

Chromatic Scale

Prints by Polly Apfelbaum

Stephanie Midon

In addition to her large-scale fabric and mixed-media installations, Polly Apfelbaum (b. 1955, Abington, Pennsylvania) produces dynamic prints characterized by vivid color and bold shapes. Her inventive woodblock techniques place her at the forefront of the medium. *Chromatic Scale* continues NMWA's exploration of innovations in printmaking, a medium in which women have worked since the sixteenth century.

The exhibition presents a focused survey of Apfelbaum's recent prints, including *Empress Shout* (2015), in which the artist explores increasingly complex formal and chromatic relationships through a diamond and zigzag pattern. She was partly inspired to make this work through her study of the Cosmati family, who were renowned for their mosaic work in medieval Italy. In 2012, Apfelbaum won the Rome Prize, a prestigious award for emerging artists, and she completed a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. While in Italy, she observed Cosmati mosaics firsthand.

While referencing ancient Italian craft traditions, *Empress Shout* also offers a fresh perspective on themes that Apfelbaum has explored throughout her career, including Minimalism and Pop art. She explains, "I went to Rome thinking I would explore the patterned geometric mosaic floors made by generations of the Roman Cosmati family in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. I did go out of my way to see as many floor mosaics as I possibly could, but what I came back with instead was thinking about the Minimalists and color."¹

Apfelbaum employs elements of Minimalism in *Empress Shout*, including repetition, a grid, and geometric forms, through

the composition's rows of diamonds and zigzags. Other Minimalist motifs such as stripes feature in other prints by the artist, along with references to Pop art. The bold, simplified flower shapes featured in some of her prints often elicit comparisons to designs used by Andy Warhol.

Because of her prints' clean-edged shapes and even color, one might assume that Apfelbaum's works are mechanically produced. In fact, they are meticulously handmade. Each print is created with carved woodblocks that are inked and placed individually on thick, handmade paper, and then pressed. Working closely with master printers at Durham Press in Pennsylvania, Apfelbaum has woodblocks cut from plywood in shapes based on her hand-drawn doodles. The blocks are also inked by hand in a broad but ordered spectrum of colors.

To develop her compositions, Apfelbaum places the blocks intuitively in a process that is both controlled and spontaneous. She carefully pursues a precise balance of color and shape, but must work quickly so that the inks do not dry before she is finished. The performative element inherent to Apfelbaum's printmaking connects to her wider oeuvre, including her "fallen paintings," compositions of dyed synthetic fabrics that she places directly on the floor.

Across Apfelbaum's artistic practice, color is the hallmark. She sees color as both structural and emotional, arranging it in precise sequences to elicit a particular mood. Valuing the emotional power of color, Apfelbaum uses woodblocks to create shapes of rich, pure color in her prints. Her works on paper demonstrate an evolution of technique, as she has graduated



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Polly Apfelbaum, *Empress Shout*, 2015; Woodblock print on handmade paper, 25 3/8 x 25 3/8 in.; Printed and published by Durham Press; Image courtesy of Durham Press

from using blocks inked with a single color to blending two or three colors on a block. *Empress Shout* and other recent prints display the artist's "rainbow roll" technique, in which multiple colors are partially mixed when particular blocks are pressed onto the paper, achieving a continuous gradient effect.

Empress Shout models the fundamental elements of Polly Apfelbaum's prints. Through its bold forms and symphony of colors, the print reveals the ambitions of the artist, whose intuitive yet ordered process pushes the boundaries of printmaking and color theory.

Stephanie Midon is the curatorial assistant at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Note:

1. Stephanie Buhmann, "Polly Apfelbaum," in *New York Studio Conversations: Seventeen Women Talk about Art*, (Berlin: Green Box, 2016), 92.

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