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Art in Review

SIGMAR POLKE

'Lens Paintings'

*Michael Werner
4 East 77th Street, Manhattan
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Sigmar Polke is like Robert Ryman, only crazy. He is fixed, seemingly, on one thing — how (and with what) paintings can be made, from the ground up — but he is polymorphous and perverse. To that end he has painted on canvas, fabric, stretched plastic; used resins, lacquer, minerals of all kinds; appropriated images high and low; mixed abstraction and representation; and conjured up Benday dots and metal engraving, among other reproductive techniques.

Mr. Polke's latest New York gallery show, his first in 11 years, introduces the Lens Paintings he started making about four years ago. The series might be titled "Sigmar Polke Takes a Holiday" for the way it filters Polke motifs through the sieve of a new technique. The engravings and other borrowed images; the cannily contrasted fabrics; the large, sudden eruptions, brushings and controlled drips and repeating polka-daubs; the nonchalant excursions into abstraction — it's all here.

They are seen through a kind of screen of semiclear plastic that was applied in a gelatinous form to the surface (canvas, fabric or stretched plastic) and then neatly striated (vertically) with a comblike machine. The plastic forms a ridged, crudely lenticular surface, which means that the images change, slanting in and out of view as the angle of sight shifts.

Supplementing the confusion, Mr. Polke sometimes adds color to the plastic before it is applied, or adds images to the ridged surface after it has hardened. This is the case with the elaborate Benday image of an old engraving of a mythological metalsmith in "The Miracle of Siegen," which is layered over a field of white dots and splashes of rose, lavender and yellow.

The results raise the perceptual questions usual to Mr. Polke's work, about what came first; what is accidental or deliberate or printed or handmade. Despite appearances, only the found fabrics

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involve mechanical printing. One small painting unmask the striating process; it is nothing but plastic (tinted pink) on plastic.

The experience of these works is vaguely archaeological, an act of visual excavation. They seem functional, like signs that could go outdoors, which could be a comment on the commercial success of the earlier Polkes they borrow from. Their caustic beauty and polymorphic exuberance are undeniable. But in the end, as a fairly familiar Polke image emerges, you're left wondering if it wasn't better the first time. **ROBERTA SMITH**