



Sigmar Polke, Polke Polke Polke
1968, watercolor on paper, 27 1/2" long

coded mix of words and icons spells out the basic issues of identity as dependent on membership in one's family, class, and ethnic, sexual, or national group. The connection between psychological needs and political identity animates the seemingly arbitrary connection between South Pacific, "The Family Man," and Freud. The essentially regressive nature of the dominant culture clashes with the need of the child/adult to belong to a group. The public and private exist in a complex dialectic, whereby need is battered for freedom; where the deification of public figures is a weak substitute for parental guidance; and where sexual and racial prejudice conspire against the happiness of the individual.

Victor Burgin's show does not fall prey to the anesthetizing tactics of so much sincere yet conventionally ineffectual politically concerned art. Rather than exploit the protective insulation of the art world, Burgin lays bare some of the dynamics behind our urge to belong and the conflicts this need engenders.

—Denz Shattner

SIGMAR POLKE
MICHAEL WERNER
GALLERY

When Holly Solomon presented Sigmar Polke's first one-person show in America in 1962, his career had already spanned two decades. Subsequent exhibitions here have failed to catch up or to keep pace with his chameleon fluctuations in style and iconography, or to illuminate the various conceptual strategies he employs. The current retrospective of paintings, watercolors, and drawings, originating in San Francisco and slated for a yearlong tour, attempts to right



Alan Belcher, Schmozone
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this situation; unfortunately, it tells only half the story. Paradoxically, we are back to introductions with this exhibition at the Michael Werner gallery of Polke's objects, photographs, prints, drawings, constructions, and assorted ephemera from the '60s. With the exception of his mechanical multiple, *Kartoffelmaschine* (Potato machine, 1969), none of this work has even been shown in the U.S.

According to his infamous claim, Polke first received the "command of higher beings" in 1966, and his obsession with extraneous perception, parapsychological phenomena, and occultism animates this magical mystery tour of his eccentric cosmology. Selections from the print portfolio of 1968, *Wahre Wesen befehlen* (Higher beings command, including an image of Polke as a coconut palm tree, along with one of a glove, palm-side-up, make icono-biographical puns (as he put it, "Palmis-Palmis-Polke-Prometheus") that combine references to exorcism, commodification (the palm tree as commercial resource, palmistry, and the artist as titan. Published concurrently, a portfolio of photographs includes an image of scissors hovering above a glass of water (which appears in subsequent paintings) suggested by a 1920 photograph documenting a Polish medium's powers of levitation.

Assuming the role of medium himself, Polke conducts his own telepathic experiments. *Telepathische Sitzung I*, Max Klinger-Sigmar Polke (Telepathic session I, 1969) and *Telepathische Sitzung II*, William Blake-Sigmar Polke (Telepathic session II, 1968-69), from the same year as that of Robert Barry's *Psychic Series*, are concerned with transmitting and receiving messages from beyond; these works document the results of communications with Max Klinger

and William Blake in a quasi-scientific manner. Each piece is composed of a pair of hand-painted grids partially filled with the words "A" and "Noir" and labeled at the bottom with the name of sender or receiver. Lengths of rough twine strung between the two grids connect selected coordinate points, but the statistical information presented is unintelligible or insignificant. Polke's play is at the expense of both conception's informational content and of art that posits unintelligibility as expression. His straw men are rationalism and metaphysics, and he knocks each down in one shot.

As the instrument of higher beings, Polke acknowledges the magical possibilities of art on the one hand, and parodies its pretensions on the other. In *Wunderbelohnungsservant* or *Bambusstange* (Attendant at re-association of bamboo cases, 1967), several old bamboo poles standing in a plastic tub partially filled with water constitute a deadpan parody of the artist's ability to bring the dead back to life. Polke performs his acts of rejuvenation like a magician who never quite succeeds, but who also never loses hope; there is always an unfinished quality about these works—a condition that extends to the narcissistic pursuits of the artist himself who seems to have completed all the paperwork for induction into the hall of higher beings without quite attaining admittance.

In a collaged ballpoint-pen drawing entitled *Konstruktionen um Leonardo da Vinci* and *Sigmar Polke* (Constructions around Leonardo da Vinci and Sigmar Polke, 1969), he laboriously maps parallels between his life and that of Leonardo da Vinci. In *Fossilien/Menschentier* (Photo circle/circle of men, 1968-69), his self-portrait serves as messianic hub to a wheel of anthropo-

logical photographs of primitive men, each of which is connected to the center by a cord spoke. If the self-importance of the artist is under attack, so too is the viewpoint that artmaking can be fully explained as a signifying code or historical formation. Perhaps, 1968, for example, a mock portrait gallery of blank rectangular pieces of cardboard, makes a play on words, equating the study of fathers (pappa-legs) with the study of cardboard (in German, "Pappe"), and it's perfectly plausible that Polke is gently spoofing his artistic "father," Joseph Beuys, whose voice comes through loud and clear in the "potatological" pieces.

Polke thematizes the dilemma facing German art during the '60s and the search for new paths: the "cosmonautical" idealism of Group Zero; the belief in the "total freedom" of the artist espoused by his collaborator in *Capitalist Realism*, Gerhard Richter; the preoccupations with temperance and redemption in born again Romanticism; and the blatant materialism of Pop art. Underlying his humorous critique of the mystification of art, which takes ample cues from Fluxus, is his faith in art's ability to sustain multiple levels of consciousness and to accommodate the unconscious. As is entirely fitting for an artist such as Polke, the roots of his profound conviction are to be found in these wonderfully absurd artifacts wherein, in his words, "the monkeys" get into his work.

—Jan Arp

ALAN BELCHER
JOSH BAER GALLERY

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Alan Belcher's exhibition of photo-laminated animal pelts entitled "Schmozone," will probably go down as the most obscene show of the season. Like the sick jokes that circulated following the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster or the Wendy's commercial spoofing a Soviet fashion show that aired during the first U.S./USSR summit (the evening wear category featured a KGB matron in military garb, flashlight in hand, hitting the runway under the glare of searchlights), Belcher's black humor preys on our collective woes. The only difference is that Belcher cracks his demented jokes in galleries and then collects kudos for their supposedly edifying audacity.

Most of the skins Belcher uses are from animals that live(d) in the wild, many of which are endangered: ocelot, antelope, caribou, otter, adult and baby seals, bobcat, wolverine, zebra, arctic fox, honey-bear, cougar, and Kodiak bear. The effect of well over 60 animal

skins hung throughout the gallery was staggering; more than that, it seemed senseless and criminal if not plainly insane. (The use of the polar-bear skin *is* illegal, and a pelt laminated with an image of the inside of a refrigerator splattered with freon was kept in the back and omitted from the checklist because it had been smuggled into the country.) A great white hunter's trophy room stuffed to the rafters, this hall of horrors seems guaranteed to stop viewers dead in their tracks.

Belcher's puns generally fall into two categories. One, skillfully superficial, makes "structuralist" jokes that collapse the simulated and the real, often with hilarious results. The other dryly spoofs political art, turning pressing issues such as environmentalism or international terrorism into laughing matters. In the past, Belcher was determined to play both sides of the fence concerning the degree to which he was willing to commit his own art to social causes. His crocodile cases, for example, offered a mildcritique of the consumption of endangered species in the form of luxury goods. With the "guns 'n grenades luggage," however, he turned his nose up at political correctness.

The puns on the laminated animal skins parallel those of the earlier photo-objects. The purely reflexive ones are outlandishly stupid: a canteloupe on a springbok antelope (get it—it rhymes); ketchup on a bobcat (*cat-sup/bob-cat*); a honeycomb on a honey-bear (ditto); drops of mercury on a cougar (like the car); mussels on a zebra skin (you guessed it—zebra mussels). Other works deign to comment on, of all things, environmental and animal-rights issues: drops of oil on an otter, medical waste on a seal, aluminum pop-tops on a wolverine (pollutants are bad because they can *kill* poor wild animals); spit on a mink (this is what happens if you wear fur as a coat in SoHo—but not if you make it into art and put it in a gallery).

As the title of his current exhibition indicates, Belcher has had it with political correctness. What has set him off, in particular, is the fashionable fadishness of environmental and animal-rights issues and the smugness of all who practice a lopsided brand of activism. No one can accuse Belcher of trendy conscientiousness, but his logic is seriously askew. Maybe he envisions shock treatment as the only means of real political effectiveness because it galvanizes activism, or perhaps he intends this grisly display of N or so dead animals to simulate the proportions of worldwide destruction. Maybe these are meant as macabre

structuralist jokes, chortles about collapsing the simulated and the real. Too bad they fall so flat. There is nothing simulated about these pelts—they are entirely real, and so are the issues their display in a gallery raises. If this counts as a victory of sorts, it's a pyrrhic one indeed.

—*Jan Avgikos*



Loring McAlpin, *Black Beauty*, 1999 (oil on animal skins, aluminum, steel, Plexiglas, table, light, 36 x 12 x 30")

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critique of the consumption of endangered species in the form of luxury goods. With the "puns" to promote luggage," however, he turned his nose up at political correctness.

The puns on the laminated animal skins parallel those of the earlier photo-objects. The purely reflexive ones are outrageously stupid: a camouflage on a springbok antelope (get it — it rhymes), ketchup on a bobcat (eat-up-bob-cat); a honeycomb on a honey-bear (hmm), drops of mercury on a cougar (like the cat), mussels on a zebra (skin eyes gawped it — zebra mussel). Other works deign to comment on... of all things, environmental and animal-rights issues: drops of oil on an otter, medical waste on a seal, aluminum pop-tops on a wolverine (pollutants are bad because they can kill poor wild animals); spit on a mink (this is what happens if you wear fur as a coat in SoHo—but not if you make it into art and put it in a gallery).

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**LORING McALPIN
WESSEL O'CONNOR
GALLERY**

In his show of sculptural assemblages, entitled "Purple Men," Loring McAlpin assays a critical examination of the constructions of masculine identity and desire. The persistent current throughout this escarvas is homosexuality, as it is affirmed, sublimated, and denied. In the iconography of a dominant white male cultural matrix, McAlpin works to retrieve the threads of a gay subjectivity as it is created both in collusion with, and in revolt against that culture.

McAlpin seems particularly hung up on the admittedly grotesque spectacle of male bonding as it is enacted in sports and leisure. Many of the accessories that the artist marshals to make his case—athletic lockers, wrestling mats, and cocktail bar implements—derive from the iconography of male heterosexuality, yet the rituals they suggest all have mocking overtones in the life style of the obsessively self-regarding gay queen and buff. These objects all pretend to speak the language of a straight stud, but, as McAlpin points out, the recurrent *non-entente* is "faggot."

This is interesting material for investigation, but McAlpin's presentations are exasperatingly diffuse in their aims and effects. Almost all of the works in this show are parodies of established, conceptually inclined artists, and part of the fun is picking out the references to Allan McCollum, Hans Sittinbach, Richard Prince, Chris Burden, Nayland Blake, Annette Lemieux, and Felix Gonzalez Torres. Unfortunately, often that's all they are: references severed from the meanings that the plundered works sustained. In this respect they evidence little real critical

engagement with the sources. Seductively tall works (1998) is an arrangement of pictures after the manner of McCollum's surrogates, but McAlpin has replaced McCollum's empty rectangles with portrait photographs of smiling gay men and lesbians, all of them looking assured and well-adjusted. What is the point of playing this apparent cheer plenitude off of McCollum's dour voids? The brunt of the joke is evidently directed at the recent generation of artists who answered the demands of capital by gastrostrating themselves before the tyranny of the system, but the nature of McAlpin's antidote remains irritatingly simplistic.

McAlpin is a member of the *ACT UP* activist artists' collective Gran Fury, a group that has successfully bent naked appropriations of certain artists' styles (among them Hans Blauvelt, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger) to its own didactic political purposes. But the shift from direct action to the arena of the art market may pose problems for this kind of ends-justify-the-means-thrift. Neither making a convincing statement in terms of established art discourse nor achieving his stated purpose of probing the fictions of masculinity, save in an extremely superficial manner, McAlpin's appropriations seem mannered and less urgent than one might hope. The varying qualities and merits of the different artists cited are leveled as sight gags for the in-the-know gallery-goer. These appropriations play fast and loose with two kinds of recognition: on the one hand, that of a viewer accustomed to the art world's current infatuation with conceptually derived strategies; on the other, that of one versed in gay subcultural argot.

McAlpin is quoted in the press release: "There are two kinds of men—driven souls and tasterful consumers, go to another [show]. I'm driving to push my hang-ups on

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