



Sigmar Polke: Retrospective at MoMA Reveals a Moving Target

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by Janet Goleas

Currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art, "Alibis: Sigmar Polke, 1963-2010," traces the oeuvre of German artist Sigmar Polke (1941-2010), a restless, irreverent, insatiable polymorph.

The sweeping retrospective, the largest single-artist exhibit ever undertaken by this institution, chronicles five decades of variants in Polke's dissonant and elusive works in painting, sculpture, installation, printmaking, film and photography, giving new meaning to the term multidisciplinary. The exhibition, on view through Aug. 3, is electrifying.

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Installation view of "Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963-2010," The Museum of Modern Art, April 19-August 3, 2014. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. All works by Sigmar Polke. © 2014 The Estate of Sigmar Polke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

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Sigmar Polke turned aesthetic skepticism into a lifetime of visual, psychological and intellectual experimentation. Even now, with the benefit of a long view, the artist and indeed, his art, defy categorization. Polke, who died in 2010, marched across genres, ideologies and art world pretense like a cultural insurgent. Part warrior, part alchemist and part jester, he blurred boundaries, eschewed beauty and thumbed his nose at precedent, propriety and authority.

He was a moving target, quick and prolific, and his art foreshadowed many of the idioms that erupted within the visual experience of the 21st century. The exhibit, organized brilliantly by MoMA curator Kathy Halbreich and London's Tate Modern, is a testament to the breadth of Polke's voraciousness.

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Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. All works by Sigmar Polke © 2014 The Estate of Sigmar Polke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

The show opens on an explosive installation in the mezzanine that pivots from 1966 to 2009 with film, sculpture and paintings referencing everything from the Taliban to UFOs to the German working class. Potato House (Kartoffelhaus), 1967, is a grid work of potatoes and lattice that form a see-through saltbox house. Trading on allusions to the German lifestyle as well as loftier notions like Minimalism, the simple structure is something of a lodestar illustrating the complex aesthetic experience that lies ahead among 10 other galleries.

Here, the soaring atrium walls provide the ground for a suite of projected films that run continuously alongside mural size paintings, sketchbook drawings and assemblages. Polke's attraction to the film medium began in the 1970s, and from that time forward he was rarely seen without a camera. He assiduously documented his life, both its crumbs and the shank of it, which culminated in some 100 hours of footage. Of the seven films on view here, none have been shown publicly before.



Installation view of "Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963-2010," The Museum of Modern Art, April 19-August 3, 2014. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. All works by Sigmar Polke © 2014 The Estate of Sigmar Polke/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany.

The son of an architect, Polke grew up in the easternmost part of Germany, which is now Poland. In 1945 the family retrenched to the west, settling in Dusseldorf when Sigmar was 12. At 18 he was apprenticed to a stained glass artisan and learned techniques in glass restoration, no doubt a booming business amid the wreckage of post-war Germany. The temptation to trace Polke's affinity with translucence to this early juncture is justifiable. In fact, the arch of his vision moved full circle late in his life when he was commissioned to create a cycle of stained glass windows for the 1,000-year-old Grossmünster church in Zurich, a masterpiece of Romanesque architecture.

In the final gallery at MoMA, a slide show pays homage to this, his last major work, in an earnest, if a bit hokey, presentation. But the large installation—12 windows in all—is anything but ordinary. A marriage of Old Testament allegory, medieval design and thin facets of light-absorbing agate, the window installation speaks to our geological origins and the genesis of biblical allegory as one of the keystones in western thinking.

In 1963 the young artist enrolled in Dusseldorf's Kunstakademie, where legendary artist Joseph

Beuys taught. But Polke, never much of a follower, resisted Beuys's magnetism and with fellow student Gerhard Richter collaborated on a movement called Capitalist Realism, a response, in part, to Pop Art, which had captured the American psyche.

Polke's work from this period explored banality, social mores and the sort of mass media that seemed to have the power to inculcate whole populations. In Raster Drawing (Portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald), 1963, the first of many experiments with dot imagery, the cheeky Polke appropriated the flat graphics of Pop Art as well as this dark symbol—Lee Harvey Oswald—that haunted the American public. But in relation to contemporaries like Roy Lichtenstein, Polke's Benday dots, painted by hand, were messy and inchoate. He was more fixed on the idea, and the process of actualizing that idea, than on the final product.

Often the prankster amid the sarcasm and skewering, Polke's boundary-bending was apt to level the playing field wherever he focused his attention, making everything fair game. Instead of canvas, he favored kitschy fabric swaths; instead of paint, resin; in place of figuration, cartoons. In the painting Moderne Kunst, 1968, Polke lampooned an entire subset of western canon: art history.



"Raster Drawing (Portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald) (Rasterzeichnung (Porträt Lee Harvey Oswald))" by Sigmar Polke, 1963. Poster paint and pencil on paper, 37 5/16 x 27 1/2 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Wolfgang Morell, Bonn. © 2014 Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



"Modern Art (Moderne Kunst)" by Sigmar Polke, 1968. Acrylic and lacquer on canvas, 59 1/16 x 49 3/16 inches. Froehlich Collection, Stuttgart. © 2014 Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

It's probably no surprise that in the 1970s the irascible Polke dabbled in hallucinogens and other recreational drugs. For some time he lived on an artist's commune outside of Cologne; but far from checking out, he used the hypnotic experiences from that period to fuel his art. By the 1980s, Polke had emerged as one of the most significant artists in Europe, whose work had also found a large, if bewildered, American audience.

Moving through the chronological installation, as one nears galleries five and six a soundtrack emerges. Errant cymbals, oboes and African drums morph into spoken words while long horn striations slide down the hallways. Coalescing into a layered, elastic and wholly abstract aural experience, the soundtrack acts as a prelude to the cacophony of images created, more or less, under the influence. Gigantic photographs are smeared with pigment and chemicals, cartoons erupt into frenzied animation, magic mushrooms dance among soccer players, monkeys, Spiderman and Superman, and Afghanis puff on fat smoky chillums. The works are volcanic, dizzying and deeply seductive—like a contact high.



“Untitled (Quetta, Pakistan)” by Sigmar Polke, 1974/1978. Gelatin silver print with applied color, 22 3/8 × 33 13/16 inches. Glenstone Photo: Alex Jamison. © 2014 Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.



“Untitled (Rorschach) (Ohne Titel (Rorschach))” by Sigmar Polke, c. 1999. Colored ink in bound notebook, 192 pages, each: 11 5/8 x 8 1/16 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Alistair Overbrück. © 2014 Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Polke was no stranger to beauty but he seemed to find little use for it. Still, his aptitude for the Apollonian was profound. In gallery seven, an immense triptych, as flat out gorgeous as anything you’re ever likely to see, foments with brooding. But the deep purple hues and gestural anomalies within Negative Value I, II and III, 1982 are not the result of the swashbuckling brushwork typical of abstraction; more accurately, they might be viewed as the divine accident in triplicate.

The violet pigments here are layered over an oxidizing undercoating of red lead that results in a shifting iridescence moving between violet, green, gold and blue. Similarly, around the corner a grid of hot pink chromogenic prints line the walls. Made with radioactive uranium, a celestial, Kirlian-like fog is captured inside their thin white frames: the proverbial ghost in the machine.

Polke’s preoccupation with metallurgy was well known, resulting in mutating surfaces and palettes. In Cologne, his studio was like a proving ground where experiments with arsenic, meteor dust, azurite, lavender oil, cinnabar, beeswax and myriad toxic substances were de rigueur. He could go for months not answering his phone or receiving visitors while he searched for brighter colors or a greater sense of metamorphosis in his alchemical studio laboratory.



“Negative Value II (Mizar) (Negativwert II (Mizar))” by Sigmar Polke, 1982. Dispersion paint, resin, and pigment on canvas, 103 1/8 x 79 1/8 inches. Private Collection. Photo: Alistair Overbruck. © 2014 Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Still, for all his aesthetic universality, Polke never left the German soul far behind. At the end of the Cold War and the beginning of reunification, he created a series of paintings that feature stark, stenciled images of wooden turrets typical of the guard stations found in concentration camps or along the walls that separated east from west for so long. Polke’s chilling Watchtower (Hochsitz), 1984, was painted with a concoction of silver oxide that shrouds the work in a black haze. Recalling the alibi recited throughout postwar Germany, “I didn’t see anything,” the silent painting is an ode to the cultural amnesia that tyrannized a generation—some hapless, some guilty, some just plain blindfolded.



“Watchtower (Hochsitz)” by Sigmar Polke, 1984. Synthetic polymer paints and dry pigment on patterned fabric, 9’ 10” x 7’ 4 1/2.” The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fractional and promised gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder. © 2014 Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

In the end, Sigmar Polke’s body of work is something like one long performance: dissonant, phantom, heroic and constantly, relentlessly unfurling.

BASIC FACTS: “Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963-2010” remains on view through August 3, 2014. The Museum of Modern Art is located at 11 W 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019. www.moma.org.