

Polke takes off: *Untitled* (1975)

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All-Seeing

Sigmar Polke's aesthetic escape velocity

BY R.C. BAKER

Sigmar Polke was a prisoner of his childhood, as are most of us. Born in 1941, when the Nazis were at their apogee, he suffered an impoverished youth in communist East Germany after the Third Reich's collapse, followed by a disorienting exodus, in 1953, to Düsseldorf and the comparative riches of the West. "It wasn't really heaven," Polke later said of his family's move when he was 12. "That early painting of mine, *The Sausage Eater* from 1963, was critical in a way; you can eat too much and blow up too big." The 22-year-old artist may have been reacting to gluttonous capitalism when he depicted a mouth set in chubby cheeks gobbling up 61 brown links, but he was also embarking on a voracious — not to say insatiable — search for provocatively altered states that would renew the ancient art of painting.

Polke was a one-man group show. He worked with a staggering array of materials, including paint of every formulation, photographic emulsion, lacquer, uranium, Xerox, resins, film, meteoric granulate, silver leaf, and other concoctions that he marshaled into *mélanges* of abstraction, figuration, mechanical reproduction,

cosmic charts, dreamscapes, porn, comics, and pretty much everything else in creation's kaleidoscope. His vision quest didn't shy away from the most horrible specter his generation of Germans faced: the sins of their fathers, including the big lie muttered by the many perpetrators of the war and the Holocaust who later held positions of power in West Germany: "I didn't see anything."

In 1964, Polke scripted a fake interview featuring his friend and fellow painter Gerhard Richter, in which his satiric version of Richter brags, "The big death camps in Eastern Europe worked with my pictures. The inmates dropped dead at mere sight. . . . Anyone who survived the first show was killed off by a slightly better picture." In a 1976 exhibition, Polke erected a fence topped with wooden letters spelling out "Art Makes You Free," parodying the sardonic "Work Makes You Free" that the Nazis had emblazoned over the gates of Auschwitz. As art historian Christine Mehring has pointed out, Polke was employing bad — OK, atrocious — taste in an attempt to pierce his countrymen's alibi of blindness.

The tendrils of the horrendous past that clawed at Polke's generation inform a

striking 1978 painting displayed halfway through MOMA's appropriately sprawling retrospective: A blank-faced cartoon bureaucrat aims a slingshot at his forehead as "Wanted" posters for members of the notorious Baader-Meinhof gang watch over his clumsy antics. (Unlike the literally faceless functionary, the terrorists have their eyes wide open.) In the '70s, posters of these glowering Marxist revolutionaries, who blasted their way through West Germany while railing against its fascist past, were plastered across the nation. You can feel in this powerful composition — the action takes place within a cone of white light that mimics the "V" of the taut slingshot — Polke's desire to create as visceral an impact through art as terrorists have with violence.

Polke generated the aesthetic escape velocity he needed for such titanic ambition through the unbridled combinations of scale, materials, and content he deployed in his alchemical confabulations of history and fantasy. In a 10-foot-high depiction of a watchtower, painted on bubble wrap, the semi-transparent ground and the runnels and eddies of yellow, pink, and acidic green enamel cast ephemeral shadows that echo the grayish silhouette of the observation post, a chilling yet undeniably gorgeous vision of limbo infused with menace. In another version, the ghostly white outlines of the tower float above fabric printed with flowers and partially blackened with pigment, the sooty pall harkening back to the concentration camps but also commenting on the surveillance of the entire populace of East Germany at the time these huge paintings were created (in that auspicious year of 1984).

Polke's flair for historical hurly-burly matches that of Veronese, who, when hauled before the Inquisition in 1573 because of the licentious liberties he took in his sumptuous biblical murals, nonchalantly informed the court, "We painters take the same license the poets and the jesters take." It was Polke's unfettered license that helped him strike those chords of incongruous beauty over and over again, sometimes through the visual noise of the patterned fabrics he often preferred. In one small painting he contrasts a pair of wavy green palm trees against a gray-and-orange-striped fabric; in another piece, he bounces painted green circles off a rose pattern on a dun field, the brushed colors exquisitely tuned to the hues of the pre-printed surfaces. Swiftly rendered herons in a trio of paintings are reminiscent of Matisse's corporeal draftsmanship; the checkered pastel grounds channel that master's chromatic virtuosity.

Ultimately, Polke left his past behind, pulling painting into the future with his uninhibited amalgams of concept and medium. According to a cogent essay by curator Kathy Halbreich, Polke pursued an "encyclopedic and not entirely recreational study of hallucinogens from various cultures, including mushrooms and frog urine." One gallery brings together entrancing collages, paintings, and photos of tree-size toadstools; music from Herbie Hancock, Weather Report, The Residents, and Captain Beefheart drifts from overhead speakers, inducing an aesthetic contact high. (Beefheart, whose real name was Don Van Vliet, also lived from 1941 to 2010, and was a notoriously free-spirited painter himself.) Adding to the party vibe is a nearby print of a man gazing in wonder at the palm-tree-like penis erupting from his loins, while a gaggle of cartoon nudes giggle appreciatively. A painting covered with iron mica reflects light from a nearby film documenting one of Polke's massive canvases as it is lifted and lowered, powdered pigment and resins mixing and wriggling across the surface like some primordial landscape shuddering into being. The metallic pigments Polke experimented with are capable of tugging a viewer's hazy reflection deep into the voluptuous depths of his layered, densely intermingled surfaces.

In another series, Polke slid old-school engravings around on the glass of a copy machine as it was scanning in order to drag the illustrated figures out like brushstrokes; in the last gallery, a four-screen slide show of these distorted, ecstatic bodies becomes a graphic rave set to the rhythmic clacking of old-fashioned carousels.

This powerful show pays witness not only to Polke's conceptual brilliance and technical virtuosity but also to the perverse ego that drove him. In 1969, he filmed himself attached to ropes arranged in the shape of a heart as Chet Baker crooned, in "My Funny Valentine," "Your looks are laughable/Un-photographable/Yet, you're my favorite work of art."

No denying that Polke, who died too young at age 69, fits the bill.