

## Paintings From Germany, With a Wink and a Sneer

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Painting may go in and out of fashion, but its many lifesaving graces always keep it afloat. One is its capacity for what might be called beautiful sarcasm, a sly self-parody while still looking good that is cultivated by many young painters today.

For precedents, such artists might look to two exhibitions on the Upper East Side that feature little-known paintings made more than 20 years apart by well-known German artists: Markus Lüpertz at Michael Werner, and Martin Kippenberger at 1018 Art.

Both shows suggest that the tradition of beautiful but facetious painting is unusually strong in Germany. Perhaps it can be traced back to the acerbity of German Expressionism and especially the paintings of the Weimar period, if last fall's exhibition of Weimar portraiture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is any indication. It is also linked to the so-called triumph of postwar American painting, which was closely watched by students in Germany's art academies in the late 1950s and '60s.

The American influence is palpable in the nine semi-abstract, richly colored canvases in Mr. Lüpertz's show at Werner, which he painted in 1965, when he was 24. Based on photographs of camping tents from a department store catalog, they are second-generation Pop looking backward, trying to build an image out of formalist abstraction. They convert the saturated color fields of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko into dry goods folded this way and that, tied to tent stakes here, given window flaps there. But their bite is buffered by romanticism: signs of the intuitive paint handling and symbolic motifs of an artist like Max Beckmann, not to mention a festive heraldry that reaches back to Sir Walter Scott.

They suggest the painter as a kind of poet-knight temporarily but happily exiled, and lack the pomposity of Mr. Lüpertz's later images of army helmets and tweed-clad dandies. They may be the best paintings he has shown in New York.

Mr. Kippenberger was the premier bad boy of the raucous generation of German artists born mostly in the 1950s, after Mr. Lüpertz's. His paintings at 1081 Art are more forthrightly caustic yet also more intriguing. They come from the artist's two "Preis Bilder" series, whose title exploits the double German meaning of "preis": "price paintings" or "prize paintings." Two of those on view here were painted in 1987, when Mr. Kippenberger was 24, and the art market seemed out of control (how little we knew);

the remainder date from 1994, a few years before his death, accelerated by hard living, from liver cancer at 43.

In each work variations on “preis” appear in fat dark letters across cheerfully all-purpose abstract fields. The wordplay implies a certain indifference to the market and art-critic approval. “Preislos,” for example, means both “priceless” and “prizeless.”

By suggesting that painting is a commodity-driven competition, the Kippenbergers skewer the success of Mr. Lüpertz’s more romantic Neo-Expressionist age group, conjure their own notions of fabric and mash together a laundry list of American painting styles, from Abstract Expressionism through Pop to Lyrical Abstraction.

The contrast of hard-edged bands and brushy slurps — the primary techniques of formalist painting — frequently recast the Modernist grid as cheerful, painterly plaids or checks redolent of drapes or tablecloths. Reds and hot pinks inveigle for the pleasure principle, although one canvas, “Tröstpreis,” sticks to threesomes of grays. Its title translates as “consolation prize” or “consolation price.”

Plastering a word or two across the face of an otherwise abstract painting has precedents in the work of Jasper Johns, Jim Dine and Ed Ruscha. But the real ghost in the machine may be the German painter Gerhard Richter, whose star rose to vertiginous heights in the years between Mr. Kippenberger’s two stints as a price-prize painter.

Interestingly enough, some in the 1994 batch are almost impossible to decipher technically, a well-known attribute of Mr. Richter’s abstractions. The colors are layered, but in what order — is tape used, or maybe even silk screen? Mulling over such mundane questions undermines the painting’s initial slapdash impression. Care balances sarcasm, and, oddly, beauty becomes more than skin deep.

“Markus Lüpertz: Tents — Early Dithyrambs” is on view through Friday at Michael Werner Gallery, 4 East 77th Street, Manhattan; (212) 988-1623. Martin Kippenberger’s “Preis Bilder” is on view through July 27 at 1018 Art, 1018 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street; (212) 537-0453 [www.1018art.net](http://www.1018art.net).



Markus Lüpertz’s “Tent — Dithyrambic” (1965), based on a department store catalog photograph, was painted when he was 24. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York