THE PAINTER PRINCE

THE GERMAN PAINTER MARKUS LÜPERTZ SAYS AMERICANS DON'T UNDERSTAND HIS ART. NOW TWO MAJOR MUSEUMS IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL WILL PUT THAT IDEA TO THE TEST WITH COINCIDING RETROSPECTIVES ON THE ARTIST'S HALF-CENTURY CAREER

BY RACHEL CORBETT

Markus Lüpertz, left, and his dealer Michael Werner at the artist's studio outside Berlin.

R. GANAHL

Lüpertz with his *Tent* paintings mounted on poles for a show in Niederkrüchten in 1967.

MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY, NEW YORK AND LONDON

THE CASTLE CAME INTO VIEW at the end of the narrow road in Trebbin, about 25 miles southwest of Berlin, marking our arrival to Markus Lüpertz's house and studio. The castle actually belongs to Lüpertz's longtime dealer, Michael Werner, but the elegantly converted barn just across the yard was nearly as suitable a home for an artist widely referred to in the German media as *Der Maler-Fürst*, or "the painter-prince."

Like true royalty, the 76-year-old artist has an outsized reputation that harkens back to an earlier era. He often laments the days when a pupil would refer to a professor as "master," when life drawing was required of all art students, and when men fought out their differences in good old-fashioned bar brawls. He is macho to the extreme: a hunter, former coal miner, trained boxer, and self-described genius who signs a big corner of each canvas with an all-capital *MARKUS*.

He is only slightly less intimidating in person than his reputation suggests. I arrived on an unseasonably warm Sunday this spring yet Lüpertz answered the door in a black suit, tie, pocket square, and a silver-handled cane in hand. A gold hoop dangled from one ear. He greeted me politely in slow, steady German—he doesn't speak fluent English—and invited me, an interpreter, and photographer in for some espresso. I took a seat in the living room, which, filled with dozens of taxidermied animals that Lüpertz had personally killed, was hardly settling.

A moment later, Werner strolled in unannounced, wearing camel-colored corduroys and a pink shirt. The dealer doffed his straw hat and slouched into an armchair beneath a wall of pheasants with barely a word. Most journalists dislike the presence of such "handlers" during interviews because they tend to micro-manage the conversation or censor the juicy parts. But Werner is himself a central character in Lüpertz's story, having shown the artist's work since 1968—and I quickly learned that I needn't worry about either man shying away from provocative statements.

Lüpertz sat down and nodded at Werner. "None of my marriages lasted as long as my relationship with him," he said.

"That's true, but it was a very tough break when I took away his first wife," the dealer replied.

That, I would learn, was in 1969, before the city's art scene revived

itself from the ravages of war. Looking to avoid their own grim culture, German artists turned to American abstraction and to prewar Expressionism for inspiration. "Nobody had money and there was no success," said Werner, who had just opened his own gallery with a show of paintings by Georg Baselitz. The artist had advised the young dealer to recruit a stable of like-minded artists that functioned as a group. Werner listened and soon assembled a roster that included A.R. Penck, Sigmar Polke, Anselm Kiefer, and Lüpertz, then a struggling artist living above a grocery store.

"I almost went bankrupt," Werner said. Lüpertz had begun a forceful, but so far unsalable series of paintings on German military motifs: soldier helmets; the black, red, and gold of the flag; a wall of defensive World War II forts known as the Siegfried Line. "Nobody came to the gallery," Werner said. "They'd say it was disgusting there or that we had Nazis in the gallery."

Lüpertz argues, however, that his work isn't political at all. Symbols like the helmet were so blown up and monumentalized in his paintings that they became abstract. The colors, meanwhile, were not meant to represent the German flag, but "a certain mood," he said. "You could paint a steel helmet, for example, and the helmet's steeped in history but the painter himself is not responsible for that history or for the story the helmet relates. Just as with the apple that Cézanne painted."

In lieu of payment, Werner sometimes picked up Lüpertz's grocery tab. It was around this time that Lüpertz's wife—pregnant with their child—broke up with him for Werner. "It's no wonder she left me and

ABOVE:
German Motif—Dithyrambic II, 1972. Distemper on canvas, 74 x 78 in.

LEFT:
Portraits of the artist as a young boxer.

FROM TOP: MICHAEL WERNER GALLERY; R. GANAHL

Lüpertz admiring one of his recent sculptures.

went to join him. He had the money and he had a heated apartment; I didn't even have heat then." Lüpertz abandoned the gallery for one in Cologne, but the old friends occasionally ran into each other at art events.

"I was so dumb that I went to his opening six weeks after I stole his wife," Werner said. "I saw him in the gardens about to throw a rock at me so I ran away."

"It wasn't fair because he showed up with my ex-wife and I was trying to make headway with a new lady," Lüpertz said.

The pair made up a year later and embarked on what would be a life-long working relationship that has brought each other enormous mutual success.

Work from these early years of Lüpertz's career is the focus of an exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum, up through September 10. "Our focus is on the 1960s and '70s because this was an important moment, coming out of World War II, and the historical appraisal that the Germans were coming to terms with themselves, as well as the new world order. Lüpertz's work really grappled with that," said Hirshhorn director Melissa Chiu. In 1963 Lüpertz began painting his signature series of dithyramb paintings, a Nietzschean term that describes a passionate artistic tribute to Dionysus. Lüpertz describes it as "the initial cause to do something, the trigger." Many of these works are now on view, but the centerpiece of the show is Lüpertz's five-canvas, 40-foot-long painting *Westwall (Siegfried Line)* from 1968. "It gives you a sense of the ominous presence that the war still had decades later for Germans," said Chiu. A retrospective spanning the full length of the artist's career will appear simultaneously at the Phillips Collection, through September 3.

ALL IMAGES: R. GANAHL

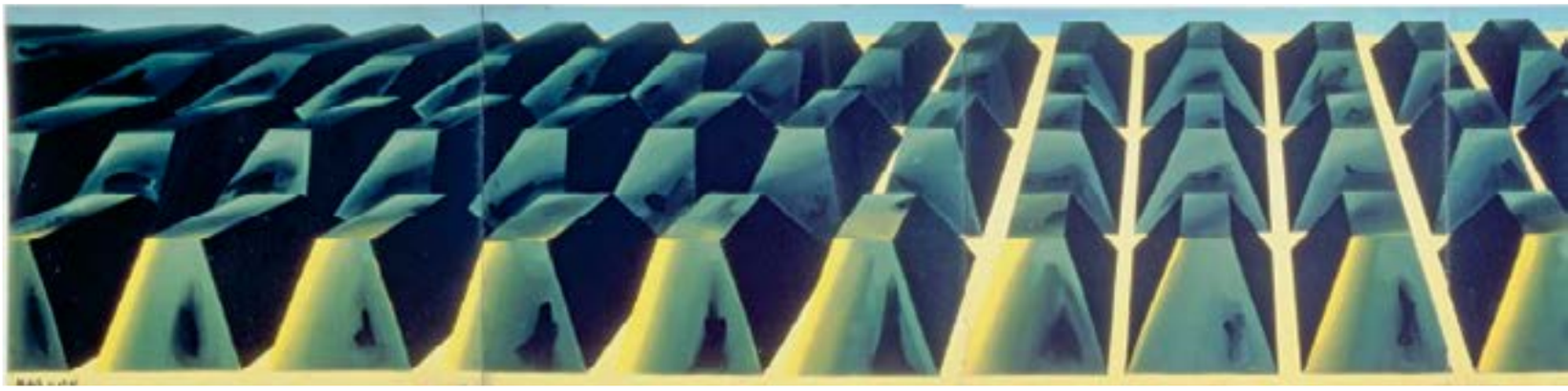
FROM LEFT: Plaster sculptures that Lüpertz painted and then dipped in wax to achieve a skin-like surface; a few of Lüpertz's hunting trophies.

R. GANAHL

Lüpertz and Werner outside the dealer's 19th-century-style castle in Trebbin, Germany.

"Painting is a life ethos for Markus Lüpertz," said Dorothy Kosinski, director of the Phillips. "There is something tough and challenging about his paintings. His works explore tensions, for instance, between figuration and abstraction, in his depictions and distortions of everyday objects. In painting, he grapples with fundamental issues of art and living, aspiring to help us to see and understand our world more fully."

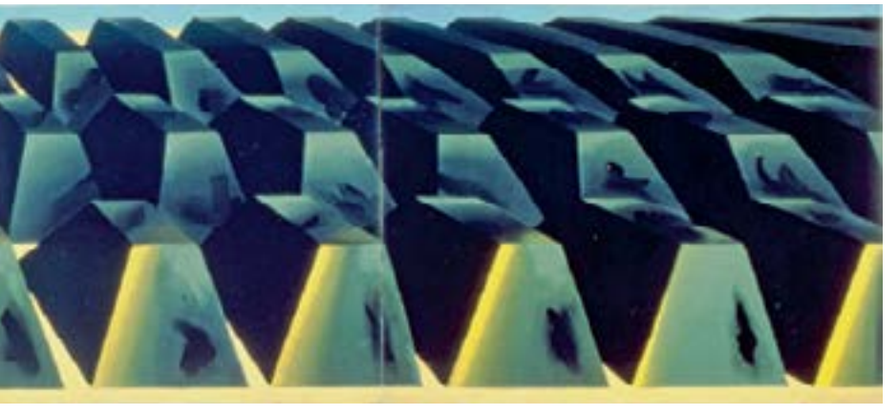
Lüpertz was born in Liberec, now part of the Czech Republic, in 1941. A few years later his family fled to a German town in the Rhineland and because he "never wanted to be anything other than a painter" he enrolled in classes at an arts and crafts school that focused more on training artisans than fine artists. He recalls a



Westwall (Siegfried Line), 1968. Distemper on canvas, five parts, each 78¾ x 98¾ in.

Inspirational ephemera in the studio.

FROM TOP: MARKUS LUPERTZ; R. GANAHL



Paintings in progress.

rigorous syllabus of art history, life drawing, and piano lessons, training that "was very much in line with the Bauhaus attitude where you had a close link between education and enlightenment," he said. After a brief break to work in the nearby coal mines, Lüpertz returned to his studies, eventually attending the prestigious Düsseldorf Art Academy.

The unstructured studio-based program he encountered there clashed with his academic ethos. "I believe it's wrong to give students that kind of freedom of decision and leave them to their own devices," he said. "This kind of freedom of choice leads to nothing."

Twenty-five years later, Lüpertz would have his chance to change that when he returned to the academy as a professor and, later, as dean—a position he held for 22 years. By this time he had branched out from painting German history to mining all of art history. In the 1970s and '80s he painted series influenced by Poussin, Monet, *Alice in Wonderland*, and Greek mythology. He had also taken up sculpture, a practice he largely taught himself. His bulky painted bronze figures of gods and artists include Apollo, Hercules, and Mozart, rendered at monumental scale. Many of Lüpertz's public works have been met with harsh ridicule and vandalism, yet he nevertheless compares himself to the great painter-sculptors of art history, Picasso and Matisse. "What's important is that my sculpture comes from a painterly sensitivity," Lüpertz said. "The painter sees things on a two-dimensional plane, and then he starts breaking it down into facets and that is how he gains that added dimension and roundness, so it's quite different from a purely sculptural approach. Every surface does not necessarily have to correspond to the other surface. For example, looking at a painting-sculpture from the back you could discover something totally surprising that you wouldn't have expected there. Whereas the sculptor really pursues a logic of the continuous shaping."

Lüpertz's high self-regard, exaggerated by his dandyish dress, has become the stuff of legend. "I have an aesthetic responsibility to the people I interact with," he said, "and I believe that the world has lost its style and gone astray." He expected his pupils to serve him and emulate his fashion as a gesture of respect. "Students really became his followers," said Matthias Mansen, an artist and former pupil of Lüpertz. "I remember one student in particular who became his chauffeur, wore his old clothes, and even imitated his way of speaking and walking so successfully that it was hard to tell who was who."

The photographer for this article, who happened to be a student of Nam June Paik's at the Düsseldorf Academy during Lüpertz's tenure, recalls ocasionally violent clashes between the conceptual artists and the painters. When he recounted this to Lüpertz, he replied, "You studied with Nam June Paik? No wonder you ended up a photographer."

When asked if he ever taught female students, and if they also wore suits to class, Lüpertz shook his head. Not in the beginning, he said. "I didn't want to deal with it. It's a time-tested tradition at the academy that the second wives of professors are usually students and they become very unhappy. I didn't want to go down that path." (Werner apparently takes an equally harsh view on working with women: Of the 19 artists on his roster, not a single one is female.)

Lüpertz retired from the academy in 2010 and now paints full time, most recently on a series of canvases that will appear at Werner's gallery in New York, in a show that coincides with the museum surveys in Washington. I wondered what he thought would come of all the attention abroad.

"Americans don't understand what I do," he said.

"That is the problem, but that can change," Werner interrupted.

Lüpertz shrugged: "Hating someone is also a way of celebrating them." MP

TOP RIGHT: R. GANAHL