

SIGMAR POLKE, *THE THREE LIES OF PAINTING*, 1994.

## SIGMAR POLKE

TATE GALLERY LIVERPOOL  
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In the 1950s Liverpool became twin cities with Cologne, Sigmar Polke's recent adopted home. This is perhaps why he has chosen the Tate Liverpool for his first important exhibition in Britain, providing this country with a rare glimpse into the source of so much theory, apology, denial, and superstition. Spanning three and a half decades and progressing from the Pop works of the sixties through the "gap" in the seventies, the massive rediscovery at the beginning of the eighties, to the transparent works of today, this exhibition helps to situate a lot of the discussion surrounding Polke's radical critique of painting.

For instance, the new paintings on translucent fabric instead of the found patterned material or canvas of earlier times appear as extensions of this logic rather than as deviations. Solidity is swept away in a cloud of lacquer that is transparent from both front and behind. Sweeping shifts of artificial resin build up from a view through to the bare

architectural bones of the stretcher's crossbar at the back. Through such attention to materiality, or to immateriality, awareness of the construction of pictorial illusion is heightened.

Further paintings convey the familiarity of printing styles. In *Knight* (1994), a faint image of a medieval man warming his pointed boots over a fire with a singular tongue of smoke is reminiscent of broadsheets, an early shared visual language. Here the stretcher becomes a structural element, a little local perspectival glimpse at the comforting beams of an old timber house. *The Three Lies of Painting* (1994) carries a sewn insert of splayed hand outlines that runs from top to bottom eradicating any possible spatial play. A severed tree trunk is suspended and the top of a mountain sliced through, held mid-surface, in a crossover of illustration and topographical reference. *Refugee Camp* (1994) is another set piece that, though a little more loaded, shows Polke still using the power of attraction and the desire for visual gratification. People pick rags, power lines recede, all manner of media-led association in an enlarged photographic grain builds up an indulgent flow of reference and background that extends way beyond what is in reality a perfunctory level of detail. The whole scene is painted

from edge to edge on a gigantic landscape format. The layering builds up to engage and at the same time repel literal interpretation.

Polke attended Düsseldorf Academy when Joseph Beuys made the famous edict linking painting with betrayal, and this background of anti-authorship is deeply engrained. Like a medium who allows images to emerge, a shaman or, as is often said, an alchemist, he brings materials together and then lets the process itself create. This wrestling of apparent order from chaotic shifts in method and process is particularly evident in the upstairs section on early 1980s paintings. Toxic, barbed materials and powders blown onto adhesive surfaces struggle to bring a focal point out of the blur, representing the need to escape a fixed view of culture and construct a "natural" approach. The imagery that results combines the jack-in-the-box levitation of timeless truth, borderless fable, and a certain childish irreverent tone.

Polke's work reveals a sort of time gap between knowing, seeing, and thinking. The Liverpool exhibition

illuminates, first of all, how certain considerations live on as afterglow or reflection. The painting is not about any kind of coherent totality, there is no blinding light of insight. Subject matter is evened out, blended and emulsified by the consistently tenacious physical relationship with the work. The products remain separate and removed through this denial of total understanding and involvement. Our part remains transitory, like watching a rock emerge from a swell, shed water, and disappear again.

SACHA CRADDOCK