

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times
Tobias Rehberger's Friends Are Always With Him
Adam Popescu
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The German sculptor Tobias Rehberger in his Frankfurt home, surrounded by the art created by his friends. His collection includes work by Olle Baertling, Jorge Pardo, Andreas Eriksson and Martin Kippenberger. Credit...Danny Schreiber for The New York Times

FRANKFURT — Navel orange, royal blue and purple, Black Forest green: A color psychologist would have a field day here.

“It’s uplifting,” says the German sculptor Tobias Rehberger happily puffing a Lucky Strike in the citrus-hued bedroom filled with silk-screened prints that recreate every canvas painted by the avant-garde Swede Olle Baertling.

Mr. Rehberger, 51, is known for his abstract mixtures of art and architecture. He’s built sports cars just by eyeballing them, recreated his favorite New York bar in his hometown and designed a Japanese garden in Manhattan in August — with snow. Bright color is constant in his work. The other unchanging factor is the work with which he surrounds himself. Nearly everything here was made by friends, some of them no longer living.

In the blue and gray living room are curtains designed by Jorge Pardo, Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija, one depicting the sun as flames, another as an ominous hand and eye, the last as a terse haiku. In an orange hallway leading to the rooms of his three children is a pair of cartoonish paintings by Michel Majerus, the tech-obsessed Luxembourger who died in a plane crash at 35.

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Mr. Rehberger's living room features curtains designed by Jorge Pardo, Douglas Gordon and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Credit... Danny Schreiber for The New York Times

Down the corridor, there are two paintings by his former assistant Andreas Eriksson, next to absurd works of Mr. Rehberger depicted as a baby and another in which he resembles a doddering version of the German screenwriter Werner Herzog. Both are by Martin Kippenberger, sketched on a menu and stationery from the Musée d'Art Moderne stationery in the early 1990s.

"The drawings were portraits of mine that Kippenberger made because I used to be a student of his," Mr. Rehberger explains.

The ground floor is a strange secondary living room with an apocalyptic mural of floating Karl Marx heads over decaying, Brutalist concrete assembled by the little-known local artist Holger Wüst.

Below are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Rehberger.

Berlin is such an artistic city, why live in Frankfurt?

It's not like Berlin. Not a place where you have a big art scene. I have an apartment in Berlin as well, but I always liked working here. It's a bit rougher, more straightforward. There aren't so many distractions.

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A mural of floating Karl Marx heads over decaying, Brutalist concrete assembled by the artist Holger Wüst in Mr. Rehberger's home. Credit... Danny Schreiber for The New York Times

You have a green, white and red wall in your driveway.

That's a wall painting by Günther Förg from the '80s. A long time ago, I traded a work of mine with him. He was a friend. I was always interested in his wall paintings and finally I had a wall, a nice wall where I could put it up. The concept of his wall painting is, you hire a normal painter and he paints it on. So whenever I hit it with my car, I can always have the painter come again and paint over it.

Have you hit it?

Couple of times. It's easy to restore.

What's it like to be surrounded with art made by close friends?

I wouldn't call it a collection. There's no system in it other than I like [the] work of friends. Or maybe they're my friends because I like their work. Both are a little bit true. Some of them are made for me, like these pieces that are curtains. I asked Douglas and Jorge Pardo and Rirkrit Tiravanija if they would make work that could be used as a curtain.

Did you ever ask Douglas the meaning of that witchlike hand he drew?

It looks a bit evil. I never asked. Of course, whatever they would do, I wouldn't say "Oh, it doesn't fit the room."

At nighttime, does it have a different tone with that piece and Karl Marx in the other corner?

I feel my house is very friendly and livable. It's not dark at all, somehow. Even if Douglas — I don't know why he brought a little bit of darkness into it. But next to it is Jorge's orange and yellow curtain and Rirkrit's curtain that says "The sun is gone but we have the light," it kind of levels out. A lot of my work is based on personal relationships and making something for somebody I know. That's also how I collect. I like things that, when they're made for me, almost like a portrait, it reflects what they think I am or what I like.