grisly subjects from photojournalistic sources. As has been pointed out ad nauseam, such imagery is an extension of Hirst's established themes, among them death, altered states of consciousness, pathology and corruption.

But whatever their place in his oeuvre, the new works must stand or fall on their own. On that score, it's hard to imagine these photo-realist paintings making a stir without their brand name. There is a painting of a blood-streaked car windshield moments after a suicide bombing, a series of portraits tracing the downward spiral of a crack-addicted woman and an image of a hospital technician thrusting an autopsied brain before us like a ritual offering.

There are also some works bearing imagery that seems to hail from Hirst's earlier, more conceptual days: several large-scale versions of pharmaceutical packaging can be read as jaunty geometric compositions referencing modernist painting, some crisp paintings of various pills and capsules multiplied by the reflective metallic shelves on which they rest and, unaccountably, several paintings of cut and uncut gems.

Because Hirst relies on others to do most of the work (he claims that he does the finishing), the paintings display a range of skill and precision. Among the few that linger in the mind are two depictions of empty rooms where absence turns out to be more powerful than the graphic splashes of blood and gore that ornament so many other works here. One of these is *Hospital Corridor* (2004), which depicts the yellowish walls and shiny waxed floors of a long institutional hallway. The

Damien Hirst: *Mortuary*, 2003-04, oil on canvas, 120 by 180 inches; at Gagosian.



Damien Hirst at Gagosian

If these paintings were not affixed with the name Damien Hirst, would there have been such crowds thronging the gallery? Much is being made of the fact that Hirst, former enfant terrible, has moved from his trademark dead animals, faux pharmacies and science-museum displays into oil painting. But this being Hirst, these are not, of course,