Con contradictions, Equivocations

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I

t the name Blinkly Palermo reminds you not of a famous German artist but, rather, of a famous U.S. mobster—or perhaps the clown you hired for your child's birthday party—you are not alone. Palermo was christened Peter Schwarz in Leipzig in 1943. When adopted as an infant, he became Peter Heisterkamp. He assumed the name Blinkly Palermo in 1964 while he was studying art in Düsseldorf alongside Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter under Joseph Beuys. The moniker refers to the Philadelphia gangster and boxing promoter Frank "Blinky" Palermo, whom the artist resembles. Accounts differ as to whether Palermo or Beuys chose the name. Either way, it stuck, and remains one of the most eccentric aspects of this abstract artist's short, prolific and patchy career.

Palermo, who died suddenly at age 33 in 1977, lived for a time in New York and had a fondness for all things American, especially Beat literature, Conceptualism, Minimalism and the New York School painting. This retrospective, curated by Lynne Cooke, hopes to put Palermo, who was not as well known in Europe as in his native Germany, squarely in art history's canon; or at least to make him a household name on this side of the Atlantic.

Certainly at least some of Palermo's art needs to be better known, especially outside of Germany and America's Mecca of Minimalism, Dia—Beacon—he was much more talented than his celebrity contemporaries Polke and Mr. Richter. Although he courted insouciance, Palermo was clearly sensitive to color—visually striking, in the manner of Dia: Beacon. He was, after all, a German artist, especially when seen against the Minimalism with which his art is so often compared.

Working out of early 20th-century European abstraction, Palermo demonstrates that he can do a lot better with his bent for abstraction from the 1960s, single-colored geometric shapes pulse rhythmically across planes, or torque the surface of the canvas. And his numerous series of flat, hard-edged geometric abstractions on multiple aluminum panels—exploring the cardinal points, New York City and the times of day—confirm Palermo to be a genuine painter, who can push abstraction's economy of means to the point that his imagery resembles little more than signal flags yet still engages serious passions. But this uneven exhibition, in spurts charming and strong, but belies a persuasive case for canonization.

Up until this retrospective—which began in Los Angeles, visited the Hirshhorn in Washington, and finishes its tour concurrently at Bard College's Hessel Museum of Art and Dia: Beacon—Palermo had been able to see Palermo's particular brand of glib abstraction only in small doses or in the context of other artists. And perhaps that's how it should be. Seeing the full range of Palermo's oeuvre is like stepping into a laboratory where contradictory ideas, some in their infancy, are being explored with mixed degrees of earnestness and success. In large quantities (the retrospective comprises roughly 70 works) Palermo never hits his stride. Over and over again, just when the show begins to get good, it is aesthetically derailed by another clever idea.

This sense of unevenness was much more prevalent in Washington, where the retrospective was installed hastily chronologically, and handily, but also linearly along the Hirshhorn's curved gallery walls—a surface competing with Palermo's large, small, hard-edged geometries.

In New York, the show is divided between early (Hessel Museum) and late (Dia: Beacon). And the difference between Washington and New York is astonishing. Bard's installation allows works to play off of one another and to bring each gallery wall into an elegant, cohesive unit. The retrospective is complemented by "If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now," Bard's concurrent, adjacent show co-curated by Josef Palermo and Lynne Cooke, in which new site-specific wall works by Mr. McElheney draw upon the legacy of Palermo. And while there is an intentionally striking, unified installation—where Palermo can be seen among familiar Minimalist and Conceptualist works, as with their current exhibition "Im Knoebel: 24 Colors—for Blinky"—Palermo doesn't just shine; it is as if he has just come back home.

Still, a well-installed exhibition can only do so much. Revealing Palermo's strengths and weaknesses, this retrospective presents an exceptional and inventive artist full of promise but just getting started. And it exposes Palermo's own conflicted urges and influences, which veered between the rigorous abstraction of Europeans Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich and Americans Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, on the one hand, and the nonchalance and gamelessness of Conceptualism on the other. The exhibition also betrays the influence of his mentor Beuys, whose rebellious work and tactics clearly were at odds with Palermo's own and perhaps primary desire to be a serious abstract painter. Clearly influenced by Marcel Duchamp's "Readymades," Palermo concurrently embraced and challenged Modernism. He sometimes worked with tape, chromium steel and mirrors instead of paint, and he bought bolts of single-colored factory-dyed cotton and stretched it un- terered as dyptichs and triptychs. These modest, nonpainted fabric "paintings," recalling Mark Rothko's horizon- tal rectangles, as well as those products from the Conceptualist's factory. When, early in his career, Palermo relinquishes the rectangular surfaces such as the circle, triangle, cruciform, totem pole and even the interior walls of buildings—which feel at times like acts of defiance—gives up more than he gains. A few of his constructions—some- where among object, architecture, consistent painting—seri- ously engage with the tradition of metaphoric abstraction. "Schmetterling II (Butterfly II)" (1964) is a turned cross, the slim, 11-foot-tall "Untitiled" (1967)—a vi- olete-colored triangular canvas held, as if pinched, by three long brown wooden chopsticks—suggests a delicately teetering bird. But even in the best of these works, Palermo can seem off-track.

Blinky Palermo: Retrospective
1964-1977
Dia: Beacon and Hessel Museum at CCS Bard
Through Oct. 31

Appearing cavalier and handmade or pristine and machine- tooled, Palermo's spare geometric forms can suggest utilitarian objects, primitive totems and student exercises. As with the work of Richard Tuttle, his brushes of cloth can simultane- ously evoke hanging laundry, pure rubbish and ships' sails billow- ing on an ocean horizon. buoying it all, and evident throughout this retrospective, is Palermo's sense of humor. Pal- able also is his posturing and forced naivety.

Inconsistent as an artist, Pal-ermo was either a gifted ab- stract painter unwilling to com- mit, or he was a Conceptual artist who made good work de- spite his antiesthetic leanings. Perhaps he was genuinely ambivalent—an experimentalist si- milar to Polke, et al., by dint of questioning the fundamentals of abstraction; a painter made so self-conscious about his love of painting that he resorted on oc- casion to acts of mere clowning around.

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