The uncategorizable breadth of Sigmar Polke’s work

"Untitled (Rorschach)," a 1999 work by Sigmar Polke.

NEW YORK — What kind of artist was Sigmar Polke (1941-2010)? The question affords no easy answer.

Besides being the most protean major artist of the past three or four decades, this German face-puller, tongue-poker, and cackling boogeyman was the kind of artist willing to spend weeks and months extracting purple pigment from the glands of snails (following ancient, imperial precedent) only to apply the precious substance to silk with a kind of desultory shoulder shrug.

He was the kind of artist who was happy to spend vast chunks of his life hand-painting raster dots — the pixel grids that make up imagery on television screens and printed matter — or pointing a video camera at whatever took his fancy.

He was an artist who, with a small, scabrous drawing in ballpoint, could almost unhinge you. Just as easily, he could turn out a giant abstract painting of such pointed and shuddering banality that it snap-freezes any late-lingering, moist-eyed idea of art’s special significance you happened to harbor.

Polke, that is to say, was a great artist who poured scorn on the idea of genuflecting before great art. An incessant, impulsive creator, he ridiculed our habit of revering artists or entering art galleries with earnest intent.
You must nevertheless visit at least one gallery this summer, and maybe two, if you want to take a bite of the biggest slice of Polke pie served up in a generation.

At the Museum of Modern Art, Polke is the subject of a brilliant, if overwhelming, 260-work retrospective. Replete with paintings, drawings, and prints on every scale and in every conceivable medium (and in some media, like “meteoric granulate,” “iron mica,” and “thermal enamel,” you probably never conceived of), as well as videos, photographs, photocopies, sculptures, and stained glass, it arrives four years after the artist's death, at the age of 69.

A handful of these works, including one 21-foot-high digital print — really a glorified newspaper graphic — called “The Hunt for the Taliban and Al Qaeda,” fill the museum’s atrium. The rest, like manic children escaping their parents’ clutches in the demented last hour of a child’s birthday party, spread out through a maze of galleries. You arrive at the end aesthetically hollowed out, morally enfeebled — and (because it turns out that the party was an excursion to a giant factory spewing spells) bewitched.

Meanwhile, a much smaller show of the artist's early drawings — a mere hundred of them — can be seen at the New York gallery of Michael Werner, Polke's longtime dealer. All are small. Many are in ballpoint, marker, or pencil.

Taken singly, they are almost aggressively unprepossessing. Together, however, they punch and roll you, like old dough, into Polke World — a place haunted by weird voices, sarcastic jibes, and a spooky fascination with making stuff.

Polke was born in 1941. His family fled Silesia (in present-day Poland) in 1945 for what was just about to become Soviet-occupied East Germany. Eight years later, the family escaped to West Germany.

In his early 20s, Polke studied at the art academy in the creative hothouse of Düsseldorf. In 1963, he and fellow academy graduate Gerhard Richter, along with Manfred Kuttner and Konrad Lueg (who later changed his name to Konrad Fischer and became a successful art dealer), established a short-lived but brilliantly named art movement, Capitalist Realism.

The movement was influenced by American Pop. But, born of more pungent political circumstances and a more rigorously critical climate, it had sharper fangs.
Sharper humor, too. The earliest work in the show is a drawing in ballpoint and gouache called “Apparition of the Swastika.” The same period, 1963-64, saw Polke produce an image, in raster dots, of Lee Harvey Oswald, and hilariously downbeat images of biscuit wafers, chocolate, socks, sausages, folded shirts, and sparkling wine.

All are double-edged: They function less as critiques of postwar consumerism than as expressions of an immense, all-pervasive boredom that was in some ways an upshot of postwar prosperity, and for Polke a state of utmost potential.

Over the next few years, ghosts and flying saucers appear in his work along with apartment blocks, erotica, and aimless doodles.

Any whiff of authority — cultural, political, familial — provoked outbreaks of animus in Polke. He reserved special contempt for the rhetoric around abstraction, which was enjoying a surge in Europe in the wake of its decade of triumph in the US. For Polke, abstraction’s suppression of content was an easy way out — an excuse for German artists to paper over the embarrassment of recent history. Hence his fondness for spraying swastikas about. Gentle reminders.

In these early galleries, perfunctory sketches alternate with paintings like “Modern Art” — a brief anthology of enervated abstract marks against a black ground — that skewer a half-century of avant-garde rhetoric in one mid-size canvas.

Other works — “Constructivism,” “Malevich Looks Down on Pollock,” “The Large Cloth of Abuse,” “Negro Sculpture,” and “Higher Beings Commanded: Paint the Upper-Right Corner Black!” — tackle the idea of artistic genius to the ground then unceremoniously kick it to death.

Polke was equally barbed in his attitude to the burgeoning materialist ethos — see, for instance, his magnificently hectic “Supermarkets” of 1976: nine sheets of paper stuck to a large canvas and layered, like excavated supermarket aisles in the aftermath of an earthquake, with imagery in every conceivable idiom.

Unlike Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and the other American Pop artists, Polke didn’t let his early experiments crystallize into a signature, brand-ready look. His work remained essentially style-free, although that didn’t prevent him exploring certain ideas and media in depth.

Even more, perhaps, than American Pop, Polke was an heir to the sarcastic high-jinks of France’s Francis Picabia and to the mystical clowning of Germany’s Joseph Beuys. An anarchic contrarian, he nonetheless toyed gleefully with cliche. In the 1960s, he pursued an interest in séances, communication with higher beings, and other aspects of the paranormal, all with a blend of manic curiosity and bug-eyed mischief.
In the 1970s, following well-trodden countercultural paths, he traveled widely, enjoyed communal living in a house on the outskirts of Düsseldorf, and devoured hallucinogens with exemplary, and seemingly indiscriminate, avidity: peyote cactus, angel’s trumpets, fly agaric, whatever he could get his hands on.

Through all this period, discussions of advanced art in the US and Europe were dominated by minimalism and conceptualism. But Polke continued to relish the paradoxical consciousness of figurative imagery — the busier and more dissonant the better — and the havoc-wreaking possibilities of paint.

He also explored almost every technical possibility offered up by photography, from collage to applied color and photolithography, conducting endless experiments with “mistakes” and random effects.

Polke’s layering of imagery grew more and more sophisticated, and more and more dense in suggestion and reference. He took to incorporating patterned cloths in his canvases, and often superimposed cartoons or diagrams onto them — a sort of pincer attack on modernist decrees against decoration and illustration.

In these frenetic works, the color is always wrong, composition is a kind of non-concern, chance is the presiding genius. As for meaning … well, what is that? And yet the results rarely descend into absolute nihilism.

Polke’s intelligence, even in his most acrid modes, always pushes through, and his fundamental, urgent, mad-professor-like preoccupation with the idiosyncrasies of making art lends most of his work an inimitable, a necessary air — a feeling that, however histrionic or hare-brained its conception, this particular thing simply had to be made — and here it is.

Despite his early skepticism toward abstraction, some of his best late works were in fact abstract (many, mind you, were not). What distinguished them was Polke’s restless experimentation with scale and, above all, with material. Concocting strange potions, he was often compared to an alchemist. His media included resin, dispersion paint, pure pigment, enamel, varnish, fluorescent paint, lacquer, graphite, soot, silver leaf, silver oxide, silver nitrate, applied not just to canvas but to felt, polyester, and even bubble wrap.

"Untitled," from 1975, are three of 260 works by Polke on display in a Museum of Modern Art retrospective.
Many of the results are simply astounding. Instead of expressing anything so hackneyed as the state of the artist’s soul, these often enormous works have an imperious, objective quality that is as haunting as it is distinctive. They appear at once random, like clouds, and ancient, like oceans. By the last two decades of his life, Polke was well established as a role model for today’s generation of artist-pranksters — those who, in the teeth of tremendous pressures to conform and professionalize prefer to play the role of holy fool, making a virtue of continuing to paint and draw and otherwise create in the face of absurdity.

Their art, like Polke’s, is conspicuous by its absence of identifiable style, its promiscuity in matters of material and medium, and its determined resistance to being pinned down. If, at times, it seems to take suspect pride in projecting an aura of anarchy, the best of it nevertheless touches on obscure truths. It stands up — almost despite itself — for the repressed, the factored-out, the fragmented, the incommunicable.

Of course, Polke was bored by the idea of standing up for anything. His art — for all its intoxications, its giddy reach for the celestial beyond — was also a truncheon swinging away at one’s shins.