

**MERLIN CARPENTER**  
GALERIE CHRISTIAN NAGEL

Merlin Carpenter's exhibitions are always attempts to step outside the bounds of the "realm of the possible"—that is, the current conventions of the art industry—the better to criticize them. His latest show continued this attack on art-world consensus but at the same time demonstrated that one still has to deal with the reigning norms, to *engage* them somehow. His attack this time was, in the first instance, one on the posthumous canonization of the Martin Kippenberger currently being hailed as a painterly genius at the expense of the "conceptual" Kippenberger, whose project was in essence not painterly but rather conceptual—concerned with institutional critique. As Carpenter sees it, there is no longer any significant distinction between Kippenberger and a classic like Degas. The two artists are brought literally to overlap in Carpenter's *Not Made in Japan* and *Not Made in China* (all works 2005), appropriations of reproductions of Kippenberger's famous "hotel drawings" from a Taschen catalogue. By painting over this substrate with very quick, even drastic sketches of famous sculptures by Degas, Carpenter changes the very meaning of the underlying images. In Carpenter's hands, Kippenberger indeed becomes the conservative painter he has lately been made out to be. In Cologne, which prides itself on having been the site of Kippenberger's social and discursive excesses, this amounts to fouling one's own nest.

The drawings were hung serially à la Hanne Darboven, while the reception area across from them was converted, for the duration of the exhibition, into a bar; kölsch, the local beer, was available on tap at the opening to the sounds of Eric Clapton. This transformation, of course, demanded a certain amount of interior design; the entire gallery space was wallpapered in imitation of marquetry work, lending the room a wood-paneled ambiance

typical of Cologne. On top of this hung a row of detailed and ornamental paintings depicting interiors of Victorian-era pubs. What, though, do these commercial-looking pub images have to do with the paraphrases of Degas, which seem more gestural or even airy, hanging directly next to them? Based on ready-made images, both groups of work serve as reminders—in the face of the current return to thinking in terms of innovation and originality—that the past intrudes inexorably on the present. In another example of this type of appropriation, Carpenter has also integrated a work from Stephen Prina's *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet, Le Balcon (The Balcony) 1868, Jeu de Paume, Louvre, Paris, April 7, 1991*, a catalogue of Manet's complete oeuvre, into his own exhibition.

Drunkness and alcoholism are latent themes in Degas; they are crucial for Kippenberger. Carpenter's paraphrases of *L'Absinthe* (The Absinthe Drinker), 1875–76, make the point: Here the figures—and indeed the entire image—are submerged in a blue haze as though the clouding effect of the drink were materializing, settling over the art. Without alcohol, this reinterpretation seems to say, there is not much to project on. While a handful of the Degas paraphrases have a purposefully unrefined, rather wooden effect, others seem to approximate the "sensitive painting" so in demand these days. Degas is thus at once profaned and updated. Carpenter shows himself to be directly implicated in the value-creating processes of the art market. His work is hopelessly compromised; however, it still insists on the possibility of going against the grain of conventional practices and value judgments.

—Isabelle Grav



Merlin Carpenter, *L'Absinthe (Peasant Girls Bathing in the Sea at Dusk)*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 25 1/2 x 31 1/2".