

“Polly Apfelbaum: Waiting for the UFOS (a space between landscape and a bunch of flowers),” Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

by Dana Self

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Polly Apfelbaum is an iconoclast, refreshingly devoid of bullshit, and known for her wildly exuberant installations in which the floor is as important, or more, than the walls. Her installation-based work always feels honest rather than coolly distant yet is layered with process and content. Las Vegas showgirls, the cartoon Powerpuff Girls, music, literature, film, art historical movements, Andy Warhol, Lynda Benglis, and other pop culture icons have influenced her throughout her career. The floor, a horizontal land of plenty, has been the territory in which she has often staked her claim for a few decades. Her floor pieces have been referred to as “fallen paintings,” although that idea is too limiting for what Apfelbaum is doing in her work.

This exhibition was first exhibited in Birmingham, England’s Ikon Gallery, and Apfelbaum’s title is a direct reference to Graham Parker’s *Waiting for the UFOs* from the 1979 album *Squeezing Out Sparks*, and to René Magritte’s garden description. Apfelbaum’s work is well known to Kansas City audiences and she has exhibited at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art at least twice before.

Composed of textiles, ceramics and paint, and utilizing the floor, walls and ceiling beams, the exhibition fills the museum’s main gallery. “Sun Targets,” glazed ceramic rondels, encircle the gallery walls. The wall behind the targets is painted in orange and yellow bands, directing the viewer around the gallery’s space. “Life Spirit,” an enormous wall painting in the colors of the gay pride flag, commemorates Gilbert Baker’s original 1978 Rainbow Flag. It dominates the room and sets the tone for the entire experience, as its colors are repeated in the works throughout.

“Wallflowers (Mixed Emotions),” a mandala of handmade flowers, is noteworthy as a work that Apfelbaum first created in 1990 and recast for the installation. The echoing circular form in the rugs, drawings, and ceramics is a tautological thread woven throughout the exhibition.

Brilliantly colored rugs hug the gallery’s floor, and “Kneeline,” three separate rows of tiny ceramic balls suspended by black thread, hang from the gallery’s beams at about knee height. The “wall” of black thread created by each “Kneeline” installation suggests the warp of a loom, ideologically connecting to the hand-woven rugs.

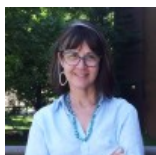
Apfelbaum’s earlier work in velvet often capitalized on the soft, fluid, and pliable quality of the fabric. Here the rugs, which are hand dyed and woven by women in Oaxaca, Mexico, where weaving and textile work are part of Oaxaca’s cultural history, are, by nature and comparison, rectangular and implacable, each inhabiting a singular space. Unlike Apfelbaum’s “Spill” pieces, that can morph from installation to installation, the rugs don’t transform. The simple rectangular geometry of the rugs is the perfect contrast to their buoyant colors, circular and swirling patterns, combining two of Apfelbaum’s motifs of control and abundance. The physicality of this installation— the hard ceramics, glazes and rugs, is also a difference from her softer fabric works, demonstrating the artist’s interest in tactility and how it is experienced differently from textile to textile or from dye to stain to paint to glaze.

The glazing process in “Kneeline” and “Sun Targets” relates to the work of dying fabric and the way the material sometimes absorbs the dyes in unexpected ways. Similarly, the glazed ceramics, all different, share the feeling of the artist’s hand and the accidental and sometimes uncontrollable nature of liquid glaze and the firing process. As Apfelbaum said in a 2003 interview with Claudia Gould, former director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, her work is a tension “between the intuitive and the formal, or the emotional and the controlled.”

Like much of Apfelbaum’s work, this installation telegraphs optimism in its commitment to the visible artistic process, pop culture’s energy, to literature, music, art history and creativity’s life force. It’s there in the text emblazoned across “Life Spirit”: sexuality, life, healing, sunlight, nature, art, serenity/harmony, and spirit. As Apfelbaum noted in that Gould interview, “The idea is to make the work rich enough, dense enough, or complex enough so that there is always something unexpected that may come out of that experience.” Like a Powerpuff Girl, Apfelbaum tears through the world, making it her own damn space and claiming the wide-open floor as her own.

“Polly Apfelbaum: Waiting for the UFOS (a space between landscape and a bunch of flowers)” continues at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd., through April 28. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday. For more information, 816.753.5784 or www.kemperart.org

About The Author: Dana Self



Dana Self is an arts writer who was a contemporary art curator for more than 13 years in Kansas, Wisconsin, Missouri, and Tennessee museums, including the Kemper Museum. She has organized about 100 exhibitions of emerging and mid career artists. She is currently marketing director for UMKC’s Conservatory of Music and Dance.