



HELSINKI

Markus Copper

Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma

“The Taste of Metal,” a recent survey of works by Markus Copper (1968–2019), finally united the Finnish artist’s complex mechanical sculptures—or, in some cases, what’s left—contextualizing them in relation to his life and larger artistic practice. Informed by personal experience, an interest in performance art, and tragic events, these visually compelling works

can physically affect the body while often veering into thematic territory that some viewers and critics have found shocking.

At Helsinki’s Academy of Fine Arts, the sculptor Radoslaw Gryta not only recognized Copper’s talent, but also gave him free rein to experiment. Copper’s explorations resulted in works such as *Mayhem* (1994, destroyed), an installation that

assaulted the senses and placed people in a potentially dangerous situation, subjecting them to insanely bright lights, deafening sounds, and a suspended metal ball that would begin to swing. *Juggernaut* (1992–95, dismantled) and *Sixpack of Instant Death* (1995), Copper’s final student works, were even more menacing. Talking about *Juggernaut* in a 1994

episode of MTV’s *Pulse*, Copper said, “Usually man is the subject and the artwork is the object, and I want to make it opposite.” By placing motors and infrared detectors inside a large and very heavy steel ball, he created a machine that chased people. For *Sixpack of Instant Death*, Copper made six phallic, key-activated explosive devices and gave them to friends—without the detonation keys, which he kept. Twenty-five years later, the Helsinki police announced that they were looking for the work; all six elements were found and deactivated. Rendered

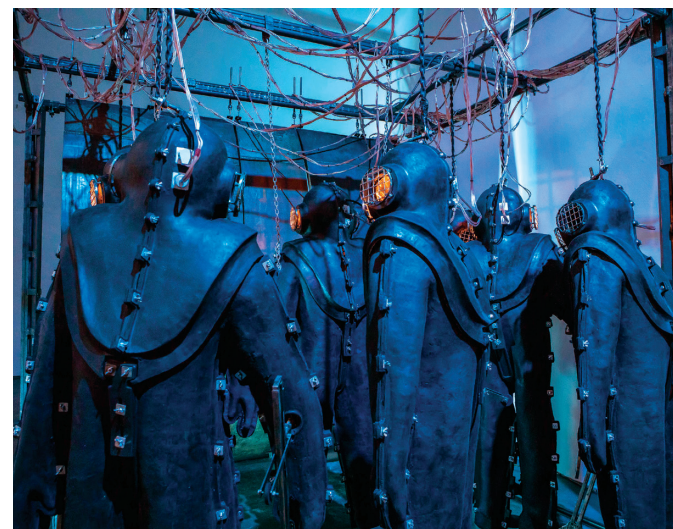
inert and stripped of danger, they were included in the exhibition.

Two life-threatening events shifted Copper's focus away from such ruinous plans of action. After an accident badly burned his legs, leaving them a copper color, he took Copper as his surname. He then lost his left hand in a sawing accident; it was replaced by a metal prosthesis. His subsequent project—

the massive *Archangel of Seven Seas* (1998)—drew on the singing of humpback whales in what can be interpreted as a redemptive vision. The imposing form, which hangs from a cubic steel structure, consists of a carved wooden skull and a frame made from a dozen Subbass organ pipes. The powerful, ultra-low sounds emitted by the pipes, which are heard and felt, generate an immedia-

cy that conveys something of life's wondrous strangeness while overriding all distractions.

Other works explore violent and distressing aspects of the human condition. The inactive windmill of *Khyber Pass* (2014) proposes a massive turnstile through which victims travel to and from West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Asia for female circumcision. The column, which is covered



in reliefs by Copper and Hannele Heino, offers graphic displays of hands engaged in this act. Harrowing, too, is the fate of the submarine crew referenced in *Kursk* (2004). Here, the divers' thunderous pounding on the exterior wall of the vessel is answered only by ominous stretches of silence. The mood of this scenario is so penetrating that it inspires, then crushes, the viewer's sense of hope. *Estonia* (2006), in contrast, offers a deceptively lighthearted rendering of the MS *Estonia* car ferry disaster. The anonymous cross-dresser musician standing at a keyboard appears to be oblivious to everything but the music—or is he absorbed in a moment of prayer? Copper's rendition may echo his near-fatal mishaps, events that, in addition to tempering his fascination with death and destruction, permitted him to consider the predicaments of others.

— JOHN GAYER

MARKUS COPPER

OPPOSITE:
Archangel of Seven Seas, 1998.

Organ pipes, steel, wood, and electric motor, installation view.

THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT:
Juggernaut, 1992–95.

Steel structure of dismantled sculpture installation, installation view.

Kursk, 2004.

Silicone, metal, and light, detail of installation.