

Art

Mad Worlds: Sigmar Polke and Harvey Kurtzman

Soaking up the garish pleasures of two kindred spirits

By R.C. Baker

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Polke's *Today You Accomplish Something That Not Everybody Would Accomplish in This Short a Time (Ersatz Van Gogh)*, 2007 Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery

Details:

Sigmar Polke: 'Lens Paintings'

Michael Werner

4 East 77th Street, 212-988-1623

Through June 19

The Art of Harvey Kurtzman: The Mad Genius of Comics

By Denis Kitchen and Paul Buhle

Abrams, 256 pp., \$40

You may have seen the *Spiderman* movie poster in which the Green Goblin appears to change position depending on the viewer's angle. For almost a century, the gimmick of lenticular printing—placing a thin, striated lens over a flat image to create a fluttering animation effect—has enlivened everything from baseball cards to cereal boxes to campaign buttons. (The technique was employed in 1967 to embed portraits of the [Beatles](#) into the cover design of the [Stones'](#) album *Their Satanic Majesties Request*.) Recently, the painter [Sigmar Polke](#) has transmuted this down-market contrivance into a series of works that meld garish gestures and quirky imagery into startlingly vibrant art.

Polke was born in 1941, in what would soon be Communist [East Germany](#); when he was 12, his family moved to [Düsseldorf](#) in West Germany, where he eventually attended the city's art academy. There, he came under the tutelage of [Joseph Beuys](#), whose Fluxus-inspired performances and dismissal of painting as a reactionary medium helped steer Polke, a world-class contrarian, to the easel.

But neither he nor his friend [Gerhard Richter](#) could ignore Beuys's emphasis on conceptual practices, and the two budding painters dreamed up a highly ironic style they christened "Capitalist Realism," in which they conflated the mad consumerism of the West with drab, Communist Bloc socialism. Playing a game of visual Telephone with American pop art, Polke highlighted the noise as much as the signal:

He emulated printing dots in coarse, near-incomprehensible enlargements of news photos; layered cartoon cowboys over abstract smears; and stenciled hunting towers across flowery fabric swatches (a more haunting evocation of Germany's schizophrenic past than [Anselm Kiefer's](#) Wagnerian assemblages).

For his rousing *Lens Paintings*, now on view at [Michael Werner](#), Polke used a rake-like tool to craft ridged sheets of thick gel medium (a material, the artist dryly notes, that is often employed "to add the brushstrokes to the van Gogh reproduction"), then placed these translucent scrims over his canvases, distorting the underlying scenes.

A recurring image among the 29 works here is derived from a 17th-century engraving of two men viewing a dragon from different vantage points—a metaphor for Polke's own complex demands on viewers. In one instance, the figures have been painted on fabric printed with multicolored cartoon ghosts, which seem to waver and vibrate as the viewer moves from one side of the canvas to the other. At the top of the painting, a gelatinous white cloud dissipates into a grid of drips, an ersatz geometry echoed in angular "Seeing Rays" that emanate from the men's eyes. The grooved acrylic over some of the works has been slathered with abstract blobs, causing runnels of paint to obscure the rasterized images underneath. The figures in one such painting seem to be wearing Hazmat suits; the fact that their enigmatic environment has been painted in drippy primaries only adds to the graphic frisson.

With its fascinating, often wry content, diverse textures, and ingenious techniques, Polke's new work is as good as third-millennium painting has so far gotten.

While it's mostly other painters, insightful curators, and savvy gallery-goers who know Polke, *everybody* has been touched by [Harvey Kurtzman](#) (1924–93), even if they've never read his signature creation, *Mad* magazine. In the early '50s, Kurtzman was writing, editing, and often drawing a series of realistic war comics. In a genre mostly devoted to tales of gung-ho GIs blasting Krauts and Japs to smithereens during the Good War, Kurtzman chose to document the then-ongoing (but undeclared) Korean War. In one story, an American soldier contemplates corpses floating down the Imjin River just before a hungry, scared North Korean infantryman attacks him. The hand-to-hand combat is desperate, fast, and brutal, drawn with Kurtzman's astonishingly fluid brush. The original boards emphasize how far the artist could push his formal designs, as when black-and-white stripes abstractly define a pair of arms plunged into dark water.

These and other original drawings, plus published covers and comic strips spanning half a century, are all crisply reproduced in *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman*, in which authors [Denis Kitchen](#) and [Paul Buhle](#) note that publishing a story about the existential absurdity of war was brave at a time when "the media, echoing the government, warned that dissent might be treason."

In 1952, needing money for his growing family, Kurtzman pitched a humor comic to his publisher. Running pell-mell through the resulting green light—although who actually conceived the title *Mad* is lost to history—Kurtzman dreamed up parodies that influenced everyone from R. Crumb to [Monty Python](#) to the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. (Does that make *South Park* Kurtzman's grandchild?) He and his cadre of trusted artists first went after other comic books (*Bat Boy and Rubin!*), but were soon

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hammering the commie-hunting senator from Wisconsin in a blistering parody that envisioned the Army-McCarthy hearings as a raucous game show. In a typically wrongheaded business decision, Kurtzman left *Mad* just as it was being retooled into a larger-format magazine, which would soon have a circulation in the millions.

Kurtzman's later solo work could be wildly inventive—a buxom blonde is seen through the eyes of townie admirers in a complex, six-panel scene that interweaves multiple viewpoints with maladroit charm and coarse fantasy. Like Polke, Kurtzman was maniacal about technique, using numerous layers of vellum to position word balloons, figures, and objects for maximum visual impact. Kurtzman finally received a worthy paycheck from *Playboy's* Hugh Hefner, but *Little Annie Fanny's* gorgeously illustrated titillations never came close to *Mad's* rough-'n'-ready provocations.

It was Kurtzman's witty garishness and willingness to mix things up—literally and metaphorically—that made him a quintessential American. Perhaps similar strengths should earn Polke an honorary citizenship.

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