Polke at the Tate

One of Polke’s first solo exhibitions in the United States was at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1991. Scroll through installation images on the MCA’s exhibition archive.

The Dallas Museum of Art organized Sigmar Polke: Recent Paintings and Drawings in 2003, which traveled to the Tate Modern as Sigmar Polke: History of Everything. The exhibition featured works created between 1997 and 2003 inspired by the American West, especially the shooting arcades, gun sellers, and gun culture in Texas.


Sigmar Polke: Photographs, 1968-1972 was on display at the Getty Center in 2007. That same year, Museum Frieder Burda in Baden-Baden, Germany installed a retrospective bringing together 60 paintings and 114 works on paper. Watch a VTV Classics video about the exhibition.

In 2007, Polke’s famous series, Axial Age, was shown at the 52nd Venice Biennale. Read a New York Times article, “The Alchemist’s Moment: The Reclusive Mr. Polke,” in anticipation of the installation.

Raphael Rubinstein, who wrote a monograph on Sigmar Polke in 2009, reflected on what he would have asked the artist at the time of his death in 2010.


Watch a Tate Shots video about Sigmar Polke’s unusual materials and techniques, from snail juice to meteor dust and potatoes.

A 2016 exhibition at Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy included works that won the artist the Golden Lion at the 42nd Venice Biennale in 1986. Watch a tour of the exhibition with the curators and flip through the exhibition catalogue.

Productive Interference: Sigmar Polke and Artistic Perspectives Today was on display at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf in 2021-2022. The exhibition marked the 80th anniversary of the artist’s birth, juxtaposing Polke’s work with 21st century artists exploring similar themes of fake news, manipulated images, and information transmission.
Sigmar Polke (German, 1941–2010)

**Bikini Frauen**, 2004
Acrylic and interference color on canvas

Private Collection; L2023:74.11

In the 1960s, Sigmar Polke and several other like-minded young artists founded the tongue-in-cheek Kapitalisticcher Realismus (Capitalist Realism) movement in West Germany. The movement’s style was derived from advertising, newsprint, and other commercial imagery, akin to the Pop Art movement in the United States. Like Pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997) and Andy Warhol (1928–1987), Polke was particularly interested in the mechanized raster dot printing process. However, Polke used the imagery to critique the process, assert the dominance of painting, and question the truthfulness of mass-media. **Bikini Frauen** is one of many works that features the bikini-clad female form—an ever-present subject in magazine advertising and pop culture gossip columns. As the artist once said: “The conventional definition of reality, and the idea of ‘normal life,’ mean nothing.”

*On view October 25, 2023 – January 28, 2024*
Sigmar Polke (German, 1941-2010)
**Rasterbild mit Palmen, 1966**
Dispersion on canvas

Private Collection; L2021:192.1

“I like the way that the dots in a magnified picture swim and move about. The way that motifs change from recognizable to unrecognizable, the undecided, ambiguous nature of the situation, the way it remains open.... Many dots vibrating, swinging, blurring, reappearing: one could think of radio signals, telegraphic images, television come to mind” (Sigmar Polke, 1966).

Sigmar Polke moved as a boy with his family from East to West Germany in 1953. In the 1960s, he founded the tongue-in-cheek Kapitalistischer Realismus (Capitalist Realism) movement with Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) and Konrad Lueg (1939-1996). Like Pop Art in the United States, the movement’s style was derived from advertising, newsprint, and other commercial imagery, and in Polke’s case, a biting sense of humor. However, the artists worked to challenge the dominance of US Pop Art and situated their practice in the political context of postwar West Germany. **Rasterbild mit Palmen** was made in 1966, the same year as Polke’s first solo exhibition in Berlin. The work is one of the artist’s **Rasterbilders** (Raster-dot paintings), a series of magnified, pixelated images that question the apparent truth in mechanically printed photographs in the media.

*On view May 18 – August 21, 2022*