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# ARTFORUM

## Polly Apfelbaum

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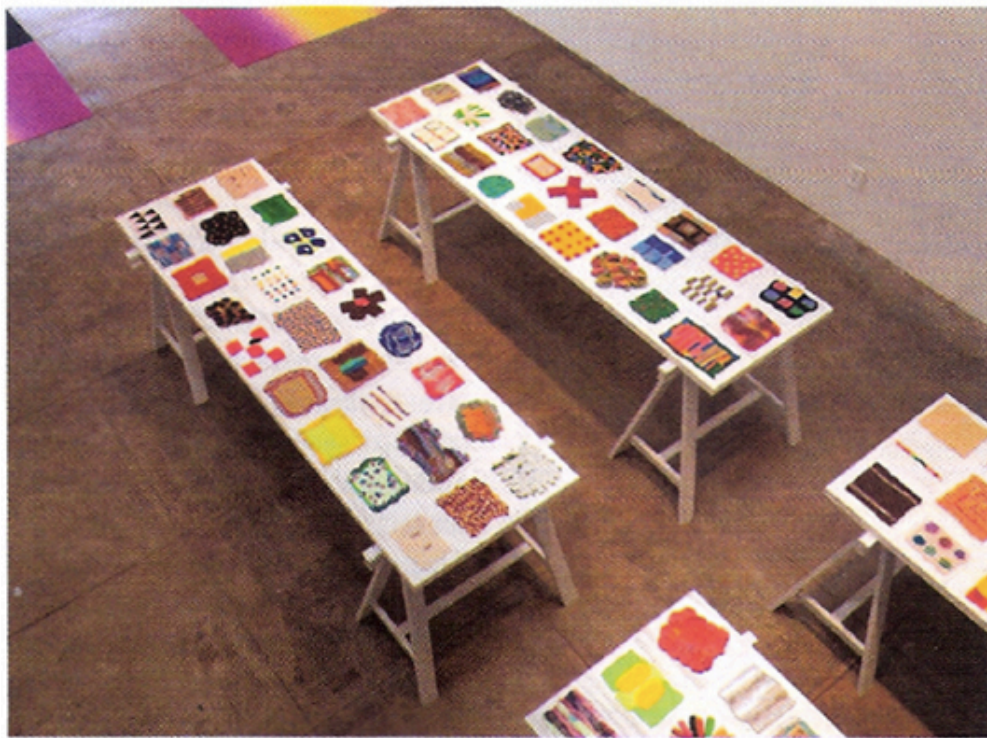
Polly Apfelbaum's "Feelies"—an ongoing series of small, unfired polymer-clay sculptures that the artist began during her Yaddo residency in 2010—point to a handful of cultural references, namely the midcentury abstractions of painter Paul Feeley, the "feelie" vessels created by potter Rose Cabat, and the proto-indie rock of the Feelies. The title of this show, "Double Nickels on the Dime," was also referential, having been taken from an album by West Coast hardcore band Minutemen that, in turn riffs on a song by former Van Halen frontman Sammy Hagar. Such layers of knowledge could be followed to variously poetic and amusing ends, but Apfelbaum's "Feelies" are formally compelling in their own right, pleasurable, suggestive little objects, even without such cultural baggage.

Each smaller than a square foot and made from colorful arrangements of polymer clay pressed flat, the 112 "Feelies" in this show could be as effectively identified by their compositions as by the particular materials each evoked, including felt, flannel, insulation material, shag carpet, children's craft supplies, sliced Spam, smashed sushi, chewed bubble gum, and a 2-D dish of caviar. Already vivid eye candy, the works appeared particularly confection-like, laid out as they were on individual squares of waxed paper as if waiting to be ingested. Although free of any intentional ties to the processes or complicated "craft" histories of ceramics, the small decorative works could be described as Pop-y approximations of traditional slipware, Apfelbaum having used commercial molding clays such as Sculpey, Fimo, and Plasticine to fashion their wild variety of stripes, dots, and odd patterns. Yet (as material like Sculpey might suggest) the flat molded works were one step removed from traditional sculpture, more naturally situated within the continuum of painting. Some pieces (e.g., *60s Modern* and *Hudson River Sky*, both 2011) skewed particularly pictorial, while others remained resolutely nonrepresentational, as was the case with *Bee's Nest* and *Rosebud*, both 2010. Yet all the works—their compositional diversity a testament to Apfelbaum's careful attention to the many subtle strains of nonfigurative modernism—signified within the general rubric of abstraction: hard-edge painting, Op art, Neo-Plasticism, and Concrete art, for example.

Installed on four narrow tables toward the back of Benevento's recently opened auxiliary space, Apfelbaum's constructions appeared divided into four irregular groupings arranged in three long columns. Navigating between the white tables, viewers were able to approach each "Feely" at such close range that touching (if not taking a bite out of) their fleshy planes had to be actively resisted. Complementing this display were two additional works that had been laid flat on the ground toward the front of the room, *Ombre (Black Yellow Pink Yellow)* and *Ombre (Pink Yellow Silver Gold)*, both 2011. Formed by overlapping sheets of synthetic fabric, these pieces, with their slightly ragged edges, seemed energized by their material immediacy. While their placement on the floor emphasized the works' physical flatness, their surfaces had been dyed with chromatic gradient fades that lent surprising depth. As ready-made color fields, the *Ombres* underscore the sophistication of Apfelbaum's formalism.

When performing the tricks of modernism, Apfelbaum is astute and nimble, yet her niggling cultural citations remain a flurry of references belonging more to language than to mark-making. Instrumentalizing these tabletlike "Feelies" in an immaterial game of linguistic play, Apfelbaum connected the dots of postwar history using equal parts manual craft and cerebral savvy.

—Catherine Taft



View of "Polly Apfelbaum", 2011.