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Sigmar Polke: Inscrutable master of the unexpected

By Carol Vogel

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Sigmar Polke, who will be featured at the Venice Biennale, in his studio in Cologne.
Albrecht Fuchs for The New York Times

COLOGNE: Of all his work materials, arsenic is particularly precious to Sigmar Polke. So are lavender oil, meteor dust and flakes of gold and cinnabar, all of which he has incorporated into his paintings at one time or another. On a recent rainy afternoon, however, it was a pure, crystallized violet pigment that preoccupied the artist.

Entering what he calls his summer atelier, an oilcloth tent behind his warehouselike home in an industrial neighborhood here, he strode over to three giant paintings. All are intended for the Venice Biennale, which will open on June 10. Polke, 66, had applied layer upon layer of multicolored fabrics soaked with lacquer to the canvases, then more lacquer, then pieces of black transparent fabric. With only a scant amount of daylight penetrating the tent, the works had developed an ethereal glow.

Michael Werner 4 East 77 New York New York 10075

"Once I apply the violet pigments with a brush, the surface will become gold," he said, gazing intently at the 3- by-5-meter, or 10-by-16-foot, paintings resting on wooden sawhorses. "As the light reflects it, it will change color."

His dealer Gordon VeneKlasen, who represents him with Michael Werner, interjected, "Violet has had mystical properties since the Renaissance, which has always fascinated Sigmar."

Sorcerer, jester, sage, visionary — Polke is a hero to many artists working today and a magnet for curators and collectors. Part of the attraction is his relentless quest to ask more of the conventional canvas, applying clumps or droplets of ancient substances or cheap mass-produced fabrics in unusual juxtapositions with sketched figures.

At a moment when no clear artistic movement or style dominates popular tastes, he is known as a master of the unexpected. And while often rooted in ancient mythology, philosophy and chemistry, artists and curators say, his work always seems new. The artist John Baldessari, 75, describes Polke as an artist's artist. "Any one move can provide a career for a lesser artist," he explained.

Collectors and museum directors line up to buy virtually anything Polke produces these days. His appeal also lies partly in his unavailability. Unlike Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst or Takashi Murakami, who work hard at maintaining their movie-star allure, Polke shuns the limelight and guards his privacy. He has been known to go for months without answering his phone, opening his mail or allowing visitors into his studio.

At the prodding of VeneKlasen, however, he allowed a reporter into his studio and backyard atelier to see what he has been up to in advance of the Venice Biennale. "I felt this body of work is a milestone and needed to be explained," the dealer said.

As is always the case with his work, Polke said, the paintings for the biennale sprang from specific ideas yet evolved in mystical ways as he experimented. "This is the meeting point of ideas and materials coming together," he said. "You see what you want, but you have to work with the painting, and the results are always different." Altogether, it has taken him two years to apply and dry the poured lacquer surfaces of the seven abstract paintings he has created for the biennale. Jointly titled "The Axis of Time," they are to form the heart of the biennale's signature exhibition in the Italian pavilion, called "Think With the Senses — Feel With the Mind. Art in the Present Tense."

The show was organized by Robert Storr, the artistic director of the biennale and a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Given that he views the exhibition as "a meeting place of conceptual and perceptual art," Storr said, it was a natural choice.

"Polke for a long time has been the most interesting, least predictable of the painters around," he said by phone from Venice. "He's almost impossible to get a bite of. People don't know what to say right off the bat when they see his work. It has a deep kind of shrewdness."

Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate in London, who has exhibited Polke's work since 1995, said that quality of inscrutability played into the fascination. "He turns base metal into gold and base

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fabrics into great paintings," Serota said. "But he is a very difficult artist to get hold of. He makes Richter, who's complicated, look simple." (Polke is often grouped with Gerhard Richter because both came of age and experimented in West Germany in the 1960s.) Like the paintings themselves, Polke's explanations are not always easy to parse. He pointed to a painting in which his fingerprints are visible through a film of deliberately applied dust. "This kind of painting tells many stories," he said. "The fingerprints, like the fingerprints of a criminal, are something you fear, but at the same time something you want to touch."

"For me the image isn't important, it's the human behavior of wanting to touch it that is," he said. Over the hours, he alternated between passionate absorption and detailed, almost scientific explanations of his materials and process. When he begins to apply the violet, he said, the surfaces will turn "gold as though they were drying against the sun." Then he added: "Or a fragment of the moon. So many phenomenons belong to this kind of painting."

His absorption in subjects ranging from art history to chemistry to celestial objects is reflected in the array of books and magazines in his atelier. There is also an ancient Chinese gong, an electric keyboard and rolled-up old fabrics and maquettes. Tables that are not covered with books are adorned with curious objects like chunks of crystal and amber. The son of an architect, Polke was born in 1941 in Oels, Silesia, which was subsumed into East Germany at the end of World War II. He and his family — he is one of eight children — stealthily immigrated by tram to West Germany when he was 12. Having observed the contrast between the Communist East and the nascent affluence of West Germany, he made frequent reference to consumerism in his early work. He describes his education as "bourgeois" and recalls being forced to play the viola in his youth. "My father made us all learn a different instruments — he wanted a family orchestra," he said.

He was heavily influenced by the old masters. "When I was young I was interested in Renaissance art," he said. "As a child I copied Dürer drawings and Bruegel. All this for me was very familiar." Today, he said, he relies on drawing "to fix an idea."

"Mostly drawings are things I make for myself — I do them in sketchbooks," he said. "They are mental experiments — private inner thoughts when I'm not sure what will come out."

Later he studied glass painting, which helps explain his fascination with translucency. (He often pours resin on a canvas and then paints images over it, or douses fabrics with lacquer before sketching patterns on top of them.) Then he studied painting at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, where Joseph Beuys was teaching.

His career has been a constant stream of experiments. During the 1960s, while a student in Düsseldorf, he joined with Richter and Konrad Fischer to found the German rejoinder to Pop Art, an ironic style they called Capitalist Realism. He took everyday objects like matchsticks, chocolate bars, sausages and biscuits, and painted them as though they were advertisements, always with a skeptic's eye.

He stopped painting for a while in the '70s and turned to the chemistry of photography. He has also delved into film and video.

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Polke returned to painting in earnest in the 1980s, exploring new materials and pigments. He began experimenting with toxic substances, he said, because store-bought pigments often lacked the brilliant hues that he craved. He has used everything from arsenic and jade to azurite, turquoise, malachite, cinnabar and beeswax. He even extracted mucus from a snail and subjected it to light and oxygen to produce a vivid purple, in much the way the ancient Mycenaeans, Greeks and Romans created dye.

In "Lump of Gold" (1982), he smeared arsenic directly on the canvas. Implicit was the notion that physical materials are as potent as the image itself. "He likes the idea that paintings can provide more than visual stimulation," VeneKlasen said. "Large amounts of arsenic can kill, while small portions can heal."

At various points he has alluded to the "higher powers" controlling his work. As early as the 1960s, Polke said, he created 16 photographs and four drawings of subjects like palm trees and female wrestlers and placed them inside a box. His notion was that the box — a sort of visual and metaphysical diary — would be sold to someone who would commune with the ideas within.

Recently he has focused on how light changes the texture and colors of the canvases. "Light is a metaphoric thing," taking on diverse emotional meanings, he explained. "There is green light and red light. Then there is black light, which is mostly danger."

"I am trying to create another light, one that comes from reflection," he said of the glow that emanates from the layers on his canvases. "Like celestial light, it gives the indication of new, supernatural things."