

Thomas Erben Gallery

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 2005

Art in Review

Jutta Koether

Thomas Erben Gallery
516 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through May 7

The notion of seriously unserious painting has existed at least since Francis Picabia painted pulp-fiction nudes in the 1930's. It is part of the legacy of Martin Kippenberger, whose work is highly visible at the moment, but it also underlies the deliberately ersatz, curiously visionary work of Jutta Koether, a German musician, artist, critic and admirer of Kippenberger who has lived in New York since the early 90's. The 13 works here, presented with punk-elegant touches of Mylar and gold lamé, form an intriguing if somewhat uneven 16-year survey.

Ms. Koether's work defines painting as defiantly multipurpose; it provides pleasure, incites thought and questions assumptions about taste and technique. For much of the 1990's, she mixed graffiti-inspired brushwork, fluorescent colors (especially bright pink), fragmented images and assorted quotations on surfaces that had a vibrant, all-over undergrowth.

The gyrating spirals and orbs of "Das Wunder" suggest a red-on-red New Year's Eve party; among this festive thicket are the words "Das wunder ist immer wie," ("wonder is as always"), from a German translation of Thomas Wolfe, suitable to mindless celebration but also to the yellow light that shines through the red like an approaching vision. An edenic, if sketchy waterfall landscape incorporates a sentence from Marx and Engels about consciousness being a social product. A black canvas with the outline of a veiled head is too slight for the words of Guy Debord, the founder of Situationism.

A small, pink, checked painting from 2004, reflected in the shimmering surface of hanging Mylar, suggests that beauty is fleeting. Take it where you find it. The metallic gleam recurs in a recent relief incorporating liquid glass, images of coins, skulls and crossbones and the inverted silhouette of what seems to be an eagle about to strike its prey. The combination doesn't seem promising, but it has the ersatz factor that has always served Ms. Koether well.

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