



## Sigmar Polke, "Lens Paintings"

In the German artist's latest work, painting becomes a ghost of the past.

By Howard Halle

Michael Werner, through June 19



*The Illusionist*

Photograph: Courtesy of Michael Werner Gallery, New York

It's been eons since the New York art world adhered to any particular trend, but that doesn't mean certain currents can't be divined if you pay attention. This season, for instance, the issue of age seems to keep cropping up. First the New Museum mounted its "Younger than Jesus" survey of millennial artists fresh from the box. Next, the Met took a trip through the wonder years with a look back at the Baby Boomers who comprise "The Pictures Generation." Finally, Gagosian Gallery weighed in with Pablo Picasso's "Mosqueteros" canvases, limned in the years just before his death in 1973 at age 91.

If I had to choose a winner from the above, it would be the Picasso show. It's a clear demonstration that, contrary to the conventional wisdom that youth must be served (especially by contemporary art museums), life experience can count for something as long as older artists still possess a certain creative fire. Admittedly, I say this as someone getting long in tooth, but if you need further proof, check out Sigmar Polke's compositions at Michael Werner. At 68, Polke isn't

quite as venerable as the Picasso of the early 1970s, but his "Lens Paintings" are further testament, if any is needed, to the power of "late" style.

This is the first show of new works in New York by Polke in 11 years, and in it, the German artist seems to gaze retrospectively at his career through the metaphor of the lenticular process—most commonly associated with those postcards that flicker back and forth between two images. Though they don't create the same kind of illusion, the canvases here are faced with a ribbed material that ranges in opacity from transparent to translucent to opaque. But behind and on top of this surface treatment, you can see Polke reprising motifs that cover his 40-plus years of production. There are snatches of the cartoony figuration and blown-up benday dots that characterized his earliest efforts from the '60s, when he and Gerhard Richter embarked on the critique of American Pop Art they labeled Capitalist Realism. The kooky found fabrics and gestural passages that made their way into his oeuvre at the end of that decade and into the '70s are also here, as are the blown-up old-timey bookplate engravings that Polke began to appropriate in the 1980s. The last are probably the most relevant to the new paintings, since they evince the love of vintage books that led Polke to his inspiration: a treatise on optics by a 17th-century monk named Johann Zahn.

Zahn was a key figure in the development of the camera obscura, the device which presaged photography, and in his text he describes a "teledioptric artificial eye"—what we'd call a telephoto lens—while noting that every luminous object in the universe varies in appearance depending on the viewer's position. A dry observation to be sure, but one that ran contrary the certainties of Renaissance perspective that defined painting in Zahn's time. And indeed, the science of lens grinding, which began in the 1600s, was one of the developments that would eventually lead to the modernist revolution. But more compelling to Polke, perhaps, was Zahn's implication that perception was necessarily democratic, dependent on the individual's point of view. This notion comports with what Polke learned as a student of Joseph Beuys, a big believer in the idea of art as a populist arena.

In this respect, Polke's choice of ground for these pieces would seem suitably pedestrian; it looks like he used manufactured sheets of funky corrugated plastic, the kind of thing you'd find on Canal Street. But in fact, it's also made of paint: Polke spent five years developing the recipe for a thick acrylic gel that cured slowly enough to allow him to rake the surface with a toothed implement, leaving behind a hardened pattern of furrows and ridges. The mechanical uniformity Polke achieves is stunning, amounting to a sort of trompe l'oeil. But it's the illusion he creates of a spectral presence that's truly astounding; the works aren't paintings so much as the ghosts of them.

It's no coincidence, then, that the fragmentary images that Polke employs appear to make references to prestidigitation, magic lantern shows and spirit photography. More to the point, however, he hints at the threshold where vision meets the divine. More than just taking a trip down memory lane with these "Lens Paintings," Polke is looking back over a career and seeing the light.