



## SIGMAR POLKE BY DAVID FRANKEL

### THE SORCERER STRIKES

The honeyed images above are a single work, front and back, by the German artist Sigmar Polke, magus of contemporary painting. *Magus* would have been a strange word to apply to Polke early on, when his work seemed closer to American pop art than to magic or alchemy—but Polke has always been surprising, and now, 40 years into his career, the ways in which he surprises only multiply. An artist of mystery and wit, he seems at the same time transparent and impenetrably elusive.

Born in 1941 in what would become East Germany, Polke moved to the West as a boy. He had journeyed from a culture of privation to one of plenty, and it is easy to understand his interest in pop, an art of consumer abundance. The work in his upcoming show at the Michael Werner Gallery, New York (on view through

January 13), explores a different kind of luxury: a sumptuous material, amber, present not only in the chromatic timbre of the paintings but in a choice group of Renaissance and baroque objects shown along with them, works of value and beauty.

Worth remembering, though, when seeing Polke's paintings in the company of these things, is his earlier love of commonplace imagery and cheap printed fabrics. Worth remembering, too, is his layering of meanings—the way he would make those printed textiles his canvases, combining their pictures with his own; or the way a work would fuse images and styles, so that to get to one, the eye had to make peace with the rest. And finally we remember his experiments with materials that will change over time, into the future. The old master-ish drawing and

mottled abstraction bonded in the painting above are, for Polke, not “natural” means of picture making but conscious choices among many, and amber is neither a color nor a precious ornament (or, at least, not just those things), but a medium dense with historical and even prehistorical properties. The glowing light of this picture is only one sign of the richness he finds in it.

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David Frankel is managing editor in the department of publications of the Museum of Modern Art and a contributing editor at *Artforum* and *Aperture* magazines. Above: Sigmar Polke's *Untitled*, 2001–2006, artificial resin on fabric, 54 x 46 in. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York City and Cologne, Germany. Both sides pictured.