

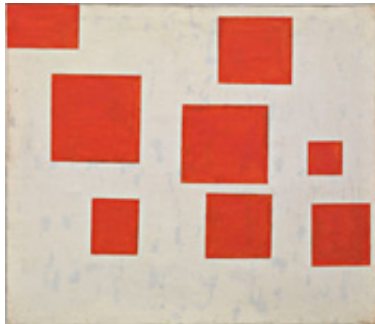
Print Article

**Blinky Palermo***Untitled*

1964

Collection Ströher, Darmstadt

photo Jens Ziehe

**Blinky Palermo***Composition with 8 Red Rectangles*

1964

Collection Olga Lina and Stella Liza Knoebel

DROLL ABSTRACTION

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

When Peter Heisterkamp abandoned the name provided by his German foster parents in favor of **Blinky Palermo**, the lively moniker of Sonny Liston's boxing manager, he made a declaration of independence from his European roots. A native of Leipzig, student of **Joseph Beuys**, friend of older artist **Gerhard Richter**, Palermo struggled throughout his brief career to find a methodology for painting that could be justified during the politicized 1960s and 1970s.

His solutions to this challenge are elegantly presented in "Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964-1977," the first overview of his work to be held in the United States. Organized by Dia Art Foundation curator-at-large Lynne Cooke, the show premiered at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Oct. 31, 2010-Jan. 16, 2011, and is slated to appear at the Hirshhorn Museum in the spring before splitting into two parts and closing its tour in the summer at Dia:Beacon and CCS Bard in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.

Installed under a welcome new lighting system in LACMA's Broad galleries by LACMA contemporary art curator Franklin Sirmans, Palermo's work is possessed of what might be called a droll sincerity. A painter at a time and place when the traditional medium was under siege, Palermo manages a series of modest victories that accumulate to win his very personal war.

As astutely chronicled by Cooke in the catalogue, American critics tend to position Palermo in the realm of the Minimal and Conceptual while European critics have viewed him as operating within their expansive and turbulent history. Palermo died of drug-related causes in 1977 so he cannot defend himself; according to the catalogue, he had very little to say on the matter in any case.

The works must speak for themselves and they are eloquent. *Composition with 8 Red Rectangles* (1964) shows the influence of his visit to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam to see the works of **Piet Mondrian** and **Kazimir Malevich**. The following year, he used the colors of red and white in paintings that appear at first glance to have something in common with the shapes and structured canvases of **Ellsworth Kelly**.

On closer inspection, Palermo's works are obviously handmade, with lumpy surfaces and irregular lines, a near jocular response to the frosty purity of geometric abstraction. This attitude is especially apparent in *Green Quadrangle* (1967), which looks as though the artist had used a hacksaw to cut the shape out of pressboard and then slapped a coat of green casein onto it. Despite its casual construction, that little painting fairly vibrates with intensity from across a very long gallery. *Landscape* (1966), a long horizontal shaped canvas of sky blue hung a few inches above an equally long horizontal shaped canvas of grass green, is a convincing translation of the German romantic landscape tradition.



Blinky Palermo

Blue Disk and Staff
1968

private collection, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth



Blinky Palermo

Butterfly II
1968

MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt

Despite his protean talent, Palermo, like many of his generation, sought to make paintings without paint. *Blue Disk and Staff* (1968) consists of two wood shapes wrapped in bright blue fabric tape and leaned against the wall. That year, he began stretching colored fabrics in rectangles that are evocative of **Mark Rothko's** abstractions in the close relations of their subdued earthy tones. The show is not installed chronologically, so the fabric pieces hang together in a large gallery.

Another gallery features documentation of his many site-specific paintings, done on walls and addressing the nature and function of the surrounding architecture. In Europe, Palermo's work was widely exhibited and collected, but he decided to move to New York City in 1973. The choice of his snazzy pseudonym was just one aspect of his fascination with American culture. Perhaps he hoped to become part of New York painting circles, but in any case his visit was unproductive at first: For two years, he destroyed everything that he produced.

When he snapped out of it, he painted *Times of the Day I* (1974-75), four modestly scaled panels of aluminum painted in acrylic that are absolutely radiant. The slim strips of aqua at the top and bottom of the mandarin red of the first panel smacks of the sun rising over a tropical sea.

These are the sorts of paintings for which Palermo is best known in the United States. Similar compositions comprise his huge series *To the People of New York City* (1976). Much of the earlier work remains in European collections and it is a revelation to see these semaphores in context. By the mid-1970s, Palermo had traveled across the United States, visited the Rothko Chapel in Houston, and apparently was deeply affected. His subsequent paintings are possessed of a joyful gravitas.

The mystery of what his future might have been remains unsolved but the gorgeous work in this selective presentation goes a long way toward resolving doubts, if there were any doubts, about his stature.

A glimpse of his legacy can be seen in a complementary exhibition on the top floor of the Broad galleries. Organized by Sirmans, it includes a great number of paintings by Palermo's friend **Imi Knoebel** and a number of others selected from the Eli Broad collection that fit into the category of the show's title: "Color and Form."

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP writes about contemporary art in Los Angeles.



Blinky Palermo

Untitled

1968

Collection Musée d'art Moderne, Luxembourg



Blinky Palermo

Gray Disk

1970

Collection Olga Lina and Stella Liza Knoebel

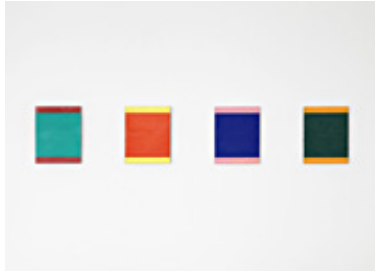


Blinky Palermo

Mirror Object

1973

Hessel Museum of Art
photo Chris Kendall



Blinky Palermo

Coney Island II

1975

Collection Ströher, Darmstadt

photo Jens Ziehe