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Contemporary artist Sigmar Polke dies

By CBC Arts
CBC Arts

Contemporary artist Sigmar Polke, who launched the Capitalist Realism movement with two other German artists, has died from cancer.

German artist Sigmar Polke, a major figure in the contemporary art world and co-creator of the Capitalist Realism movement, has died at age 69.

His dealer Erhard Klein said Friday that the painter died from cancer on Thursday in Cologne. Klein declined to provide any other details.

Polke is known for helping launch the Capitalist Realism movement back in the early 1960s, along with Gerhard Richter and Konrad Lueg. The movement was both a reaction to the Pop stylings of the West and the severe Soviet-approved art of the Communist bloc.

Polke has been described as an "anti-pop pop artist."

Nicholas Serota, director of London's Tate Modern art gallery, saluted Polke for his "sublimely beautiful paintings."

In a statement released late Friday, Serota went on to note the German artist's works often contained a "tough message about society and its values."

German Culture Minister Bernd Neumann called Polke "one of the most important and successful representatives of contemporary German art."

"He was a critical, ironic and also self-deprecating observer of post-war history and its artistic commentator ... With a desire for experimentation, he developed his own language in images. Sigmar Polke, the 'alchemist of colours,' leaves behind a unique body of artistic work," Neumann said.

Born in 1941 in eastern Germany, Polke said he made his way to the West at age 12 by hopping alone onto a train to cross the border. He went on to study at Düsseldorf's Art Academy in the 1960s.

'I'm a believer in luck'

"We were very poor and my family lost everything during the war - our home and our identity. But I'm a believer in luck and think the social conditions you're born into provide the opportunity for you to prove your luck. And I suppose I've been lucky," Polke told The Los Angeles Times in 1995.

At the start of his career, Polke used images of ordinary foods and manipulated them so they became abstracted.

He also experimented with many styles, subjects and materials. In the 1970s, he focused on photography but then began to do more painting in the '80s.

Polke's works have been shown at Vienna's Museum of Modern Art, London's Royal Academy and Tate Modern, the Martin-Gropius-Bau museum in Berlin, New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

The record price for a Polke at an auction was for \$5.3 million US for *Strand (Beach)*, sold in London in 2007.

Polke garnered many art prizes including the prestigious Golden Lion of the Venice Biennale in 1986.

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