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Sigmar Polke: an alchemist of paint and potatoes

Sigmar Polke’s work bewilders many, but at Tate Modern you can see the late German artist’s delight in spontaneity.

This autumn, Tate Modern presents a major retrospective of work by the late German artist Sigmar Polke. Prepare to be baffled, even if you do know who he is, which is reasonably unlikely. Bewilderment is a perfectly natural response to Polke’s work. This mercurial creator — cleverer, wittier, more wildly experimental, more waywardly subversive, more wilfully capricious than any of his peers — had a mind like a one-man laboratory. It bubbled and seethed with mad plans for new ways to make images. Before he arrived on the scene, people were sure that it was all over for painting. In Polke they found a maverick to make them rethink.

Where so many artists tend to discover a style and then steadily pursue it through endless repetitions, Polke, as one critic described him, “was more like a rogue elephant on the rampage”. He revelled in the use of extraordinary materials. Potatoes, for instance, were a favourite medium; most famously when he used them to construct his 1967 flat-pack potato house: a gridded, garden-shed-type structure studded with tubers — a shelter for “the dissident dweller” as he put it. “If there is anything at all that manifests everything artists are supposed to be or have — the delight in innovation, creativity, spontaneity, productivity, creating entirely out of oneself and so on — then it is the potato,” he said. However, Polke also used decorative tea towels and children’s duvet covers, arsenic, meteorite dust and the mucus of snails, coffee and soap and vegetable juices, beeswax and Perspex, silver oxide and candle smoke. There’s a film of him boiling up sea snails in his studio, like some ancient Phoenician artist extracting their dye, says the curator of the upcoming Tate show. “Apparently the whole space was filled with a terrible smell.”

These bizarre materials, along with more conventional artistic media, were all mixed in the cauldron of an alchemical mind to produce works — paintings, drawings and photographs, collages, sculptures, performances and film installations — which play with styles that range from abstract

expressionism through pop to conceptualism. Polke took a subversive delight in frustrating the expectations of anyone who tried to pigeonhole him.

So who is this irreverent master who, before his death at the age of 70 four years ago, was hailed as perhaps the world’s finest and most influential living painter — and why isn’t his name more familiar to the wider public?

Polke was notoriously reticent. He rarely gave interviews and, when he did, his answers — patchworks of Delphic utterances (“there is green light and red light. Then there is black light, which is mostly danger) — poked gentle fun at his interlocutor’s earnest quest. At private views he would remain hidden behind the barrier of a camera, filming. More frequently he would evade callers altogether. “He never answered his telephone,” says the über-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist. “In the Eighties, when I first met him, you would have to go to his studio behind the railway station in Cologne and wait for hours and hours in the hopes that he might come along.” Even then you might not be successful. There is a tale, perhaps apocryphal, of a posse of wealthy collectors turning up, only to find that as they waited the artist had sneak ed up behind them and urinated down the backs of their coats.

Polke offered very few artist’s statements. His only extended piece of writing on his work, Early Influences, Late Consequences or: How did the Monkeys Get into my Work and Other Icono-Biographical Questions, published in 1976 and printed in the catalogue of his first museum survey, was a parody and, as it turned out, ghostwritten anyway. Unlike his friend and erstwhile collaborator Gerhard Richter, whose collected writings extend into a tome of nearly 600 pages, he produced the equivalent of the poet’s slim volume. He didn’t see explaining the work in any way as part of the artist’s job. “And yet,” Obrist says, “he was probably the most erudite artist I ever met. He was multidimensional: not just a painter, a film-maker and photographer, but a voyager and scholar and encyclopaedic researcher.” Certainly, on the rare occasions that he did try to write — a piece about the Victorian painter of fairies and other supernatural phenomena Richard Dadd which he penned for Tate magazine, he proved himself to be an articulate and insightful commentator.
Polke was fiercely protective of his privacy — when his obituaries were printed, reports varied as to whether he had married two or three times (it was two), and only his last wife, Augustina von Nagel, and his children from his first marriage, Georg and Anna, were named — but a little is known of his early life. He was born in 1941, at the height of the Second World War, one of several children of a bourgeois family who lived in the then German town of Oels. It is now Oleśnica and in southern Poland as is Auschwitz, images of which were later to crop up in Polke's work. In 1945, fleeing the Soviets, the family moved to East Germany and then, eight years later, to the West, the 12-year-old Sigmar pretending to be asleep so as not to attract attention. The family had gained its freedom but materially it had lost everything. Those who find Polke's painterly jokes about Stalin and concentration camps rather challenging should remember that no one has more cause for offence than him.

Polke embarked upon a year-long apprenticeship in a stained-glass factory in Dusseldorf — an experience which was to influence his later work as, painting upon transparent plastic and laying image upon image like paint upon glass, he created multilayered pictures meant at once to be looked at and looked through.

In 1961 he enrolled at the Düsseldorf State Art Academy. It was known at the time for its experimental character: Joseph Beuys was his teacher and Polke was certainly attracted by the older artist's charisma; though, as so often in his life, he remained also sceptical, refusing to be corralled into Beuys' way of thinking. Polke pursued his own path, finding inspiration also in the pop pioneer Robert Rauschenberg, and the scribbly calligraphic symbolism of Cy Twombly, both of whom showed in Düsseldorf during those years.

Polke was still at the academy when he teamed up with his fellow student Richter in 1963, to form a movement which they called Capitalist Realism (a subversion of socialist realism, the stifling official style promoted by the communist East). Polke contributed images painted with the uninflected look of an advertising poster: from cakes, butter and sausages to plastic tubs and pairs of socks. He staged a performance in a shop window: a living sculpture posing on an armchair raised aloft on a pedestal. Yet, even as he played with the language of American Pop, he parodied its bright optimism. He used tawdry materials. And instead of crisp clear lines, he allowed random splashes of paint to allude to an underlying disorder, to the disruptive forces of the unconscious. In 1966, he was awarded the German Youth art prize.

Fascinated by psychedelia, Polke also indulged in large quantities of recreational drugs, especially the hallucinogenic LSD. Mushrooms are a frequent motif in his paintings. But it was not about dropping out, Obrist suggests. “He was fascinated by esoteric philosophies, paranormal phenomena and altered realities. He would talk about ‘higher forces’.”
In the Seventies, when the artist Peter Fischli first met him, Polke was “playing the bad ass” he remembers. “Polke the punk. He was always attacking people but in a smart way. He had a really good sense of finding the weak spot, but he could always change into something charming. You couldn’t really pin him down,” he says. “At the time, it wasn’t even clear that he was making art. He seemed to be just taking photographs and filming. He was always taking photographs. And he wasn’t so much hanging out with artists, but more with what I’d call intellectual Hell’s Angels, like rockers.” He was also travelling a lot, spending time in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Brazil. But the geographical journeys and psycho-chemical voyages of what are too easily categorised as the fallow Seventies were to inspire the incredible output that was to come, explains Obrist.

Polke settled in Cologne in the late Seventies, to remain there for the three decades or so until his death. Although he taught in various institutions — perhaps most notably from 1977 to 1991 as a professor at the Fine Arts Academy in Hamburg — his most vigorous focus remained his own work. He gave himself wholeheartedly to painting, producing both abstract pieces and work that involved recognisable imagery: a duality he would sustain to the end of his life. In 1986 he won the coveted Golden Lion prize at the Venice Biennale for his Athanor — a massive installation of murals which, coated with chemicals that responded to changing levels of humidity and light, were in constant flux.

Along with his fellow Germans, Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz and Jörg Immendorff, Polke was hailed as an artist at the vanguard of a resurgence of painting. He was increasingly fêted. A collector speculated that he set his prices by “doubling his age and adding three noughts”. In 2007 a work sold for a phenomenal $5 million.

And yet, Polke preferred the backstage to the spotlight. Dressed in an elegant suit, he looked, it was said, more like a banker or a university chancellor than an artist. Photographs of the genial grey-haired figure in a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles would seem to have little to do with those earlier images of an artist larking about with toadstools, were it not that he seems so often on the verge of breaking into laughter. He remained playfully tricky to the end, insisting upon hand-picking his buyers, or agreeing to go ahead with the staging of a long-planned exhibition only if the dealer promised that it would be the last. “Basically he behaved as if every aspect, ritual and protocol of art and the art world was available for manipulation,” as one insider explained it.

Certainly success did not spoil him. Polke led a relatively modest life, working without an assistant, preferring the solitude of his warehouse studio where, surrounded by his pictures and books, he would “pace slowly and deliberately like an old lion” said Chrissie Iles, a curator from the Whitney Museum who worked with him.
Only very rarely did Polke work to commission. However, in 2006 he returned to his artistic roots, beginning a series of stained-glass windows for the Grossmünster cathedral in Zürich. The result, a series of abstract compositions that look like clusters of oddly shaped cellular forms — “images of primal slime”, one critic said, illumined by “a sunlit mescaline glow” — was completed in 2009. It was the swansong of a mercurial imagination. A year later Polke died of complications arising from cancer. However, as visitors to the upcoming Tate Modern show are about to find out, his legacy remains very much alive and kicking: booting all preconceptions off the playing field.

Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963–2010 is at Tate Modern, London SE1, from Wed Oct 1 to Feb 8 2015