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Polly Apfelbaum Gets Up Off the Floor

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Polly Apfelbaum's 50 ink-on-rayon synthetic velvet panels made with traditionally utilitarian weaving patterns are drawn with a found plastic punch card
(Courtesy of Andres Ramirez/Clifton Benevento)

"I like it because it's not normal," said [Polly Apfelbaum](#) of her exhibition "[A Handweaver's Pattern Book](#)," at Clifton Benevento through August 8. While the pieces in the show are made using fairly simple materials — markers, string, ceramics, and textiles — the artist has conceived of her installation as a hybrid of forms: a drawing; a painting; a book whose pages have been removed and hung on the walls. The exhibition is composed of 50 ink-on-rayon works, arranged in rows, and a series of glazed ceramic beads suspended from colored strings that hang from the existing sprinkler pipes on Clifton Benevento's ceiling.

Apfelbaum has spent much of her career exploring the terrain beneath our feet, arranging fabrics in intriguing constellations and configurations. Last year she lived in Rome, as a resident with the American Academy, and treated her time there as a personal reset, a chance to think anew about the practice she's been fine-tuning since her early shows in the mid-'80s. Her first solo exhibition in New York since her return from Italy is a testament to some of those considerations abroad, not in the least because the focus is on the walls, not the floor. Apfelbaum's current body of work was born from [the 1944 craft book from which she borrowed the title of her exhibition](#), though she did not directly reference any of the patterns contained therein. "I liked the idea of coming up

with all my own,” she said. “Somebody sat down and collected those [patterns] — it’s a history of weaving — but I loved reinventing it for myself.” For starters, there’s no actual *weaving* involved, as the textile works are made by letting the tips of [Chartpak markers](#) press and bleed into the fabric through an informal stencil: a punch-card of unknown provenance and utility that Apfelbaum found in a craft store. That punch-card provided a framework and a way of working that was then disrupted or challenged by Apfelbaum’s own daily whims and moods. “They’re idiosyncratic,” she said of the textile drawings. “There are systems, but there’s no *system*.” As such she considers the resulting pieces to be “conceptual weavings,” as well as “patterns of thought.” The markers leave varying traces depending on if they’re fresh out of the box or running low on ink.

There’s a rich variety among the 50 works: bluish monochromes; colorful grids that coalesce and then fall apart; vertical columns interspersed with primary tones. (There are around 150 colors of Chartpak available, and Apfelbaum reckoned she used them all.) Certain corners and edges of the fabrics have missing chunks, from where previous customers cut samples. Apfelbaum intends the fabric works to interact with the suspended beads, which she made by hand. (Rosaries were on her mind, she noted, after her Italian sojourn.) “There are two different grids going on,” Apfelbaum said of the interplay between the works. “It makes it much more site-specific and situational, which is what I’m interested in: It’s not just a drawing show, it’s an installation. It makes you physically conscious. You come in and feel the color and material; it activates the whole room since you have to walk around it — you can’t just *stare*. You’re walking in a painting.”



A painting, mind you, that can also be read like a book, bringing the exhibition back to its roots in the 1944 volume that had lingered on Apfelbaum's shelf until it caught her eye. Bookmaking has long been a sideline of the artist's practice, and some examples of those projects are on hand at Clifton Benevento — including a nearly foot-thick survey of her studio experience in Rome, bound together in the manner of an enormous pad of Post-It notes. For "A Handweaver's Pattern Book," Apfelbaum has printed the individual works on fabric paper; when I spoke with her, she was still determining the best way to bind those delicate pages.

Wandering through the installation, Apfelbaum bounced from one of the 50 fabric works to another, picking out personal favorites. She has an affection for some of the monochromatic pieces; she pauses at one work — a bit rawer, perhaps — that one of her studio assistants enigmatically described as being very "South Philly." She pointed out works with intricate diamond patterns that start quite orderly before becoming scrambled in the mid-section. And she stressed that these are works meant for the wall — she wouldn't, for instance, be able to lay them on the floor, as in previous installations — and that they are meant to work in tandem with the hanging beads, which she envisions as "a mark that could have popped off" from one of the drawings into space. She's fond of the setting that Clifton Benevento provides for the work — the space has a lived-in, domestic feel, thanks to an inset bookshelf lining one wall, and Apfelbaum said that it reminds her of her own downtown loft, where the works were originally arrayed.

"I think it's going to be really exciting to live in this space and figure it out," she said, referring not to the gallery itself, of course, but to the new way of working that she's discovered. "I think these works have the kind of simplicity that is interesting for me in the art I like, and the art I want to make. We'll see what their life is," she said. "Over the years it was hard getting people to the floor, and understanding. It was a whole focus about that. I love changing and seeing other things, stretching a little. That's really what this show is about: Shaking it up."