

CLIFTON BENEVENTO

LOCATION: 515 BROADWAY NEW YORK NY 10012 PHONE: 212 431 6325 FAX: 212 334 4703
EMAIL: INFO@CLIFTONBENEVENTO.COM WEBSITE: WWW.CLIFTONBENEVENTO.COM

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Polly Apfelbaum's 'Color Stations Portland' at the Lumber Room

By [John Motley](#) | [Special to The Oregonian](#)

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Polly Apfelbaum, who lives and works in New York City, is best known for her ambitious installations, in which hundreds of hand-dyed swatches of velvet fabric creep and spiral in hive-like formations on the floor. Existing somewhere between painting and sculpture (the artist describes them as "fallen paintings"), these hybridized installations buzz with vibrant

color combinations and complex patterns, even though they are made with minimal means. For her installation at the Lumber Room, "Color Stations Portland," the artist continues to pursue that minimalist aesthetic, muting the hand-crafted quality of her dyed velvet installations and considering the optic effects and meanings of pure color in isolation.

Developed during a recent residency in Rome, Apfelbaum's new installation consists of a group of seven large sections of fabric, which she has arranged as wall hangings of various heights in the Lumber Room's main gallery. The artist's careful presentation of these monochrome fabrics implies a sense of progress, and Apfelbaum has said that this body of work and its title, in particular, were loosely inspired by the Stations of the Cross. As a viewer circles the gallery, the wall hangings advance from red-orange and indigo to chartreuse and royal purple, rising and falling rhythmically in height. In front of each piece of fabric, one or two small wooden beads are suspended on threads. They at once resemble bobbins, referring to the process of creating these textiles, and disembodied eyes, instructing viewers to stop and closely examine what's in front of them.

Near a central support beam, a pile of folded fabric indicates that another seven elements could have been incorporated and that the current presentation is only one possible expression of the piece, rather than a fixed display. In fact, Apfelbaum considers each configuration of this work to be like a "session," connoting an improvisatory performance among musicians, which yields a unique version each time it is installed.

It would seem that Apfelbaum had the history of Color Field painting in mind with "Color Stations Portland," allowing the sheen and sway of the fabrics to echo the subtle optics of a Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman canvas. Indeed, when the work is bathed in the generous sunlight of the Lumber Room's gallery, each piece of fabric glints with a range of undertones and overtones, calling to mind the spectacular light of stained glass in a cathedral.

In the Lumber Room's rear gallery, Apfelbaum has selected a group of artworks by female artists from the Miller Meigs Collection for an auxiliary exhibition. Her choices all seem to be kindred spirits: women who found boundless conceptual depth in slight, but symbolic actions and figures, from the rigid grids of Agnes Martin to the emphatic dots of Yayoi Kusama. Certainly, Apfelbaum's career-long commitment to color and textiles represents a formal scope focused enough to place her in this lineage.

--John Motley