

# THE NEW YORKER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## STUDIES IN AMBER

by Peter Schjeldahl

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Perhaps the most enchanting room in New York now is at the Michael Werner gallery: “Polke–Bernstein–Amber,” an update of the Renaissance-era *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities) by the quicksilver German artist Sigmar Polke. It is about amber (*Bernstein*, in German), the fossilized tree resin that captivated European imaginations when it was discovered on Baltic shores. Brownish, liquidy paintings in artificial resin on translucent polyester fabric are spotlighted in a space that is painted a brooding eggplant purple; display cases present authentic Renaissance and Baroque amber artifacts, such as candlesticks and figurines. The paintings glow uncannily, because the rectangles of wall behind them are white. Bounced light casts shadows and exposes intricate textures and lurking imagery, in 3-D chiaroscuro. The installation boosts an idea that might seem merely precious to a pitch of vertigo. Jadedness doesn’t stand a chance at this show. You may feel like a child again, thrilled and a little bit scared by serious splendor.