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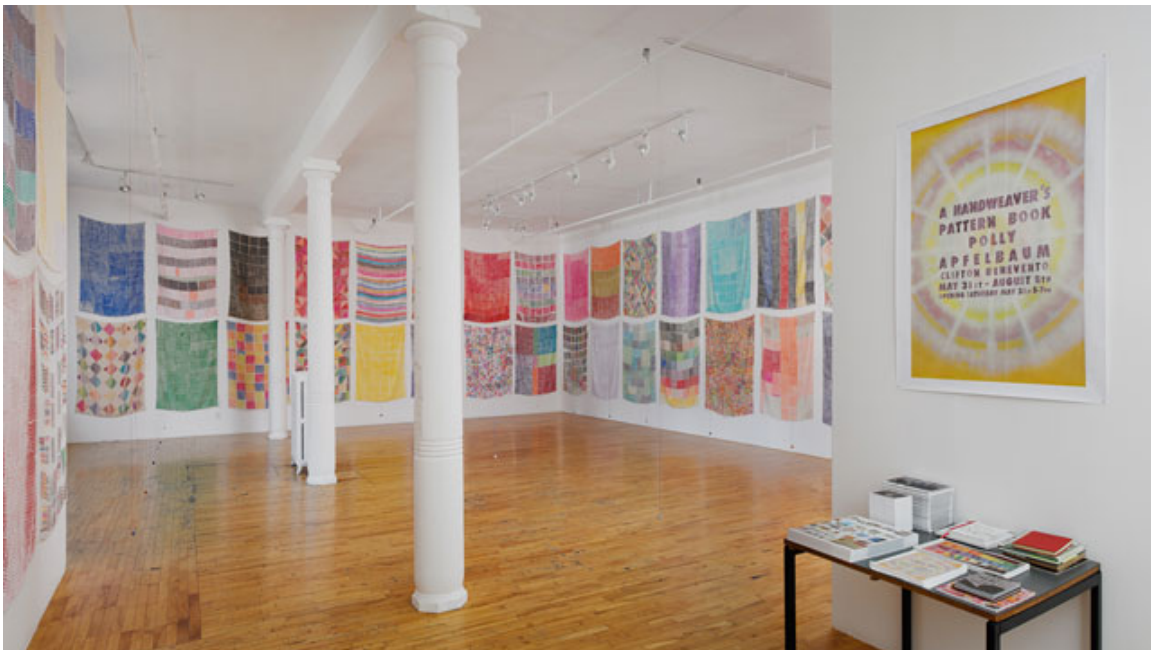
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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Sarah Cowan August 1, 2014

Polly Apfelbaum Plays with Pattern



Installation view, 'Polly Apfelbaum: A Handweaver's Pattern Book,' Clifton Benevento, New York, 2014 (all photos by Andres Ramirez, courtesy the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York)

Among the sleek catalogues at the entrance to the Clifton Benevento Gallery sits a tattered hardcover, its paper jacket ripped to reveal the plain binding. This is artist Polly Apfelbaum's copy of *A Handweaver's Pattern Book*. Published in 1944 by Marguerite P. Davison, it's the idiosyncratic bible for four-harness weavers, a how-to encyclopedia for an art form defined by the threat of obsolescence.

For [this installation](#), Apfelbaum has borrowed not just the book's title but also its agenda. In the book's introduction Davison writes, "Inventive designers will build on this foundation, but the foundation was necessary for the building ... We now know that handwork is a heritage which no machine can ever take from us; we are adjusting our needs to this knowledge."

Fifty rectangular swaths of rayon synthetic velvet, marked with ink, hang in two rows evenly spaced across the walls of the gallery. Using only a found plastic punch card as a stencil through which to let her markers bleed, Apfelbaum limited her mark making for this show to the unit of nine-by-seven dots. Like a weaver's weft and warp, the x- and y-axes are limits within which she can invent.

For Apfelbaum this is a departure. Long resistant to the rational machinery of Minimalism, she's known for inventing her own medium, "[fallen paintings](#)," installations of fabric dyed, cut, and arranged on the floor by hand. Site-specific, the pieces are customized to the particularities of architectural space — walls, columns, and floorboards are her canvas, square footage her frame. Whereas that past work on the floor follows the law of expansion, spreading towards uneven edges, this latest installation is born of containment.

Punch cards were the invention that [mechanized the loom](#), allowing it to mindlessly churn out ornate patterns. But Apfelbaum's reinterpretation is no systematic tabulation of exhausting variations. Rather than impress by mathematical infinity, her panels drum up personal memories: of sheets drying on a clothesline, of molted snakeskins studied in science class, of towels laid respectfully close on a crowded beach. The palest — one is actually white on white — enhance the weave of the synthetic velvet, reflecting the yellow tone of the gallery's lights. They register as dishrags washed but never clean, or thrift store dresses, alluringly soft but ingrained with the discomfort of an unknown past.

The panels are held up only by two thumbtacks in their top corners, the thickness of the velvet causing them to sag, like flayed skins spread and pinned. Most settle into a U-shaped ripple, which bends the path of the dots into three-dimensional forms. Though Apfelbaum lets the markers' ink bleed, she never completely blocks out the moats of white fabric surrounding each dot. From afar the entire installation shimmers.

Each panel measures about three by five feet. One yard of real silk velvet would take a handweaver about a day's work. Apfelbaum has always been partial to the synthetic version — trashy, cheap, and desirable, it's simultaneously aspirational and honest. Meanwhile, [velvet painting](#) is practically the definition of kitsch.

Patterns among the group are difficult to grasp: some are color studies, others odes to pointillism; some are glitchy and skewed like a [moiré effect](#). Haplessly cut, a number of the panels retain a jagged edge, a hint that all are “cut from the same cloth,” so to speak. And separate though they are, they do come across as a series — of portraits, personalities, styles, moods, age groups, ways of life. “Patterns” refers not only to formal decorations, but also to the routines and pathologies we carve out through repetition, or conventions in need of revision.

In 1973 Lucy Lippard wrote, in an essay titled “Household Images in Art”: “‘Female techniques’ like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines — all natural elements of artmaking — were avoided by women. They knew they could not afford to be called ‘feminine artists.’” Apfelbaum may be a barometer for how much things have changed for women artists in the past 40 years. She built a career confidently using flower imagery, bright colors, fabric, punny titles, and a staining technique many critics have read as a celebration of bodily fluids, all while choosing to crawl on the gallery floor.

While her imagery is not explicitly autobiographical, Apfelbaum has always asserted her own importance in the physical installation of the work. The “fallen paintings” were placed with calculation and not to be stepped on by visitors. These new pieces signal a relinquishing of control: they could be hung by any installer and, *falling* as they are, sway in the breeze.

On the wall Apfelbaum must reckon with traditional ways of making and seeing art, and the rote etiquette that viewers bring to it. And so, scattered throughout the gallery, handmade ceramic beads hang close to the ground from long loops of thread, like necklaces strung from the gallery’s exposed pipes. Another falling element, the strings stretch like a loom, and the beads dot the floor like punch-card holes. Unable to roam freely, visitors must *weave* between the threads, mindful of the dimensions of the floor. If it were crowded the gallery would become a maze, but being alone in the space as I was (which is likely given the prohibitive summer hours), the bright light renders the strings almost invisible until you’re right up against one.

In the *Pattern Book*’s introduction, Davison writes, “A long view into the past brings also a long view into the future from the high point handweavers have reached today.” This is the other lesson of patterns: understanding them in hindsight can make them reliable predictors. But habits are not immutable — to recognize them makes it possible to change course. That is what Apfelbaum seems to be doing. Once identified by Ingrid Schaffner, the curator of her

2003 [retrospective at the ICA Philadelphia](#), as making “an art of accommodation,” assimilating to any space, she’s now asserting her own obstacles. In doing so she challenges the viewers’ predispositions when faced with art on a white wall. It’s a new approach to the same scheme: Apfelbaum reminds us to watch our step, to keep our distance, to respect.



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[Polly Apfelbaum: A Handweaver's Pattern Book](#) continues at Clifton Benevento Gallery (515 Broadway, Soho, Manhattan) through August 8.