

Sigmar Polke, Windows—Fenster, Grossmünster Zürich

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[NOTE: see video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Em_TeqO4Bf8&feature=related]

December 7, 2010 by [intsculpturectr](#)



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Essays by Gottfried Boehm, Jacqueline Burckhardt, Bice Curiger, Ulrich Gerster, Regine Helbling, Claude Lambert, Urs Rickenbach, Käthi La Roche, Katharina Schmidt, and Marina Warner.

Zürich: Parkett Verlag / Grossmünster Zürich

Hardcover; 208 pages, 30 x 21, 5 cm, 110 color images, English/German,
\$65 ISBN 978-3-907582-27-5

The great German artist Sigmar Polke (1941–2010), known as “the Alchemist” for his love of working with and combining unconventional materials, completed a large cycle of extraordinary windows for Zürich cathedral—his last great work—just prior to his death this past June. We are fortunate that the entire project has been published in the new monograph *Sigmar Polke, Windows—Fenster, Grossmünster Zürich*. The window cycle is astounding, because in addition to five figurative stained glass compositions, Polke also designed seven entire windows with agate, using thin slices of this transparent, semi-precious stone. Moreover, the stained glass windows devoted to Old Testament subjects each explore different glass techniques, producing independent visual experiences. The overall effect of these images in stone, glass, and light is otherworldly, immaterial, and unique in the history of window design, requiring a beautifully described creative edge during design and fabrication.

“Thus we embarked on a collaborative venture inspired by the principle of no such thing as ‘no can do,’” writes Urs Rickenbach, the stained glass artist who executed Polke’s designs at the Zürich-based Mäder studios. I particularly enjoyed reading about the collaborative nature of the work between Polke, a trained glass painter himself, and Rickenbach, who speaks with reverence and in elaborate detail about the artistic process, complemented by a project-related glossary of glass terms. Unfortunately, Polke does not speak about the project in the book, which may have been due to his progressing cancer. I also missed reading more about Mäder studios.

The Zürich cathedral commission was to design 12 windows of various sizes and shapes to be installed throughout the church, with the exception of the choir. Hence, the architectural context of each window varies, resulting in a rich body of work that features varied coloration, style, subject matter, materials, and process. The glass windows include a monochrome King David in olive-green hues; unusual black and white, facing profiles for the Son of Man; and colorful fused glass facets in the Ascension of Elijah. The Sacrifice of Isaac and the Scapegoat feature ornamental designs in pastel tones. In the streaming light, the natural, almond-shaped agate slices luminously reveal their subtle textures, along with dramatic color variations and changes between the individual forms.

Grossmünster windows could be seen as evidence for “a renewed faith in art,” since there was no immediate need for new windows, as pointed out by Ulrich Gerster and Regine Helbling in their essay on the commissioning process and the 1,200-year history of the Grossmünster. Pritzker Prize-winning German architect Gottfried Böhm states: “Sigmar Polke’s design of the Grossmünster windows ranks among the world’s outstanding dialogues between contemporary art and traditional church architecture.” I hoped to read more about the relationship and interplay between art and architecture in his essay, but the focus is on analysis of the window cycle.

This richly illustrated monograph features seven essays that, together, give a comprehensive account of the commission, the history of the church, iconography, context, and process. Unfortunately, the floor plan lacks a legend and complete identification, which makes it difficult to envision the installation without having been there. *Sigmar Polke, Windows—Fenster, Grossmünster Zürich* offers the perfect introduction before a visit and should be in every library on contemporary art.

—Christina Lanzl