

VALUERICH MAGAZINE

Paper Lions

The Personality Portraits of Sebastian Krüger

By David Wilson



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I am face to face with Fidel Castro. His oily countenance is at once repellant and grandfatherly. His features are too imposing to take in all at once, so my eye forages its way through the jungle of his beard to the tangle of his eyebrows - only to be captured by his intense gaze.

The black pupil of his eye seductively tries to bend me to its dark will. I struggle to break its hold, only to be recaptured by an imposing nose. My gaze slides down its monumental, pore-pocked slope to the glistening cave of his mouth. The oracle speaks. Fetid air flows in and out. One step closer and I will smell cigars and rum - in fact, I think I already do.

And yet, for all his potency, I am aware that his time is nearly done. His influence is fading into the two-dimensional realm of

history - where his actions will be dispassionately analyzed once his physical memory slips away. I feel I know this man more intimately after this brief meeting - a meeting on paper, in an illustration by Sebastian Kruger.

Such is the power of Sebastian Kruger's work - to bring personalities alive on paper. The 43-year-old German illustrator has had a career of superlatives, illustrating for many of the high circulation magazines of the world - Rolling Stone, USA Today, Playboy, L'Espresso, Der Spiegel, Stern and others. He has a cult following of artists, writers, musicians and publishers. His, rather expensive, limited edition annual calendars sell out to devoted fans in advance. His original paintings and limited edition prints are owned by a Who's Who list of rock musicians, movie stars and serious art collectors.

Obsessive Technique

Krüger fanatically buries himself into the life’s work and ephemera of each subject so that he might channel their essence into the heady mixture of wash, pencil and impasto that are his illustrations. He leaves no stone unturned. For an illustration about Steve McQueen, Krüger referred to his own personal McQueen library. “I have a DVD collection of almost his whole works — movie books and everything,” says Krüger. “So I was on the same wavelength with Steve McQueen when I painted him as Carter ‘Doc’ McCoy in Sam Peckinpah’s *The Getaway*.”



Krüger takes all of that background information and uses his prodigious imagination to lose himself in the alternative universe of his subject. “I feel sometimes like an actor,” he says. After a day of work in his studio, his wife Andrea will often ask him, “How was your day today?” And he will say something like, “today I was Jimi Hendrix’s shirt.”



Perhaps it is this obsessive process that enables him to paint his subjects with such honest clarity and vision. Take, for instance, his painting of Laurel and Hardy. What other illustrator would show only the back of their heads? But as soon as you see it, you know that it is the perfect statement. There they sit — mute and monumental — facing the grey past, an imposing bridge between the theatrical beginnings of the silent film era and modern cinema. Using only their iconographic silhouettes, Krüger takes us tantalizingly close to their bygone era and leaves the rest to our imagination — leading us to supply our own emotional input as to how significant their influence still is today.

From Bogart to Brando, John Wayne to Jimi Hendrix, Stallone to Schwarzenegger — each Krüger caricature exists on multiple levels; as an illustration, as a visually explosive portrait and as a visual tone poem. This is what makes him more than just a talented caricaturist with great technique — and one of the world’s most sought after illustrators.

Many of Krüger’s caricatures have been recognized as classics in their own right.

Krüger has been illustrating professionally for twenty years. He lives and works in a forest near Hanover, Germany, with Andrea, two cats and two Rhodesian Ridgeback dogs. His home is the oldest forest ranger’s house in Lower Saxony. “It’s a good quiet place to work and be a strange artist,” he chuckles.

Intense Insight



When he calls himself a “strange artist,” he is quite possibly referring to the disturbing elements that appear in his work — jarring distortions, dark or kinky humor and a frequent single eye that seems to exist in another dimension. The single eye often glows with primitive hunger, rage and sex — an id eye.

“I like the dark side of people’s character,” Krüger says in English that, while halting, is easier on the ears than Schwarzenegger’s. “Or I like to find out if there is a dark half. I like painting people like Vincent Van Gogh, William S.

Burroughs, Keith Richards or even Marilyn Monroe. These people are very special to me. I feel very close to them. I’m very bored with all these entertainers with white teeth — where everybody is in good health and is so nice — I kind of don’t like it!” he laughs.



“Every now and then I see a movie or a photo that stops me and I say, ‘Yeah, this is what I have to do next’ ... Willie Nelson, Chris Kristopherson, Burton and Taylor together maybe. This is what I am interested in.”

And then there are the Rolling Stones. Krüger has made a personal project out of the Rolling Stones. Entire books, calendars and fine art print editions have been published on Krüger’s Rolling Stones work alone. He has traveled with the band and become close friends with

the band and become close friends with Keith Richards and Ronnie Wood, who is an accomplished artist in his own right.

“I always liked the idea of being a musician, but there is just space for one big thing in my brain,” says Krüger. “So I had to make that decision. I am a painter. When I hang out with Keith or Ronnie, I sometimes feel like I am a musician, too — but without an instrument.”



Once when Krüger visited Wood at his home and art studio, they got to playing with some sunglasses and put them on Wood’s dog, Chanel. They thought Chanel probably would shake them off right away. Instead the dog got into it, kept the glasses on and even wouldn’t let them take them off later. The episode turned into a late night photo session and eventually ended up as Kruger painting entitled *Chanel*.

Krüger also has a special affinity for Richards. They get together on an annual basis. “Every time I see him I think he has grown a new wrinkle,” he laughs.

“Whenever I do a painting of Keith, the more I go realistic with it, the closer I come to his real character,” muses Krüger. “Jagger is very easy to draw or paint as a caricature, or a little more exaggerated. It doesn’t matter. It won’t bring me away from his character. But in the case of Keith, I have found that there is a problem unless I do it realistically.”

Success in America

Sebastian Krüger’s limited edition prints and originals have only been offered in American galleries for about six months, but with phenomenal success. Danny Stern of the Limelight Agency, Krüger’s American representatives, says he’s never seen anything like it. “His editions sell very quickly. They outstrip even Warhol and Haring,” Stern says.

Dewey Graff of Dewey Graff Fine Arts, Inc., further attests to the popularity of Krüger’s work and the quality of the Giclée editions. “I ran an ad for the Rolling Stones 40 X 40 suite by Krüger in the *Robb Report*,” says Graff. “Ninety percent of the people that called in from the ad actually ended up purchasing the suite — and almost all of my customers who have purchased it have called me again to say, ‘I can’t believe how good they look.’”

According to Stern at Limelight, half of the four-paneled 40 X 40 edition sold out within the first two months of its release. The price for the remaining copies quickly jumped from



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\$6,500 to \$10,500. When original paintings are available, they can bring six figure prices. Krüger’s painting of Keith Richards entitled *Captain Keith* recently sold for \$125,000.

Limelight is currently planning an American tour for Krüger that will take place sometime in the fall of 2006. The tour will include galleries in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, with possible appearances in Maui, Scottsdale and other locations.

Krüger’s limited edition prints are selected and reproduced from popular commissioned work, and the 40 X 40 suite was no exception. “A client asked me to do a group portrait of the Rolling Stones. And he said make it big and kind of realistic, maybe exaggerated but in a realistic style,” explains Krüger. “I looked for group photos, where all four were together in one picture, and started an ordinary group portrait.

“But then I became bored with it, because it was simply too ordinary. Whatever I do when painting the Stones must be a challenge. So I broke it up and started over as a montage, with every single Stone in a different atmosphere: Charlie is somewhere on the road, Mick is in the photo studio, Keith is on stage and Ronnie is in his garden. They all have different characters, so every Stone got their own space. I thought it was a good idea. People think of it as four paintings, but it’s really one complete work.”

The Luxury of Fame

When asked how he feels about the incredible early acceptance of his work in America, Krüger says, “It makes me very happy. But all I do is try to be as honest as possible with my paintings. I don’t have to change my way of working just for success. I wouldn’t like that.

“I am in a position now where I can do what I call ‘my real work’ and be successful with it — and this is great,” he says. “I quit doing commissions in Germany, caricatures and illustrations, because I did it for a very long time and it made me very unhappy to discuss details with so-called art directors who were even younger than me and thought they knew a lot about my work, and faces and stuff.

“I want to depart sometimes from just doing portraits of celebrities,” continues Krüger. “I found some old photos of me when I was a little boy playing with my toys while I was being watched by my father. I found these pictures very interesting. I got some ideas to work with them immediately. It’s not necessary that people know the little boy in the painting is me.” He laughs, “It will be fun to paint a little boy and know that it’s myself.”

When we spoke with him, Krüger was putting the finishing touches on the cover painting for a book of poetry by British publishing mega-mogul Felix Dennis. The commission originally was for doing the interior illustrations for the book, but evolved into the cover art as well. A commissioned painting of Slash, the guitarist from Guns N’ Roses — another musician friend — was slated to go on his easel next.

Though the focus of his career may be shifting away from mundane commercial illustration to a more sophisticated art customer, Krüger remains booked well in advance. It appears that there will be plenty of new work coming to satisfy his many fans in Europe, and now America. **VR**