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Art in Brief

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MARKUS LÜPERTZ: Tents — Early Dithyrambs

Michael Werner Gallery

In 1962, Markus Lüpertz began to paint his "dithyrambic" paintings, serial works in which he explored both mundane and politically charged subjects using modernist, abstract expressionist, and pop styles. His subjects included Christ, Donald Duck, grids, tents, and Nazi imagery. The artist's use of the term dithyrambic, a word of Greek origin that relates to the throes of ecstasy experienced by worshippers of Dionysus, provided additional fodder for critics and academics.

An exhibit at Michael Werner Gallery focuses on paintings made in 1965 that were based on pictures of tents Mr. Lüpertz found in department store catalogs. A few of the paintings, such as "Taunus 200" (1965), take their titles directly from the products in the catalog. (The Taunus is also a mountain region in Hessen, Germany.) Although the banal subject matter and the serial nature of these paintings could indicate there was no emotional investment in the painting process, the prominent placement of the artist's first name at the top of each painting suggests otherwise. First and foremost, the device redirects our attention to formal issues — the subtle differences between the pungently colorful tents, the way they reflect and absorb light.

Mr. Lüpertz plays with volume and perspective through unusual cropping of the vertical and horizontal linear elements. He dramatically contrasts raw and painted canvas, and juxtaposes flat geometric pattern and tactile, sensual, and drippy passages. These tents can be read as surrogates for the artist, and at the same time they are a critique of the symbolic and allegorical traditions of German art. The various subjects that appear in the dithyrambic paintings of the 1960s are lures or empty vessels. The focus is instead on the act of painting, the construction of the individual out of the ashes of signs. The catalog tells us Mr. Lüpertz once characterized himself "das Volk, das malt," the populace, who paint. It is conflict between self-denial and self-expression that complicates his work.

Eric Gelber

Until May 19 (4 E. 77th St. at Fifth Avenue, 212-988-1623).