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« Elise Adibi at Churner and Churner

Martin Kippenberger: *The Raft of the Medusa* at Carolina Nitsch



Martin Kippenberger, *The Raft of Medusa*, 1996, 14 lithographs on paper 23 x 18 ¾ inches, Edition of 26. Courtesy Carolina Nitsch, New York, NY.

The current Martin Kippenberger exhibition at Carolina Nitsch, which includes drawings, collages, and lithographs, is centered around a suite of the latter titled *The Raft of the Medusa*—the German artist's tendentious homage to the massively-scaled 1819 Théodore Géricault painting of the same name.

Géricault's iconic work depicts the aftermath of the 1816 wreck of the ship *Medusa*, a French frigate that ran aground off the west coast of Africa. A shortage of lifeboats forced nearly 150 passengers to hurriedly build their own raft. Overcrowded and without food or water, most of the unfortunate group had died of dehydration or exposure by the time help arrived. The painting shows a beautifully composed heap of bodies: elegantly emaciated torsos drape over splayed limbs in a loose pyramid that inspires both pity and admiration.



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Kippenberger, much of whose work explored bombast and irony in equal measure, was more interested in the discrete elements of the French artist's painting than its finished coherence. Géricault made many studies for the anguished poses of the raft's passengers, and Kippenberger duplicated these in his own way, enlisting his wife to photograph him in similar contortions, then making his prints from those photos. These prints at Carolina Nitsch thus explore the way in which studies for a larger composition can contain their own pathos and grandeur apart from the finished work to which they belong. Kippenberger's line is resolutely hesitant and at times almost crude, yet they render visible unmistakable suffering. Painting is no longer the exclusive province of the epic – here, drawing exerts its own tragic power.

However, in Kippenberger's hands the pathos of the images has a different source: appearing in an unmade bed or on a featureless ground, the artist's bloated, aging body bears a stark contrast to the sad grandeur of Géricault's figures. Eschewing the French artist's anatomical renderings, the sketchy shadows rendered on Kippenberger's flesh highlight only his misshapen girth. In a biographical register, Géricault's work, part of the grand tradition of history painting, signaled his success to the world, while his premature death after a long illness at the age of thirty-two tinged his reputation with tragic genius. Kippenberger, by contrast, was forty-three when he made these prints—though he had only a year left to live, he was not old, but he was also not young. The artist sardonically takes up Géricault's treatment of the passengers of the *Medusa*, transposed onto his own body. Abstracted from history, the artist-subject is adrift in middle age.

The gallery's presentation of a small group of "Hotel Drawings" –just a few of the dozens of comical, bizarre and inscrutable sketches Kippenberger made on stationery at the many hotels he temporarily called home – is good accompaniment to the *Raft* series. Apart from their status as surefire crowd pleasers, these small drawings underscore the notion of the study as the end product. Scrutinizing a colored pencil drawing of a rotund owl-like creature with a disconcertingly human face, the viewer does not wish for a more developed composition – nor any context, though the bizarre image does seem to carry its own back-story. These works, far from feeling unfinished, are perfect at their sketchy scale. – *Nova Benway, Curatorial Assistant*

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