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The Inquirer

Acclaimed artist, Temple student team to pay tribute to Gene Davis' stripes

By Samantha Melamed, Inquirer Staff Writer



'Oh my god!' Polly Apfelbaum exclaimed. "What happened to 'the world's tiniest painting?'" She glanced around in alarm until Robert Blackson, director of exhibitions and public programs at Temple Contemporary, unearthed the artwork in question, a so-called micro-painting by the late artist Gene Davis. Blackson and Apfelbaum then rushed around the gallery, looking for a space to hang the work just a few hours ahead of the mid-May opening of the exhibition "For the Love of Gene Davis."

The painting - a 1 1/2-by-2-inch orange rectangle no larger than the wall card Blackson had prepared for it - did not, perhaps, look like much. But it was a Davis original, and that brought the total number of generations of artists whose works were on display to three.

The exhibition, on view through July 11, is a collaboration by the internationally known

Apfelbaum, an alumna of Temple's Tyler School of Art, and 2010 Tyler graduate Dan Cole. It's also the result of a new program at Tyler designed to pair recent graduates with mentors from the school's accomplished alumni base.

Given that intergenerational collaboration, Apfelbaum said, it seemed right to invoke the legacy of Davis' color-field paintings -thereby creating a work that is, in part, a meditation on artistic influences.

"I liked that it had to do with Philadelphia, and that it was something that inspired me as a young artist - and [that] I was working with a young artist," she said.

Apfelbaum was a teenager in 1972 when Davis took 12 miles of masking tape and 400 gallons of paint to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, laying down a series of bright stripes titled *Franklin's Footpath* that was hyped as the world's largest painting. (A related plan to mosaic the city in micro-paintings was never realized.) When Tyler invited her to give a presentation about her work and influences as part of its Distinguished Alumni Mentoring Program, she inevitably included the work, as captured in an iconic photo by Henry Groskinsky for Life magazine.

Davis' echo is now all over Temple's gallery, which is bedecked with stripes on three kinds of custom-made wallpaper and four 30-foot-long rugs hand-dyed and woven by an artisan in Oaxaca, Mexico. On one of the rugs, a gray silhouette suggests the shadow of Davis at work.

In a secondary room, a projected video collage overlays more stripes over images of Philadelphia, Davis painting, and the cemetery scene from the film *Harold and Maude*. "I don't want to say that I'm Maude and he's Harold -don't say that!" Apfelbaum said with a laugh. Their partnership has a different flavor.

Cole, she said, "brings a whole different set of skills. I'm very lucky: He brings the digital world. I'm much more analog."

They found common ground in a love of music and pop culture, and an interest in 1970s art, culture, and politics.

Apfelbaum noted that the film clip dates from the same era as Davis' painting, and -with its field of neatly spaced tombstones -serves as the stripes' somber echo.

"The graveyard is almost becoming a Gene Davis piece," Cole said. "It seemed like the right palette."

It's a loaded image. But so, beneath the luminous stripes, was *Franklin's Footpath*. It was commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art's now-defunct Department of Urban Outreach, created in 1970 with the progressive goal of bringing art out into the community. "These were radical ideas about painting: Painting on the floor, painting outside the museum," Apfelbaum said. "And I think another generation is really interested in those different ideas."

Apfelbaum was surprised that many young people, Cole among them, weren't aware of the work. (It was destroyed when the Parkway was updated for the Bicentennial.)

She wanted to reprise the experience Davis had created, carving out a vibrant place at the intersection of art and life. So, just as the Parkway painting was made to be marred by tire marks and worn away by traffic, visitors are invited to walk on the striped works laid on the gallery floor (but only after removing their shoes).

Apfelbaum said she doesn't want her work on a pedestal. It should engage viewers, and be activated by them.

"I hope we made Gene very happy," she said, barefoot in the stripe-covered room. She was in Philadelphia temporarily, before rushing back to prepare for exhibition openings in New York City and Bonn, Germany. She was counting on Cole to make posters for those shows.

Blackson sees the partnership as a success for the mentorship program, which launched last school year with Philadelphia design firm Heads of State. The firm selected graduate Woody Harrelson for the first paid internship -and later hired him as a staffer. Next year, a graduate will work with the noted graphic designer Paula Scher.

"Within this job market, a lot of our graduates and their parents are looking for the next step, and what are the ways this can move forward into a viable career," Blackson said. "So part of this program is to speak to that anxiety."

Cole, for one, said it's been quite an education.

"I haven't gone to graduate school. I haven't had a need to. I'm an assistant for three different artists right now, and I make my own art. So it's kind of like having a faculty of my own," he said.

He and Apfelbaum have discussed other projects they'd like to work on together, such as a visual history of stripe painters from Gene Davis to Paul Smith.

Whether that will lead to more joint exhibitions is another matter.

"Dan's in my life now," she said. "Whether I give him credit or not, we'll see."

ART EXHIBITION

Polly Apfelbaum + Dan Cole: "For the Love of Gene Davis"

Through July 11 at Temple Contemporary, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, 2001

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