

the village
VOICE

Best in Show

*Recommendations by
Robert Shuster*

Pretty in Gore

Martin Kippenberger: 'Eggman II'

A wild, boozing provocateur, Martin Kippenberger made art with such manic energy—and so prodigiously—that you wonder if he suspected he'd never live to see his 45th birthday. An entertainer at heart, he typically pitched his work toward stinging satire or the practical joke. He once crucified a wooden frog (pissing off the pope); titled a 1984 abstraction *With the Best Will in the World I Can't See a Swastika*; and later constructed entrances to an imaginary worldwide subway system.

But the dedicated clown often touched on pathos, particularly in his last years. The late paintings here, styled in expressionist Pop (a trademark), convey a brooding melancholy—Kippenberger's final considerations of a favorite image, the egg. This time, that symbol of purity, birth, and femininity seems to hold end-of-life fears and dreams. In one painting, based on a centuries-old engraving, a swordsman prepares to crack open the "philosopher's egg," an alchemical vessel that produced (medieval cabalists claimed) an elixir for prolonging life. Elsewhere, an ovoid female figure stands exposed and bloated, a Kippenberger surrogate; the stitched-up doll in *Sick Egg Child* suffers alone in a room of muddy brown; and an angular

woman—perhaps evoking the artist's mother, who died in a freak accident when he was 23—fiercely clutches a large yellow ovum.

Kippenberger's hasty brushwork has always suggested a man too impatient, cynical, or drunk to bother with details, but in this selection, the rough picture-making feels driven more by emotion and foreboding. Nowhere is that more evident than in *The Spreading of Mediocrity*, from 1994: The familiar white oval, immersed in a field of gray, oozes a black goo of disease, presaging the cancer that would kill the artist three years later, turning the iconoclast into an average mortal. *Skarstedt Gallery, 20 East 79th St, 212-737-2060. Through April 16*