POLKE *PARTY*

Germany produced at least one comic genius in the 20th century, as MoMA's Sigmar Polke retrospective demonstrates.

BY DAVID SALLE

MOVEMENTS IN ART AND politics scrape over one another like tectonic plates, releasing tremors of energy that push art forward. German painting experienced such a quake in the late '60s, when a group of painters—Georg Baselitz, Jörg Immendorff, A.R. Penck, Markus Lüpertz—turned their backs on the derivative and bloodless abstract painting of the day and chose to resurrect an unabashedly Germanic tradition, rooted in drawing, of narrative expressionist art. Their renegade action came about shortly after two artists of a slightly older generation embraced the pictorialism of American Pop Art and its use of imagery from advertising—but without the Americans' sugar. Those titans of painterly sophistication are the existential skeptic Gerhard Richter and his wild-man alchemist joker pal Sigmar Polke. These differing worldviews, Pop and Expressionist, became the two main tributaries of German painting in the last part of the 20th century.

Nothing lasts forever. With the death of Polke in 2010 at the age of 69, the miracle of postwar German art came to a pause, if not an end. Richter, Baselitz, Penck, and Anselm Kiefer, as well as the younger Albert Oehlen, are alive and well, but with the loss of the prophet-like Polke the revelatory time of German painting has passed. Polke's art is often hilarious, formally advanced, and humanistic in a cynical way. Compared with the more dour Richter he seemed to enjoy posing as a kind of holy fool. In person Polke looked like a character drawn by Hergé, a grown-up Tintin. His endearing gap-toothed grin, the little topknot of hair, and his laughing eyes are what I chiefly remember about him. He liked to give the appearance of a disinterested eccentric, mounting a rear-guard action against the pretensions of late modernism while making some of the most visually ravishing paintings of the last 40 years.

Polke's work is a lifelong essay on the theme of freedom—what it looks like, what it takes to achieve and maintain it—and **"Alibis: Sigmar Polke 1963–2010,"** the retrospective opening April 19 at New York's Museum of Modern Art, captures its breadth and formal daring. The show includes a large selection of irresistible works on paper, in which we can see the artist thinking out loud, as it were: drawing as daydream, sketch comedy, diary, pure design—everything except examples of drawing's traditional function of rendering objects in space. Polke's lyrical way with line has been the single biggest influence on the last half century of German art. That angelic line is now practically a birthright for younger German artists, much the way de Kooning's brushwork became the DNA of the second-generation Abstract Expressionists.

In the earliest works, such as *Sausage Eater*, *Young Man Come Back Soon!*, and *Cabinet*, all from 1963, the tone is efficiently set out: gently mocking and self-mocking, careful to put that little bit of icing on the cake. What makes it art is Polke's ability to locate the mirth within a complex pictorial structure—not just the what but the how. Hence, three brownish-red men's stockings in profile against an

PROOF POSITIVE
From top: The Living Stink and the Dead Are Not Present, 1983; *Printing Error*, 1986; the artist, circa 1971.

FROM TOP: © 2014 ESTATE OF SIGMAR POLKE/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN (2); ANGELIKA PLATEN/NEWSCOM

off-white background (*Socks*, 1963) are laid out in parallel diagonal lines that give them a classical air; the picture is energetically composed, like something out of high-class abstraction. These pictures have none of the coolness of American Pop Art; there is less belief in the power of the commercial object. The images are subjected to whimsy and invention, and the result feels more personal.

Starting in the late '60s Polke became interested in the clouded relationship between painting and photography. For an artist of Polke's cast of mind, the darkroom must have seemed a place of revelation. His use of photography is mercurial—silvery, vaporous. The images from this era mushroom and coagulate; they thin out and cloud up like so much tinted jelly.

From the '80s on, the paintings developed in two general directions. The classical: maximal, large-scale, multipanel works that mix found fabric, silk-screening, cartooning, and every conceivable manner of overpainting and printing. Such a work is *The Living Stink and the Dead Are Not Present*, from 1983, to which the closest stylistic relative is late-'50s Rauschenberg. And the experimental: the more unified, square-format pictures made from poured colored resin, out of which emerge traces of iconic imagery. *Fear-Black Man*, from 1997, is a good example. The enormous picture, 16 feet tall by nine feet wide, appears to depict a giant scary shadow cast by a bogeyman on a melting brick wall, while along the bottom luridly outstretched arms reach up to… what? Beseech the mad creature? Cheer it on as it stomps on its victims? I'm giving a fancy interpretation, which I think it allows. But the painting can also be seen as the result of a spill, just viscous liquids fighting it out on a flat surface—nothing more. That ability to make paintings that are always both, and to make either interpretation intensely pleasurable, is the measure of Polke's art.

His paintings get at something elemental about how we want to live today. They seem to say, "You are not locked into your story. You could be otherwise." Never strictly a realist—never strictly anything—Polke balanced the representational and the banana peel on which it was meant to slip. That makes it sound programmatic, yet the effect is anything but. Like all great artists, Polke was out for ravishment. His work asks, "Can this be enough?" Or maybe just, "What are you afraid of?" Go see this retrospective and weep—for the narrowing of the spirit of our age. •

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Cinema PURGATORIO

Hollywood at the crossroads.

By Ash Carter

DAYS OF NEW Peter Bogdanovich and Cybill Shepherd in *T&C*, 1974.

DAN WYNN/COURTESY DEMONT PHOTO MANAGEMENT LLC (BOGDANOVICH AND SHEPHERD)

LOS ANGELES "COULD NOW BE THE music capital of the world," *Town & Country* declared in May 1974, citing three "charismatic" musicians as proof: Jascha Heifetz, Gregor Piatigorsky, and Zubin Mehta. "It is also the home of the much-admired Los Angeles Police Department." But not all was well in "America's Most Misunderstood City." According to the magazine, "Old Hollywood may be gone."

From its ashes—by way of USC, UCLA, and NYU—a phoenix was rising. *T&C* called it "**New Hollywood**." In New Hollywood, "'independent' production is the name of the game. New Hollywood argues about whether film is primarily an art form or a commercial medium. It lionizes *directors* rather than actors." And none more so than "golden boy" Peter Bogdanovich, pictured with "his live-in companion," Cybill Shepherd. (His other live-in companion was former golden boy Orson Welles.) Film has "become this rather sophisticated thing, like the opera," Bogdanovich said. He started wearing an ascot, in accordance with that belief.

The Last Picture Show, *The Godfather*, and *The French Connection* had made Bogdanovich, Francis Ford Coppola, and William Friedkin, respectively, "the three hottest directors in town," exemplars of a New Hollywood that was "better educated, better equipped, and more dedicated to film art than ever before." Works of "great individualism and inventiveness" like these had sparked "a box office boom," and their American *auteurs* were in a mood to celebrate. In *T&C*'s reporting, "New Hollywood grooves on blue jeans and pizza parties." Many overgrooved.

Thanks to exciting new technologies, movies could now be shot "cheaply, swiftly, and actually very efficiently." And they were, for a few years. But by 1974, New Hollywood had outgrown little films. Productions, some in exceedingly exotic locations, got bigger, longer, and a lot more expensive. When they finally arrived in theaters, Bogdanovich's *At Long Last Love*, Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and Friedkin's *Sorcerer* sold few tickets. Careers of great promise were cut short by runaway salaries, vengeful tropical rainstorms, and Cybill Shepherd's singing voice.

Television was thought to have "all but replaced 'B' movies." But, true to genre, the 'B' movie was only playing dead. Twenty-eight-year-old "Steve" Spielberg was counted among New Hollywood's next wave, even though *Duel*, his ABC Movie of the Week about a killer truck, was not very New Hollywood. In the summer of 1975, Spielberg's *Jaws*—or, as the director's mentor Sid Sheinberg called it, "*Duel* with a shark"—opened on 1,200 screens. That kind of wide release was strictly for 'B' movies. At least, it was before *Jaws* became the first movie of any grade to make more than $100 million. Now every release is a wide release, and all must find their audience in a matter of days. New Hollywood was bleeding, and to *Jaws* it smelled like lunch. •