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MODERN PAINTERS

Polly Apfelbaum

Clifton Benevento // May 31–August 8

WITH HIS 1970 ESSAY *Chance and Necessity*, French biologist Jacques Monod boldly doubled down on his faith in a biological materialism. For Monod, evolution was a zero-sum game, and the dialectical opposition between the two terms in his title answers—as far as biology is concerned—philosophy’s most basic question: why there is something and not nothing, life and not inert matter. But whatever evolutionary biology has to say about the world is a far cry from art’s commentary.

So why bring these issues up at all except, perhaps, to serve as a useful analogue to the role of a few structural conditions taking center stage in Apfelbaum’s latest work. When the narrow possibility of error is factored into repetitive and invariant genetic systems, near boundless evolutionary complexity follows. When slight errors or inconsistencies—which the artist

Polly Apfelbaum
Installation
view of "A
Handweaver's
Pattern
Book," 2014.

seems quietly to encourage with her unassuming enthusiasm for the handmade—appear in Apfelbaum’s pattern work, they gradually affect the whole, animating what would otherwise be a drab formal exercise.

Her show shares its title, "A Handweaver’s Pattern Book," with a 1944 manual written by Marguerite Porter Davison about the centuries-old tradition of textile handicrafts of rural

Appalachia. Apfelbaum uses this book as a reference and inspiration for her 50 latest wall hanging works. But she hasn’t taken to weaving. Instead, she stains rayon with brightly colored ink, as she has done in the past, only now she does so according to a basic set of parameters similar to those set forth by Davison: All mark-making is restricted to dots, the dots are made with marker tips and a punch card, and there are a finite number of marker colors. It seems the punch card frames the basic, repeating unit—or codon—of pattern. This lends the works a quasi-digital character insofar as unit, form, and repetition create data or art—or, according to Monod, life. —Nathaniel Lee

