

# Artist in a material world

NICK HACKWORTH | EVENING STANDARD | Wednesday 26 March 2003 01:00 |



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The Evening Standard

## Blinky Palermo at the Serpentine Gallery

When he died in 1977 at the untimely age of 34, German artist Blinky Palermo left behind him a colourful life, replete with a string of ex-wives and former lovers, a burgeoning reputation on the international art scene and a body of abstract work that was innovative enough to have earned him a mention, albeit it a passing one, in the history of 20th century art.

However, due to its rarity and fragility, his work travels infrequently and is rarely seen, thus this show, being Palermo's first major exhibition in the UK, presents an opportunity to reassess his art.

That Palermo was as successful as he was in his brief lifetime was largely due to the support he received from his teacher at the Dusseldorf School of Art, the legendary German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. He influenced Palermo heavily, most importantly in his artistic direction, by encouraging him to pursue his interest in expanding the nature of painting but also in the odd personal matter of his name. For it was Beuys who suggested that he adopt the pseudonym Blinky Palermo, after the shadowy American mobster and boxing promoter.

His work was all driven by the same aim; to make painting, a physical phenomena rather than an activity that creates the illusion of space, as all figurative painting does. He did this most successfully with his series of "material paintings", which he made by neatly stitching together brightly coloured, horizontal swathes of cloth mounted like canvas on regular stretchers. From afar they resemble precise abstract paintings, but up close, the matte surface of the cloth takes effect, soaking up light, intensifying colour and highlighting the physicality of the object you are looking at.

Simultaneously, Palermo created odd painting-sculpture hybrids by taking found, irregular 3-D objects and painting upon them such as in *Untitled (for Peter Dibke)*, illustrated here, or covering them in coloured plastic tape.

Successful on its own terms, Palermo's work deserves the reputation that precedes it and the only shame is that he did not live longer to make more of it.

*Until 18 May. Information: 020 7298 1515* ■