

Features

Benedikt Taschen reveals his contemporary art

The German publisher is showing his extensive collection (for the first time) in two shows opening in Madrid this month

Benedikt Taschen is famous, and rich, because he publishes books that diffuse images in their millions, books with seemingly impossibly high production values considering their rock-bottom pricing. Meanwhile, the man himself spends large sums buying works of art, images that "belong" to him as a collector by contrast to those images he so profusely distributes as a publisher. His collection is the subject of a striking two-part exhibition in Madrid opening this month. Though an active buyer for over 20 years, Taschen, 43, has never exhibited his collection publicly before, as much of it is on rotating display in his homes and offices in Cologne, Los Angeles and Miami.

The Madrid shows have come about through the enthusiasm of the Reina Sofia, which suggested the idea to Mr Taschen several years ago and he now says he hopes the exhibitions will also travel to other venues.

Speaking to The Art Newspaper, the German publisher recalled how he first became interested in contemporary art: "As a boy of about 10, I started collecting comics; then, at 14, I worked as an intern in a gallery in Cologne. The first Taschen titles I published 20 years later, in 1980, were comic books. They are collector items now. The very first art I ever bought was two lithographs by German artist Konrad Klapheke in the late 1970s—and, yes, I do still have them".

Mr Taschen first started collecting art seriously during that notably exciting 1980s Cologne scene. "The first major work I bought was in 1985, a Martin Kippenberger diptych self-portrait from 1982", he says. "I suppose it must have cost around \$10,000. Back then, I was really only interested in German art, and especially in the work of Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen, who have remained at the core of my collection, along with work by the American Jeff Koons. I am only really interested in a small, key group of artists".

Koons has since produced a limited-edition Muhammad Ali sculpture for Mr Taschen, and Oehlen decorated his Los Angeles bookshop, while one of the Madrid shows is a generous Kippenberger retrospective of over 80 pieces from Mr Taschen's collection. He owns many more works by the artist, certainly more than he can count. "This was a man nobody really gave a shit about, apart from a few other artists and they needed to live, so they couldn't afford to buy his work. I was lucky to be able to afford the very best of his work throughout the years. I do still buy Kippenberger, but not often: the best works are no longer on the market. I am interested in acquiring a whole body of work and seeing how it performs over many years".

Certainly, Mr Taschen's long-term patronage of Kippenberger has been justified by recent soaring prices, and likewise Mr Taschen's interest in all forms of photography, including once



Benedikt Taschen in his Los Angeles home with "The inheritance", 1982, by Martin Kippenberger behind him. Above, Jeff Koons's "Dirty Jeff on top", 1991, goes on show at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid this month

lishes and what he collects. The publishing house has already produced pricey editions devoted to Oehlen (£5,000; \$7,500 for a limited edition of 25) and, for Kippenberger, a limited number of resin ashtrays. There are inexpensive monographs for Tillmans (£9.99; \$19.99), Stanton (£4.99; \$9.99) and Batters (£14.99; \$19.99).

"I want to open up for readers all sorts of worlds they maybe did not even know existed", Mr Taschen says. "That is why my books are priced so low. I remember as a boy visiting bookshops and being asked if I had washed my hands or if my parents had given me enough money to be able to afford the books for sale". Mr Taschen takes most major decisions on what books to publish and relies as little on marketing as he does on art advisors. He is quite happy with the contrasts and comparisons thrown up by the two exhibitions.

"It's great for people to see those huge nudes by Helmut [Newton] next to works by Jeff [Koons], or to have photographs of buildings by Julius Schulman alongside Thomas Struth, people need to be reminded there are other photographers of architecture besides Struth. So the way we are showing Günther Förg is to remind people that he was the first one to exhibit such large-scale photographs, because people forget he took these over 20 years ago".

Mr Taschen is still actively collecting, buying at auction as well as through galleries and sometimes from the artists themselves. He closely follows new artists he admires, even when he has not yet invested in their work, the Brazilian Beatriz Milhazes being a case in point. He actively resists lending ("Only when the artist insists because shipping art often tends to damage it and, on top of that, you end up paying for the transport from, say, Argentina") and selling. "But at some point you have to make a decision to sell; I had quite a lot of work by Robert Gober, an artist I still admire, but I had to ask 'Is it Gober or is it Koons?' So I sold them all off at auction".

Despite his wonderfully eclectic catalogue of books and interests, and his specialised expertise in now-collectible vintage pornography, Taschen actually has a rigorously elitist "less, not more" view of art. "I never care what people say is art or not. All that talk about whether photography is art or not, the way people could not appreciate Kippenberger because he was so 'comic', or how they said Helmut Newton could not be an artist because he was paid to take his photographs".

"On the other hand, there is not too much real art around today. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there was really only one outstanding artist, Andy Warhol; all the rest looks very dated today". Summing up his collection, Mr Taschen says: "My idea is to pick the losers, and then just buy their very worst works, the leftovers... No, no, I am just trying the British humour joke!" ■

Adrian Dannatt

□ Martin Kippenberger (14 October-10 January 2005); Taschen Collection (19 October-10 January 2005), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, ☎ +34 91 467 5062

obscure erotic snappers has been borne out by the booming market for photographs.

The second exhibition at the Reina Sofia, is a group show of work by some 16 artists drawn from Mr Taschen's collection which incorporates work by an estimated 25 artists in total. There are certainly celebrities such as Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman, Wolfgang Tillmans and Christopher Wool, but there are also more deliciously recherché names, such as pulp pornographer Eric Stanton or Elmer Batters. This professional foot-fetishist photographer was single-handedly re-discovered by Mr Taschen and turned into a best-selling cult. "He was in his 70s when I met him, and I instantly wanted to buy all his work, his prints. I knew other people would understand and, in fact, many artists and film people loved the work as well". Mr Taschen admits to a direct correlation between what he pub-