

der raffinierten Behandlung von Hell und Dunkel ein Meisterwerk dar. Der Katalog freilich schweigt zu diesem Blatt, und während in der Weimarer Ausstellung noch höchst bemerkenswerte Arbeiten von Hornys Vater und vom Kunscht-Meyer zu sehen waren, hat sich die Hamburger Ausstellung all dieser historischen Reminiszenzen, ja selbst der großen im Katalog abgebildeten Zeichnung entledigt. Was die Schau dadurch an Homogenität gewonnen hat, verliert sie an historischem Wert. Zumindest in diesem Punkte kann die »Abnabelung« von Rumohrs Vorgaben nicht als vollzogen angesehen werden. Die Geschlossenheit, die die Ausstellung im Kuppelsaal der Hamburger Kunsthalle erreicht, liegt andererseits zweifellos in dem Bemühen, Horny als einen seinen Weg suchenden jungen »Romantiker im Lichte Italiens« vorzustellen. Die spannungsreiche Vielfalt seines Schaffens wird

nicht nur durch die gelungene Gegenüberstellung der faszinierenden Blumen- und Früchtestudien mit den Porträts hervorgehoben, sondern auch durch die Dokumentation von Hornys Neigung zu einer bisweilen phantastischen, übersteigerten Sicht auf die Dinge. Ganz anders ein kleines Aquarell aus Privatbesitz, das vielleicht etwas zu kommentarlos dem Œuvre Hornys zugerechnet wird und sieben Mispelfrüchte zeigt (*Abb. 1*). Es gehört zweifellos zu den beeindruckendsten Arbeiten der Ausstellung. Die unansehnlichen, braunlila Früchte sind mit solch schlichter Raffinesse einander zugeordnet, daß von ihnen die Intensität eines Stillebens ausgeht, eine Gattung, die bislang im Werk des Malers nicht vertreten war.

Auch zu seinem 200. Geburtstag ist der »kleine Horny« (Graf Wolf Baudissin) noch für so manche Überraschung gut.

Heinke Fabritius, Gerhard Kegel

## Sigmar Polke. Works on Paper 1963-1974

*New York, Museum of Modern Art, April 1-June 16, 1999; Hamburg, Kunsthalle, July 16-October 17, 1999. Catalogue with essays by Margit Rowell, Bice Curiger, and Michael Semff. 325 ill. including 298 in color. \$24.95. Museum of Modern Art.*

This large exhibition of early Polke — some 180 drawings, various sketchbooks, and a number of monumental works on paper — has to be a challenge for an American audience. A sensational talent, for us he is a little difficult to place. Partly the problem is that his place in art history is difficult to understand. We need but compare him to the American Pop artists, who also emerged in the early 1960s, to be aware of the surprising differences between American and German visual cultures. American Pop art was, in part, a reaction to Abstract Expressionism; in Germany the historical situation was different. American Pop and German art using popular subjects looks different. Warhol designs in a clean cut way; Polke, in love with

many much cruder techniques, is a frank admirer of chaos. Unlike Warhol, Polke doesn't silk screen his images. Warhol repeats himself, often working in series — Polke constantly invents. He makes early Jim Dine look sentimental and humanistic by contrast. Like Roy Lichtenstein, he uses dots, but his are handmade. Polke makes everything that he needs himself. His subjects include butter, Empedocles, lady wrestlers, landscapes, Lee Harvey Oswald, Mona Lisa, Nixon and Khrushchev as potato heads, and William Blake. Obsessive and compulsive, he includes everything in his art — popular culture, but also baroque designs and modernist abstractions from high art. For Polke, anything seen is a possible artistic subject.

Nothing is more likely to get a critic into trouble than writing about a famous, much discussed artist from a distant visual culture. Can an American who has not read the vast literature in German make sense of this gifted, mysterious artist? Maybe placing Polke in relation to recent American art, the approach dominating the fully illustrated catalogue, is not the most felicitous procedure — perhaps such a painter can only be understood by identifying his roots in German visual tradition. The characterization in Heinrich Wölfflin's *Italien und das Deutsche Formgefühl* of German art might be extended into the present. The Germans, Wölfflin writes, »see a positive good in the vaguer connections of form, in the struggling and developing rather than the mature and complete.« Certainly Polke loves showing his line developing and struggling. And he is emphatically devoted to the immature and the incomplete. His larger drawings — as big as large paintings — as much as his small images revel in chaos. He detests conventional grace. Compared with him, the great comic book artists — from whom he borrows — are conventionally skilled draftsman. Polke admires messiness, enjoys lack of classical proportions, and revels in grossness. Awkwardness is his forte.

We Americans, this is no secret, have difficulty understanding German humor. No doubt Polke's drawing »Higher Beings Command: Paint an Angle!«, a watercolor depicting an angle with the title typed, is a parody of pretentious Theosophical theorizing about abstraction. But what does »Polke as a Drug,« showing a glass container partly filled with some drug, mean? It's never clear whether Polke admires or despises his subjects — or how he understands his own role. Is he a mystic or a materialist or both? I haven't a clue, his visual language — and his perspective on 1960s German popular culture — eludes me.

I do see that Polke elevates the apparent lack of style into a kind of style, a way of drawing

which is unmistakably his own. As much as Ingres, as draftsman he is always visibly himself. He is crude and determinedly vulgar — that is his way of pretending to be unrefined. Very often you feel as if these drawings illustrate a race between Polke's hand and chaos — the hand always wins, but sometimes it is a close race. We speak, traditionally, of »the fine arts«. But Polke's drawings are »low life fine art«, the visual equivalent of the literary subjects of Strindberg, Celine and Beckett, or the art of Dubuffet or Michaux. A mere listing of the materials used on these drawings is revealing: acrylic, acrylic dispersion, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, felt-tipped pen, gouache, India ink, pencil, poster paint, rubber stamp, silver, spray paint, synthetic polymer paint, typed print, watercolor, and watercolor and ink. Polke will draw with anything that makes marks.

To me, it always seems slightly paradoxical when antiformal art like Polke's drawings is presented in a high profile museum setting — it's like watching a lavishly produced movie with famous stars playing down and out people. »The Germans,« Wölfflin says, »do not want everything to be clear but desire that a residue of unclearness be left somewhere.« Somewhere! — Polke, whose drawings are everywhere unclear, at his most lucid can make the most elaborate baroque allegories seem by comparison relatively straightforward. A formalist's nightmare, he is a deep challenge for anyone who believes that art ought to reveal visual order. »Even that which cannot be made clearly visible,« Wölfflin continues, »which cannot be completely explained in visual terms, is admitted into German art.« Admitted! — Polke revels in drawing what is impossible to explain. Faced with his drawings, calm aesthetic lucidity appears a utopian, over the horizon ideal. Who would have thought that his low life techniques and often banal or plebeian subjects could be the basis for this authentic high art?

David Carrier