

Roswitha Haftmann Stiftung

Press release

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Roswitha Haftmann Prize to be awarded to German artist Sigmar Polke

The Roswitha Haftmann Prize 2010, Europe's best-endowed art award, goes to the German artist Sigmar Polke.

The Board of the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation has decided to bestow the 2010 award, worth 150,000 Swiss francs, to the painter, graphic and photo artist Sigmar Polke.

Born in Silesia in 1941 and today a resident of Cologne, Polke is among the leading artists of the present day. For forty years he has been experimenting with styles, subjects and materials, as well as with a hermeneutics that includes the role of art and the artist in its reflections. In the process, Polke has himself played a considerable part in the revival of painting.

The main leitmotif in the work of this versatile artist is the screened picture, which has recurred in a range of forms since the early 1960s. At the same time, he has also tried his hand at photochemical methods to create photographs with the look of paintings, a methodology that emphasizes their development in a process and continues to influence his painting to this day. In 1982, upon his return from a world tour, the artist showed an enigmatic series at documenta 7, purple works shimmering darkly and possessed of a savage beauty. Polke had used modern artificial pigments to craft them, mixing them with oil and gasoline. Later works attest to his meticulous study of ancient techniques for producing paint. His broad, eclectic practical knowledge has earned him the sobriquet 'alchemist', a title borne out by his juxtaposition of precious stones, such as lapis lazuli and malachite, with common-or-garden prefab materials, as well as by his elevation of varnish or metal to the status of signifying element. The nimbus of a generative process, of the detection and liberation of a given material's own vital force, hangs permanently about his oeuvre. For Polke, the act of painting is a calculated risk, a confrontation between the material deployed and the artist's own creative will that has allowed him to establish a patent new conception of the abstract, one that focuses on the material dimension of the work of art as centre and way station at one and the same time. He evokes in spectacular fashion ideas such as pure painting, untrammelled nature and romanticism, even as he coolly trains his sights on a society shaped by market forces, by politics and the media.

The jury for the Roswitha Haftmann Prize has also singled out for acclaim Polke's most recent work, his church windows for Zurich's Grossmünster. Here, Polke's training in the technique of stained glass has allowed him to create images that are as powerful as they are sensitive, figurative and abstract masterpieces fashioned out of agate and glass.

The Board awards him the Roswitha Haftmann Prize in recognition of his artistic achievements as a whole, a corpus extraordinary in its entirety.

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SIGMAR POLKE

Sigmar Polke, born in 1941 in Oels in Silesia, fled in 1945 to Tübingen. He continued thence to Düsseldorf, and a training in stained glass. He studied under Karl Otto Goetz and Gerhard Hoeme at the Art Academy of Düsseldorf and rose to initial prominence together with Gerhard Richter and Konrad Fischer-Lueg, with whom he founded the 'Capitalist Realist' school of painting. Polke has been exhibiting his work since 1963 at home and abroad, among other places at the Kunsthhaus Zürich. From 1977 to 1991 he served as a professor at the University of Fine Arts of Hamburg, and has lived and worked in Cologne since 1978.

He earned his first laurels early on, and following important retrospectives in the US and Germany was awarded the Goslar Kaiser Ring in 2000. Now, after having won the Praemium Imperiale in 2002, he is to receive the Roswitha Haftmann Prize, Europe's best-endowed award for a contemporary artist, in 2010.

FOUNDATION AND PRIZEWINNERS

Sigmar Polke is the tenth winner of Europe's best-endowed award for art. Other prizewinners include Walter de Maria, Maria Lassnig, Jeff Wall, Robert Ryman, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Mona Hatoum, Richard Artschwager, Douglas Gordon and Vija Celmins.

The Prize was originally the initiative of Roswitha Haftmann (1924-1998). Since 2001 the Foundation has awarded it every one to three years to a living artist who has created an oeuvre of outstanding quality. The legacy of the gallerist, as beautiful as she was wealthy, has since gained in esteem. The prizewinner is selected by the Members of the Board, which is made up of the directors of the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and the Kunsthhaus Zürich. Additional members are either individuals nominated in the Foundation's constitution or co-opted by the Members of the Board. For further information on the founder, the jury, the prize and past winners, please see www.roswithahaftmann-foundation.com.

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