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Blinky Palermo at Bard and Dia.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

You should know about Blinky Palermo. By the time he died, suddenly, at the age of thirty-three, in 1973, the quicksilver German artist, who was born Peter Schwarze, brought up as Peter Heisterkamp, and took on a crook’s sobriquet, had achieved a body of work furiously intelligent and beautiful. His suites of abstract paintings on aluminum panels and what might be called his paintings by other means, such as swaths of one-color commercial fabric mounted on stretchers, updated the aesthetics of modern idealists, from Kazimir Malevich to Barnett Newman, for an age of skeptical irony. In Germany, Palermo ranks not far below his majestic contemporaries, and friends, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. He remains too little recognized in America, where few of his works reside.

Two perfect summer shows—bright, cool, bracing—help matters, though in out-of-the-way places. They are halves of a retrospective that began in Los Angeles and Washington and completes its tour at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and at Dia:Beacon, forty-some miles south. The Bard segment represents most phases of Palermo’s career. Late works and the artist’s magnum opus, “To the People of New York City” (1976)—a fifteen-part sequence of forty aluminum panels painted the German flag colors of red, yellow, and black—grace the vast, skylighted spaces of Dia:Beacon. The retrospective was organized by Lynne Cooke, a former curator at Dia, which has long championed Palermo, among other key avant-gardists of the sixties and seventies.

Palermo in 1975: his life had qualities of myth.

Palermo’s brief life exudes qualities of myth. He and a twin brother were born in Leipzig in 1943, to an unwed woman, who gave them up for adoption to Wilhelm Heisterkamp, an employee of a steel company, and his wife, Erika. The family fled East Germany in 1952, settling in Münster. Erika died in 1958. The shock of losing his beloved mother was compounded when, three years later, he finally was told the facts of his parentage. Having studied graphic design, in a Bauhaus tradition, he entered the Düsseldorf Academy, a hotbed of innovation also attended by Richter and Polke.

In 1964, he became a star student of Joseph Beuys, the droll messiah of resuscitated German art. To change your art, Beuys would instruct, change yourself. A fellow-student, fancying a resemblance in photographs, dubbed Peter Heisterkamp Blinky Palermo, after a Philadelphia fight fixer and ex-con (for extortion) who was in the news for dealing with the heavyweight champion Sonny Liston. Beuys approved. What’s in a pseudonym? How would it affect the aura of nineteen-twenties Paris if Man Ray had kept his birth name of Emmanuel Radnitzky, or that of the sixties everywhere if their essential voice answered to Robert Zimmerman? A gaudy alias may express identification with a radically new sensibility, stepping Venus-like from the surf of history.

In a period epitomized by Godard’s “Breathless” (1960), striving young Europeans shook off the war-dimmed legacies of their national cultures for the confident flash of things American. New York Abstract Expressionism and Pop art and, a bit later, minimalism became transatlantic lodestars, eclipsing the School of Paris—whose last avatar, the fantastical self-inventor Yves Klein, partly led the way. From then on, though the New York art world wouldn’t fully admit it, for nearly two decades, the most acute ramifications of American styles and ideas played out in Europe, especially West Germany. Palermo steered away, toward abstraction, from the Pop tendency of his fellow ex-East Germans Richter and Polke (Capitalist Realism, they called it); but he shared their alertness to American rigor and raciness, absorbing aspects of Ellsworth Kelly’s abstractions, Richard Artschwager’s and Richard Tuttle’s object paintings, and Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings.

(Palermo first visited New York, with Richter, in 1970; he moved here in 1973 for three years.) At the same time, he sought European bedrock in the dormant grandeur of Malevich and Mondrian. At Bard, the tentative but wonderfully sensitive “Composition with 8 Red Rectangles” (1964), painted when he was twenty-one, evokes a 1915 Malevich
of the same title with the poignance of a son conjuring a remote father.

Palermo’s “Cloth Paintings,” made between 1966 and 1972, always knock me out. They look, at first glance, like the paintings on abutted monochrome panels, in oil and wax, that Brice Marden made in the same years. But they’re just store-bought fabric, machine-sewn. (Polke had set a precedent, painting on patterned cloth in place of canvas.) The works might seem a cynical parody: quick and easy, quite as good as slow and painstaking. Why sweat? However, their exquisite color combinations—brick red and manila, blue and aqua, three dusky greens—impart gravitas. And their touchless, candidly boring textures stir a positive yearning for the absent intimacy of a painter’s hand. Palermo made a point of suspending his more usual, bravura technique. He never ceased to experiment with motifs for spontaneous, gestural brushwork. The ostensibly rote execution of his aluminum panels—each a squarish field of one hue banded at top and bottom by one or two others—beats a careful layering of colors that you sense, subliminally, rather than plainly see. The humor of the “Cloth Paintings,” from a moment when minimalist doctrine was declaring all painting obsolete, is shadowed by emotional tones of despair and defiance. The works amount to poems about painting. If they make me laugh, as they regularly do, it’s at an almost absurd richness of resonance attained with such jolting economy.

Not everything in the Bard show impresses. Palermo’s restless stabs at new motifs come a cropper with an inexplicable fondness for little triangular reliefs and for wall-mounted T shapes, in wood or metal, sometimes paired with roughly painted panels of fragmentary, eccentric design. These have the generic feel of a lot of frittery, churning post-minimalist art of their era. (The standard error was in assuming that things put together would just naturally go together, in meaningful ways.) More substantial, and extremely handsome, is visual documentation of site-specific projects that Palermo executed, in Europe, from 1968 to 1973. Most involved painting directly on walls, with geometric forms echoing the contours of the rooms or projecting the shapes of windows in them. As usual with him, the colors enchant. He had a particular feel for subtly denatured tans and greens, like those which give a disembodied, ineffable air to the paintings of Robert Mangold.

Am I mentioning a great many artists here? I’ll add the master of all-whiteness, Robert Ryman, whose quiet dramatizing of relations between painted surfaces and the walls behind them Palermo often brings to mind. Palermo’s is a cheerfully name-dropping art, like none other I know: never imitative, but collegial. His borrowings pay generous tribute to their creditors. This rare characteristic partly explains his neglect in America, where a national bent for proprietary branding can confuse a signature look with quality. In truth, Palermo’s “porosity” (a word applied to him by Beuys) is a tremendous distinction. Angelically hip, he affects his fans, including me, as a cosmopolitan escort of the imagination, with ready access to the smartest and best people and ideas in the world.

Palermo was the youngest of a haunting number of influential avant-garde artists who died while still in their thirties, of illness or accident, between 1970 and 1978, including Eva Hesse (cancer), Robert Smithson (plane crash), Bas Jan Ader (lost at sea), Ree Morton (car crash), and Gordon Matta-Clark (cancer). Palermo lived recklessly. He was married twice and had innumerable affairs. He drank far too much, as he acknowledged. He was on the wagon, and perhaps taking an alcohol-aversive drug, around the time of his death, while travelling to meet a girlfriend in the Maldives, early in 1977. His body was cremated in Sri Lanka. One of his last works—a painted aluminum panel four feet high by about a foot wide, bracketing a field of bright yellow with a flurry of strokes inumber below and a zone ofumber brushwork over yellow and blue above—suggests a budding personal response to a widespread revival, then taking hold, of expressionistic painting. It is gorgeous and heartbreaking. The course of art since 1977 would surely look different, and better, had Blinky Palermo stayed alive.

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Slide show: The art of Blinky Palermo.