

SIGMAR POLKE

‘A Queer Journey....’

Ritwika Misra

Sigmar Polke, the painter-photographer has died of cancer on June 10. A central protagonist in post-war German art, Polke has been instrumental to bring about the laconic 'Modern Kunst' (the modern art movement from 1968) which was a tread away from the banality of genteel art.

Born in 1941 at the height of world war in Lower Silesia, Polke at the age of 12 left the communist east with his family for Dusseldorf where he grew up in prosperity of the West Germany. This formative experience of crossing the borders underpinned his story of art. Satiating his initial artistic craving, being an apprentice in a stained glass factory he went on to study at the Dusseldorf Art Academy from 1961 to 1967. These years opened up a wider avenue for Polke to test his curious aesthetic intellect. The profound influence of his teacher Joseph Beuys shaped Polke's aptitude. As Robert Hughes wrote in *Time*, "He seems to have got two big things from Beuys: first, the ideo of the artist as clown, shaman and alchemist; second, a healthy reluctance to believe in the final value of categories of style. Hence his early parodies of the sacred modes of Modernism." Even while studying at a conventional art academy Polke knew how to defy the laid out norms, imbibing a languid sarcasm in his creative output. In 1963 Polke and two fellow students, Gerhard Richter and Konrad Fischer-Leug, organized an exhibition entitled "Kapitalistischen Realismus" (Capitalist Realism). It was a subversion of the realist style of art known as 'Socialist Realism', then the official art doctrine of the Soviet Union. From this very first appearance Polke chose to unleash his irreverence to traditional art demonstrating an incisive commentary on the consumer-driven pop-art 'doctrine' of western capitalism. Polke challenges the authority of the printed image, Benday dots of pop artists by exaggerating the mishaps in a mechanical process. Polke's paintings which imitate the effect of commercial printing techniques blurs and smudges them.

Polke's early works were taken to have a degree of affinity to European Pop art for its depiction of regular objects as the subject—sausages, bread and potatoes—combined with images from the mass media. But he took up cudgels against the superficial slick and polished 'soup cans' style of American Pop art that reflected nothing but the shallow notions of robust consumerism. Polke situated his philosophy of art with the images emblematic of a decadent post-war German consumer society, instead of translating graphic advertising images into painted forms. Treading along the unusual terrains of art Sigmar opted for a childlike clumsiness in his early works, using the mundane objects—cakes, plastic tubs, and liverwurst—to sneer at the shallow culture of commodity worship and the issue of 'appropriate' subject matter for art. His artistic representations with these objects, exuded significant political overtones symbolizing the split between East and West Germany, and their presence on canvas called attention to their absence on the Eastern side of the Berlin Wall. Polke's paradoxical work like *Plastik Wannen* (Tubs, 1964), which uses the plastic wash basins and food containers (that were hard to get at the time in Eastern bloc countries) as its subject, was a blatant parody of western commercialism, revealing the post war ghosts still lurking in reality. Polke's paintings

mirror life as it is directly experienced through human consciousness. This deliberate attempt to represent his notion of 'capitalist realism' as an 'anti-art' style of art could be viewed in his entire oeuvre of work.

But rule, prediction could never define artist of his kind. The method was with him. His audacious parody on consumer society, in the later years was swapped by a garb of a sardonic wit. His works now emanated from a superlative sense of humour with snappy comic strip like titles.

In 1964 he painted eleven sausages spread evenly across the canvas resembling curved brushstrokes commenting himself, "what should a person paint when people after the war have to deal with the basic issues, especially after we could no longer expect nourishment from the French brush strokes." This was Polke lashing out with irony, insulting joke, caustic cynicism, proving his own acumen. With his jokily satirical experiments Polke made fun of geometric abstraction in Modern Art, 1968.

Sigmar was innately anarchic, defying every known rule; each recognized principles, depicting nothing short of a psychedelic feature. During the 1980s he experimented by replacing superior canvas with cheap printed materials and introducing chemicals, mixing together traditional pigments with solvents, varnishes, toxins and resins to produce spontaneous chemical reactions. These trials culminated elaborate abstract paintings "creating a precise visual analogue of drugged consciousness." For instance his work "Alice in wonderland" creates most fittingly a hallucination, setting a vicious trap inviting to fall in. This erratic randomness of the painting mutated itself throughout Polke's oeuvre spilling over boundaries of consciousness, rules, even historicity. His multi-layered canvas became daring testaments to the horrific realities of war deprivations and holocaust. The use of non-art materials instilled in the powerful experimental works a life of their own. 'Lager' (Camp), or 'Hochsitz' (Watch tower) series of 1980s depicting a concentration camp with its barbed wire, portrays the "mechanized impersonality of fascism and dictatorship."

Reflecting poetic and bizarre movements of the mind, Polke reaches his crescendo when he juxtaposes photography, images from satellite surveillance and flickers of images from newspapers, or negative prints in his work in the 90's, masterfully combining form and formlessness. The absence of linearity, surpasses art calling the viewer for an intimate glance, deep, to think of it and blast them into a mystical world of abstract, magical reality. Polke's entire opus remains to be an intricate laboratory of implicit narratives inducing a surreal sensory, a queer journey and magnificent psychedelic trance. □□□