The Blinky Palermo series “Times of the Day” is part of a survey of his work, split between two institutions.

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The German painter Blinky Palermo got his art training from Joseph Beuys and his pseudonym from an American gangster — a pair of tough guys, in other words. But intimidation wasn’t his style, to judge from a two-part survey of his work on view in upstate New York.

Already influential at the time of his unexpected death, at 33, in 1977, Blinky Palermo (born Peter Schwarze) has come to seem essential to an art world obsessed with painting by means other than paint. Whether made with colored tape and department store fabric or with actual pigment on walls and metal panels, his works satisfy painting’s metaphysical requirements without quite meeting its material conditions.

Blinky Palermo’s approach has emboldened others, as a visit to various galleries will confirm: young artists sew, embroider and otherwise fashion things that might be called paintings without
deigning to paint on canvas. And his art’s obliging, sociable qualities have prompted tributes from more conceptual types, Rirkrit Tiravanija among them.


In its current incarnation the show feels choppy. This has something to do with its being split between two institutions and further subdivided by medium (cloth pictures and wall drawings at Bard, metal paintings at Dia).

But a neater package probably wouldn’t suit Blinky Palermo, who is a bit of a conundrum. His art can seem reductive, but the longer you look at it, the more you notice the options it leaves open. His signature work, a blue triangle painted above a doorway, is typical: it’s steeped in mysticism, but was sold to collectors as a D.I.Y. stencil set.

And for all its American bona fides, Blinky Palermo’s painting is full of unchecked German baggage. (I’m thinking, especially, of Dia’s installation of “To the People of New York City,” a suite of 40 panels painted in the colors of the German flag.)

Bard’s half of the exhibition should be seen first, since it offers a look at the formative years of his brief career: after his 1964 graduation from Beuys’s class at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, and before his 1973 move to New York.

He had acquired his nickname from his fellow students at the academy but was still searching for a signature. Early works find him rearranging the geometric elements of a Malevich, in “Composition With 8 Red Rectangles” (1964), and making coy allusions to German Expressionism in “Blue Bridge” (1964-5).

By 1967 he was thinking more about American contemporaries like Ellsworth Kelly, producing shaped, fabric-wrapped panels like “Green Quadrangle.” A year later he started to stitch together pieces of dyed cotton fabric, achieving ready-made Rothkos and Mardens. But the German-ness is still there, encoded in tape-wrapped staffs (after Beuys) and wooden T-forms paired with brushy landscapes (Caspar David Friedrich).

Blinky Palermo’s wall drawings, temporary installations that survive only in documented form, are also divided in nationality. On the one hand, they send up the stuffy bourgeois culture of
postwar West Germany; in the best-known example Blinky Palermo’s ochre-painted walls served as a backdrop for neoclassical busts by his friend and co-conspirator Gerhard Richter. On the other, they aspire to the mathematical strictures of Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt.

That second impulse carries over to Dia, where acrylic-on-aluminum paintings that Blinky Palermo made from 1973 to 1976 are installed in close proximity to the LeWitt galleries. Here you will find “To the People of New York City” (1976), with its Morse-code-like pulses of red, yellow and black, and another series, titled “Times of the Day,” from 1974-76 (similar in format, but with a wickedly arbitrary palette).

Other paintings from this period, like the breezy, bright “Coney Island II,” hang in a nearby alcove. But you keep coming back to the strange, slightly embittered salutation of “To the People.” Actually it’s more of a farewell address; Blinky Palermo made this body of work after returning to Germany in 1976. It was still in his Düsseldorf studio when he left for his vacation in the Maldives, where he died suddenly.

It’s haunting for that reason, and also because you can see a repatriated Blinky Palermo looking at New York from a distance: viewing Mondrian, Kelly, Marden and all the rest through the prism of his own nationality. His Germany, as the scholar Benjamin H. D. Buchloh reminds us in his catalog essay, was “a fractured postfascist nation-state with dismantled territorial boundaries and conflicting ideological boundaries.”

Even when painting is abstract, he seems to be saying, color never really is. You can move to New York and take the name of a Philly mobster, but your flag will be lying in wait for you.


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