

Sigmar Polke at Michael Werner.(NEW YORK)

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In "Polke--Bernstein--Amber," his first New York exhibition in eight years, Sigmar Polke showed paintings dating from 1985 to 2006, together with an assortment of Renaissance and Baroque objects made of amber loaned by Kunstkammer Georg Laue in Munich. These are the sort of mysterious treasures collected centuries ago in Wunderkammern by discerning connoisseurs. The walls of the medium-size, low-lit exhibition space at Werner were painted deep purple, an imperial color lending a quality of preciousness to this ensemble of materials literally spanning the ages. Considering Polke's interest in history, art history, alchemy and magic, and the predominantly amber-colored palette of his most recent body of paintings, the visually intriguing juxtaposition made sense.

Called "Bernstein," or burning stone, in German, amber was believed by some in antiquity to be fragments of the rays of the setting sun that had hardened in the ocean. Others considered amber to be the tears shed by the Heliades as, turned into poplars, they mourned their dead brother, Phaethon. These and other myths inspired by this rare and costly substance, which is in fact nothing more than fossilized resinous tree sap, are the kind of stories that fascinate Polke. He is mesmerized by the ways in which base materials are transformed, especially by the artist, an alchemist/magician working with chemistry and nature. And time: some of his recent pictures--in which images and substances lie sandwiched within layers of resin, like wasps trapped in tree sap millions of years old--were produced over as many as five years. Polke's is a process-oriented art.

Produced with artificial resin on diaphanous polyester fiber, the double-sided paintings are made the more mysterious in that the recto and verso can differ widely, and that only one side of these pictures can be viewed at a time when they are hung on walls. (The opposite sides could be studied in a catalogue accompanying the show.) In one untitled work (2001-06), the front shows a figure in 17th- or 18th-century dress pulling a curtain aside to reveal the entrance to a small house. Drawn with white on top of a caramel-colored ground, the image is easy to read, while a large profile of a young woman appears more faintly behind it. Turn the painting around and you see the profile again, this time in black, with hints of the drawing on the opposite side mixed in. With a snake wrapped around the base of her neck, this profiled head is based on the portrait of Simonetta Vespucci by Piero di Cosimo (ca.

1462-1521), like Polke a highly idiosyncratic artist with a taste for the bizarre. An untitled work of 2005-06, this time entirely abstract, consists of clouds of white fluid seemingly trapped between layers of yellow resin turning a deep gold toward the center. A milky, primordial ooze--or sperm mixed with urine--is thereby evoked, in a picture recalling Antoni Tapies's experiments with varnish.

Polke's nonchalance, his hit-or-miss doodling, his "let's try this" and "how about that?," his mixing of subjects, substances, colors and textures that seem doomed to fail in combination but often do not, his ceaseless flirting with vulgarity and fine taste, his obscurantism, his leaps from minimal interventions to pictorial congestion--all of that, and then some, remain compelling.

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