

Polly Apfelbaum

D'Amelio Terras

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"Powerpuff," Polly Apfelbaum's new show, consisted of three very large pieces (the largest about 18 feet in diameter). Apfelbaum arranged soft-edged, diamond-shaped pieces of dyed velvet (like little biomorphic, Byzantine crosses) across the floor of the gallery in circular patterns. They are gorgeous, like something from the Spirograph of the gods or the tie-dyed sunburst of your dreams.

Part of the pleasure of viewing Apfelbaum's work is that it catches one by surprise. I walked into the gallery and stood there for a moment, sort of dazzled by the jubilantly patterned color, and then began to wonder exactly how she'd done it. One doesn't perceive 1040 separate pieces of velvet arranged on the floor (as in the case of *Blossom*). Each circle looks like one big piece, and the components look as if they must be sewn together. But no, she's

just arranged them, slightly overlapping each little piece.

In a way, this show is a refinement of Apfelbaum's last one here, "Ice," in which she also patterned velvet on the floor. But that was one huge piece and the patterning was much freer, flowing across the gallery floor like the ice floe to which it seemed to refer. Here she applies a new kind of rigor to the process, which seems right in that it addresses the high/low paradoxes implied by the work. The "high" part is the intellectual system underlying the work; the "low" would include the velvet itself. Velvet is almost helplessly gaudy in its luxury, and unavoidably carries with it connotations of all those black velvet paintings of, say, a bare-breasted woman astride a tiger, which have long since entered the camp hall of fame. Paintings on velvet are often lush and corrupt narratives of exoticism. Apfelbaum is using a method—abstraction—whose hallmark is high seriousness, in a medium—velvet—that is highly romantic and traditionally feminine, bringing to mind the upholstery on drawing room furniture or fancy dresses with great big bows.

The work is rich in its associations: Georges Seurat's pointillism,

Claude Monet's water lilies, and the Op Art of Bridget Riley. I'm not so sure about the show's title reference to the Japanese animated characters known as the Powerpuff Girls.

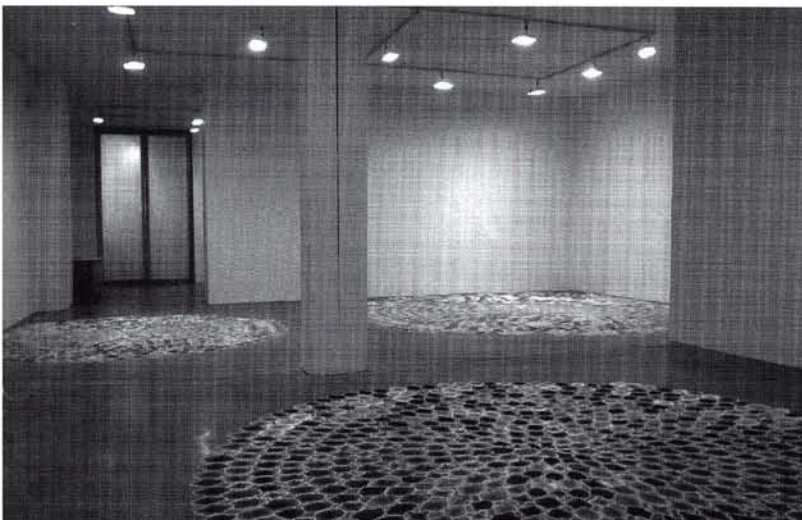
Apfelbaum based the paintings on the hair color of each girl and named the works after the characters: *Blossom*, *Buttercup*, and *Bubbles*. She likes them because they "represent an optimistic new model of gender identity that allows the feminine to be playful and disciplined, beautiful and strong, intuitive and structured." Maybe. The Powerpuff Girls are big-eyed in the manner of John Keane's wide-eyed children, or a lot of other Japanese animation. The stories aren't exactly groundbreaking. It seems like a bit of a stretch for Apfelbaum to give her work a kind of pop-political legitimacy that it doesn't actually need.

Part of the energy of Apfelbaum's work is her willingness to bang around exuberantly in the territory she's created for herself between the high and the low, between unabashed sensuous pleasure and the abstract pleasures of the mind. She seems to make no distinction between the two. Here, beauty is intelligence, and intelligence is beauty.

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reviews

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Polly Apfelbaum
Installation view of "Powerpuff," 2000. Velvet and dye,
each piece 144" to 206" in diameter. Courtesy of D'Amelio Terras.

NEW YORK

Installation

The Fabric of Her Life

"Cutting is like drawing, almost," **Polly Apfelbaum** says. There is no precise category for what the Pennsylvania-raised, New York-based artist makes—sprawling, colorful floor installations of overlapping circles made from pieces of synthetic velvet cut and dyed by the artist—but there is a lot of Apfelbaum in her work. "I had a Marimekko dress, we had a chair covered in Jack Lenor Larsen [fabric], and I grew up with Amish quilts," says the artist, whose second solo show is now at D'Amelio Terras (525 West 22nd Street; through December 22). "In my mind, there was no difference between spatterware and Tupperware." Which is why Apfelbaum is as likely to borrow ideas from cartoon characters (the color systems in her latest works are based on the yellow, red, and black hair of the superhero trio of the moment, the Pow-

erpuff Girls) as from color-field painting and conceptualism. The result is highly idiosyncratic work born, she says, of an equally personal process: "Putting something on the floor that's not supposed to be on the floor, reversing the highs and lows. I'm not worried about being a babe, but I wanted the work to be one, as sexy and hallucinogenic as possible." But then, Apfelbaum also has her deeply practical side. "I'm a do-it-yourselfer, and this work is very hands-on—I can box it up and unbox it. I like that kind of ease and self-reliance. You make your work to fit into your life." E.N.



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**Polly Apfelbaum, "Powerpuff"
D'Amelio Terras, through Dec 22
(see Chelsea).**

Color remains the key element in Polly Apfelbaum's work, both visually and structurally. Her floorbound installations—which incorporate hundreds of pieces of velvet, hand-dyed in bold hues and often arranged in sprawling configurations that appear to be organically inspired—continue to pleasantly defy categories of art-making. Like abstract paintings that melted off the wall and formed vibrant puddles, her arrangements of irregularly shaped rounds, diamonds and ovals coalesce with the physical presence of sculpture, while maintaining painting's sense of vibrancy.

Apfelbaum's process belies the seeming randomness of her installations. Each velvet cutout is individually numbered and stained according to a very particular system that spans the color wheel. Compared with past works, this underlying rigor is less submerged in the three pieces that appear in her latest show, "Powerpuff." These individual circular arrangements interact less forcefully with the surrounding space than her previous works did (underscoring the importance of the enveloping architecture to the success of her installations), but their elements still function collectively. Apfelbaum takes her title from *The Powerpuff Girls*, the popular

Cartoon Network series. Translating the essence of the three characters—Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup—the chromatic schemes of the pieces are based on hair color: *Blossom* (red), *Bubbles* (blond/yellow) and *Buttercup* (black). The largest of the three circular arrangements refers to Blossom, the leader of the crime-fighting kindergartners.

That "Powerpuff" makes reference to animation seems particularly apt, since Apfelbaum's bold colors—chartreuse, various pinks and purples, and shades of orange, blue and yellow—would translate well into the medium. (The shapes of the fabric cutouts also vaguely recall the extra-large, dilated eyes of the *Powerpuff* characters.) Beyond formal affinities, the trio of characters collectively embody what Apfelbaum considers a positive representation of femininity that's allowed to be simultaneously girly, tough, cool, generous, beautiful and calculating—not a bad metaphor for Apfelbaum's own work.

—Meghan Dailey



Polly Apfelbaum, *Blossom*, 2000.