

ARTFORUM

Polly Apfelbaum

CLIFTON BENEVENTO

Over the past twenty years, Polly Apfelbaum has employed wool, cotton, and various other kinds of textiles in her works, but there's one fabric in particular she returns to again and again: synthetic velvet. This material, with its iridescent sheen and simulated old-world opulence, wends through the majority of her floor-based output, her so-called fallen paintings—from *The Dwarves Without Snow White*, 1992, for which she presented dye-blotted sections of synthetic velvet on cardboard boxes; to *Bones*, 2000, where she rolled vast, hand-stained bolts of the cloth; to *Funkytown*, 2005/2009, in which she assembled intricately dyed bits



of it into an electrifying room-size installation. For her debut solo exhibition at Clifton Benevento, Apfelbaum presented some fifty works that yet again featured synthetic velvet—each covered in arrays of dots made with a marker. However, rather than install these works on the floor, as she has done in the past, she pinned them to the gallery walls in a grid.

To create the works in this series, simply titled “HWP,” 2013–14, after *A Handweaver's Pattern Book*, Marguerite Porter Davison's 1950 instructional tome, Apfelbaum placed a punch card she sourced from a craft store on the surface of the velvet “canvas,” and then used Chartpak markers to make dots through each of its holes. In the end, she used nearly 150 colors, and the energetic results—both monochrome and multihued—incorporate diamond, square, and triangular arrangements. From afar, the variety of patterns brought to mind the optical effects of Benday dots or a polka-dot Photoshop brush. The works also aptly evoke the nineteenth-century punched cards of the automated Jacquard loom, which famously inspired Charles Babbage to use punched cards for his Analytical Engine design and eventually led to the first IBM punched card and early digital computing. When considered in relation to the serial systems of early Conceptual art, correlations between loom mechanisms and Sol LeWitt's notable “machine that makes the art” began to surface here as well. Apfelbaum's use of ersatz velvet also contains historical resonances: It brings to mind the way in which natural-fiber velvet has been a significant marker of “luxury” in expanding consumer and industrialist economies. If, for Walter Benjamin, velvet linings defined both nineteenth-century Victorian interiors and a bourgeoisie that “prefers velvet and plush covers which preserve the impression of every touch,” for Apfelbaum, cheap synthetic velvet is likewise an aspirational commodity, a pliable ready-made that allows her to play with symbolic value, upending high and low “women's work” from a feminist perspective.

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Also featured in the show was an untitled room-size installation from 2014. Apfelbaum looped twenty pieces of thread over the gallery's three sprinkler pipes, spacing the pieces evenly along each pipe; if seen from above, the lines formed a loose grid. At the knee-height base of each thread hung a single, handpainted ceramic bead. Often seen swaying gently in the air conditioner's breeze, these droopy works connected nicely to the baggy, wall-based pieces. (Apfelbaum began producing similar giant necklaces—cum—Minimalist rosaries while in residency at the American Academy in Rome in 2012.) Here, the work came across as a continuation of her meditations on painting, bringing her longtime engagement with the medium into fully corporeal, three-dimensional space.

—Lauren O'Neill-Butler