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Press release

Sigmar Polke – Photographs (1964-1990)

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As the title suggests, the exhibition provides an insight into Polke's cosmos as a photographer. At the same time, it is a tribute to the first museum retrospective of Sigmar Polke's photography in the U.S. – the exhibition tour »When Pictures Vanish« – that Paul Schimmel organized at the end of the 1990s and, of course, a tribute to the artist himself, who would have celebrated his 80th birthday this year.

In the mid-1960s, when Polke was still living with his family in a small apartment on Kirchfeldstraße in Düsseldorf, the artist began to experiment with his camera: he staged his subjects with everyday objects, such as mugs, teapots and cucumbers, but the first self-portraits also belong to this period, such as the self-portrait with strings, which reveals a camera on the left edge of the picture. This belongs to Christof Kohlhöfer, who was shooting scenes here for the film »Der ganze Körper fühlt sich leicht und möchte fliegen« (1969), in which Sigmar Polke played himself. At the beginning of the 1970s, Polke's visual language changes. He begins to travel and takes his first trips to Paris – the photographs tell of a shimmering world, of romantic forays through the French capital, but also show wild motifs of life rushing by. This series is a kind of declaration of love, to the city, but above all to his girlfriend at the time, Mariette Althaus. In the darkroom, his experiments increase in virtuosity – multiple exposures, cross-fades, interrupted development processes, but also coincidences characterize this period of »Polkography«, the results of which are often also due to the influence of LSD. The journey to the distant Orient – to Quetta, a city in western Pakistan – represents a completely different adventure. In an opium induced intoxication, the air between the men depicted begins to literally shimmer and the arabesque on the wall to »dance«. Polke not only captured intimate, communal moments, he later expanded them by painting over the prints in colour, in some cases bright colours, allowing the viewer to literally experience the supernatural atmosphere. Abstraction and alchemical experiments come into focus at the end of the 1980s, the motif does not necessarily play a leading role and the pictorial content is reduced. They are replaced by »Polkochemistry«, the culmination of which is the series »Ohne Titel (Blau, Violett, Grün)«, better known as Uranium Photos. The process of developing and processing the prints in the darkroom is central to his photographic works: each photograph is unique. This is also clear in the series »Pavilion Venice Biennale«, which he shot during his participation at the time in 1986 in the German pavilion. His great interest in chemical processes, for which his painting has become famous, often found its antecedent in photography.

The exhibition features 50 works – starting with the early everyday stagings, through complex photographic manipulations and overpaintings that characterize »Polkography«, to the later alchemical-experimental abstractions, »Polkochemistry«. Among the highlights of the exhibition is the 10-part work »Übermalung eines Bildes – Winterlandschaft«, a sequence that clearly reveals the multifaceted nature of his photography.

Accompanying the exhibition is a catalogue with a text by Prof. Siegfried Gohr.

In a second presentation, the exhibition will be on view at Galerie Kicken Berlin in the spring of 2022.

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