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**Bones' Beat: Sigmar Polke's 'Lens Paintings' at Michael Werner**

By Bones in Bones' Beat, Featured, art

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All images courtesy Michael Werner Gallery

"The Illusionist (Lens Painting)", 2007

There is a particular young species of painting that for a long time snarled or spoiled my appreciation of contemporary art. This painting, appearing noisily around a museum corner or turned page, would be busy, usually very large, messy, and wholly lacking a clear narrative. It frequently looked, literally or figuratively, like someone had taken a shit on the canvas. [Martin Kippenberger](#) made these paintings, with streams of consciousness dribbled around the canvas and no distinction made between what was personal, what was pointed, and what was just a joke. Albert Oehlen still makes these paintings; some new ones, currently on show at Lühring Augustine in Chelsea, have commercial posters pasted to the canvas then smeared and partially obscured by angry squalls of paint as well as--here and there and for good measure--giant words. The ostentatious and systematic disregard for rules of any kind made these artworks emotionally opaque and impossible for the novice to read, and it caused a problem. Foreignness is fine, a challenge, something that an art lover

will learn to be cool about; but how can you learn the language of a painting if you can't figure out what language it's speaking? The work of 68-year-old Sigmar Polke, an elder and inventor of this mystifying dialect with a show of recent works up now at Michael Werner, first gave me the means to see this problem through.

Polke, from Dusseldorf, arrived as a pop artist in the early '60s. Where Warhol saw perfection at the nexus of infinite choice and homogeneity, neatly gridding Campbell's 32 canned flavors on the wall of the Ferus Gallery in LA, Polke saw chaos. His paintings slid between the liberation and threat of mechanical reproduction. He mangled the mathematical system of halftone dots iconic to Lichtenstein, carrying them far away from their clean, illustrational origins into mutating, cancerous masses. Pop's prerogative of appropriating imagery gave Polke's practice clanging discordance, rather than congruence, with contemporary society. It goaded him to respond to more and weirder imagery existing in the world rather than consume, then regurgitate, what was being marketed in the name of convenience. Polke's early work was a full-blooded, knuckly scrap with the promises of pop culture. 'Capitalist Realism', he called it, and it was neither hateful nor reverential. It was engaged, and it was serious. It was, by nature of the explosive scale of the task at hand, simply not that pretty.



"Untitled (Lens Painting)", 2008

45 years later and Polke is still fighting. The 29 'Lens Paintings' (2006-2009) [on view at Werner Gallery](#) are made with thick transparent acrylic gel on top of a stretched silky scrim fabric. The gel has been raked so there are small gullies running down it, like corrugated plastic or the ridged postcards that do crude three-step animation if you wobble them left to right. A few of the surfaces have been combed on both axes to make a grid, like mottled security glass. There is paint on the fabric, and there is paint on the gel, with varying degrees of opacity at each layer. Several works allow a view of the wooden stretcher and the cream wall on which the work is hanging. The device--ridged surface on top of transparent support--is stupendously functional. A basic three-dimensional effect can be conjured between the two layers. Visual shimmers can be seen as one moves past. Paint can be heavily applied so it runs south down the valleys in neat stripes, or it can be delicately brushed east-west so it only takes to the peaks. Patterned fabric is laid as a bottom layer here and there,

offering an instant, pre-made backdrop. The point is quietly made that many of these works would look very different on a collector's wall with, say, William Morris wallpaper. They could even, absurdly, be hung on top of other pieces in a collection. This body of work is a single drawn-out experiment in optics and painterly conventions, teasing a panoply of effects and surprises from a technical conceit that asks two simple but very open-ended questions: what do you see, and what are you trying to see?



"Untitled (Lens Painting)", 2008

Painting thrived for millennia on a basic premise of legibility. Content, codes and stylistic vamps swung with the breezes of fashion, but you could always count on a communicable message. Polke's practice rejected the subject-object-adjective-verb of accepted painterly grammar from the start. The searing, singular, boiled-down power of postwar commercial imagery was proof enough for Polke that we knew what pictures could do, so the artist got his hands dirty, and ripped the picture apart. A lifetime later, 'Lens Paintings' encourages us to relish the experience, once more, of an energizing, contrary language being written before our eyes. We all know enough to bear up to this challenge. In a show where most of the works are called *Untitled (Lens Painting)*, one title offers a mantra and a reward: *Today You Accomplish Something That Not Everyone Would Accomplish In This Short a Time.*

*Lens Paintings* is up until June 19th at Michael Werner, 4 East 77th Street. The townhouse off the park used to be Leo Castelli Gallery, Warhol's old New York home, and it is a magnificently posh experience. One has to be buzzed through two doors to get inside, and architectural details abound.