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Sigmar Polke: The Father of Reinvention

Artist's versatility and many modes of expression are spotlighted in show at the Museum of Modern Art

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Part of the MoMA exhibition for Sigmar Polke's 'Alibis' *European Pressphoto Agency*

The late German artist Sigmar Polke made magic of the material world.

"Who has made a painting on Bubble Wrap?" asked Kathy Halbreich, associate director of the Museum of Modern Art and curator of the new exhibition "Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963-2010." "And who has made a painting on Bubble Wrap that deals with the iconography of hunting, the line between East and West, and the surroundings of the concentration camps?"

The ever-resourceful Polke is the answer, and the subject of one of the biggest exhibitions yet in MoMA's 94-year history. Spread across four galleries on the museum's second floor, with more than 250 works, the show, opening Saturday, pays tribute to an artist defined by a sense of what Ms. Halbreich called "aggressive, promiscuous invention."

He "helped me understand actually what it meant to be an artist," she said, "which was to be ferocious, dissatisfied, skeptical, willful, to know no bounds."

Though most distinguished as a painter, Polke worked in numerous media, including film, video, photography, drawing and sculpture. His images often make use of unconventional materials, including meteorite dust, uranium, graphite and soot from smoke affixed to glass.

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"The moment you think you understand him," MoMA's director, Glenn Lowry, said, "he slips away."

That made allotting sufficient space a priority. In terms of square footage, the only points of comparison in MoMA's exhibition history are shows devoted to Willem de Kooning in 2011 and Richard Serra in 2007. For Polke, who approved the early conception of the show before his death in 2010 at the age of 69, the museum is making comparable space for an artist with less widespread recognition but a healthy reputation in the art world.

"Why aren't his paintings as expensive as Gerhard Richter?" asked Gordon VeneKlasen, managing partner at Michael Werner Gallery, home on the Upper East Side to a concurrent show of early Polke drawings. "If you ask anyone across the museum or artistic or collecting community, he's equally known to anybody. He's the equal of any great artist of the 20th century. It's just the general public, and I think that will change with the MoMA show."



'Untitled (Rorschach) (Ohne Titel (Rorschach))' c. 1999 Alistair Overbrück/Estate of Sigmar Polke/ Artists Rights Society/VG Bild-Kunst

The painter Carroll Dunham has maintained an interest in Polke's work since first encountering it in the '80s. "Polke is a very diverse artist, so it's possible to look at his work through a lot of different filters," he said. "It's organized and disorganized at the same time."

The MoMA show stands to send a charge through artists who see it, too.

"In some ways it's not unlike the recent Mike Kelley [exhibition at PS1](#)," Mr. Dunham said. "It gives one's confidence in the whole artistic endeavor a boost." (Mr. Dunham will participate in a panel discussion on Polke's work, "Who Cares If It's Painting?" at MoMA on May 1.)

Polke's versatility and knack for reinvention grew out of a search, shared among a generation of German artists who came of age after World War II, to process what happened and to progress into a new world beyond.

"His roots are deeply embedded in poisonous soil," Ms. Halbreich said. "I think the skepticism we see in his work comes out of the fact that Sigmar knew that authority isn't truth, and that truth can be deeply manipulated. He had an ability that very few artists have: to continue to search."

That led him to explore different modes of expression, and by different means that have become common currency in contemporary art. After decades of painting, drawing, sculpting, filming, and creating totems and provocations by any means available, Polke amassed a body of work ready to be re-evaluated.

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"The world is so open to see things in so many different ways that it's interesting to have somebody who is a real source, to go back to an essential figure who has inspired so many things that have come after," said Mr. VeneKlasen, a close collaborator with Polke who developed his gallery show to add to the occasion at MoMA. "I think it will be exciting for people to look back and say, 'Oh my God, he's the one who invented all of this.' "

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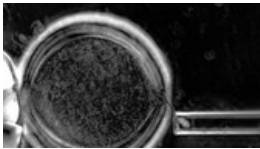
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