Interview with Polly Apfelbaum by Claudia Gould

The following conversation with Polly Apfelbaum was conducted this winter as we prepared for her exhibition at ICA. It is meant to offer a contrast to the other three essays in this catalogue, a place for the artist's voice, primarily, but also another perhaps more idiosyncratic way into her work. The titles of Polly's works have always struck me as important to her sensibility. Though her works are obviously "abstract," her titles help orient her formal and material concerns around cultural location. Like the titles of pop songs or the names of movies or bands, they are less literal than evocative. They hint at moods and attitudes, the intangible but fundamental influence of culture upon an artist's mind and her time.

CLAUDIA GOULD The range of your titles seems to swing from pop innocence to dark experience or from youthfulness to corruption. Titles like Daisy Chain, A Pocket Full of Posies, and Peggy Lee and the Dalmatians contrast with Ice, Bones, Reckless, or those of works not in the show like Black Flag and Gun Club. This contrast is also apparent in the aesthetic qualities of your work: the initial pop/bang/explosion of color (the cartoon) followed by the sense of minute accumulation, accretion, form layered upon form (the maturity). Can you talk about these kinds of oppositions?

POLLY APFELBAUM We all know that pop is never innocent—so I think that opposition is there from the start. It's true that A Pocket Full of Posies is from a nursery rhyme, but I had always heard it came from the black death—that "all fall down" referred to dying, and the posies were to drown out the stench. My work is never explicitly narrative, so the titles are always indirect—sometimes they refer to the process, but they are often simply meant to be evocative—I think Duchamp said that titles were like another color in the work.

Another aspect that is very important is that I use the titles to structure the work—not only individual pieces, but groups of pieces. There was a whole series of pieces based on film titles: Red Desert (1955), L'Avventura (1954) and Zabriskie Point (1964). Partly, I started with Red Desert thinking about Antonioni's use of color, and the way it could trigger an emotional state. The color is very artificial and in the film there's a parallel between the appearance of color and the unbalanced mental state of the female lead. L'Avventura, which is about a woman who may or may not be lost—it has to do with time again. Zabriskie Point is Antonioni's most psychedelic film, and the explosion of color in my piece is, in this case, a literal reference to the exploding house at the end of the film.

Antonioni films the explosion in slow motion, Technicolor, with a wonderful Pink Floyd soundtrack, and all of the objects in the house come floating down through the frame—it's a very Sixties moment, very beautiful. Another film maker who influenced my thinking was Chris Marker. This is Where I Come From (1994) is taken from a scene in La Jetée: there is a scene where the main character, who has traveled back in time, points beyond the rings of a cut tree to say "this is where I come from." Marker in turn is referring to Hitchcock's Vertigo here, and I like the complicated, looping series of times and references that come together in that phrase.

Of course the Powerpuff pieces (2000) are another example. I liked the idea of a strong, somewhat promiscuous female role model, the slightly out-of-control quality of these cartoon characters. On the other hand, we know that the chaos of cartoons is highly controlled, so this gets back to your other point—something apparently out of control that is the product of very slow, careful accumulation.
CG Your titles seem like song titles, pop songs. They’re less literal than lyrical: catchy, colorful, evocative. Do you think about your art as a kind of music? Do you feel like you’re creating “entertainments” like songs or TV shows or movies?

PA One of the things that is important to me is the idea that music is very evocative and emotional, but never literal—you may not know what you are reacting to. It’s less intellectual and more intuitive, but at the same time it’s very precise. For me that’s the difference between music and “entertainments,” where the emotional content is very literal.

The titles are partly for me—a series of clues about what the piece could be about, a way to begin working—and partly for the viewer—a way into the work, that may have some connection with the world outside the work. But the connection is always loose enough not to get in the way of some other possible interpretation.

CG Does your taste in music and film influence your work—performative, confrontational, absorbing?

PA Like my work, my taste is very eclectic. Gun Club and Black Flag are both L.A. punk bands, and the loose, loud experimental nature of that music strongly influenced those pieces—they came after the Powerpuff pieces, which had been very controlled, and I wanted to open up more at that time. Single Gun Theory is an Australian band, and it’s more techno; they use a lot of samples. I think there’s an analogy with what I do—taking little pieces and rearranging them. One of their samples is Natalie Wood (on the verge of a nervous breakdown) reading the Wordsworth poem in the film Splendor in the Grass. I used that to make another piece.

I suppose it’s inevitable that there is a relationship. I am drawn to the quirky and not always popular. It’s less about autobiography than about a sensibility. Many of the pieces work from very explicit rules, or systems, but often—in fact just about always—the system
is invisible. I guess I like that kind of tension, between the intuitive and the formal, or the emotional and the controlled.

CG Going back to the first question: is there something innocent or pure in your works that is being confronted or challenged. The ancient belief in the power of color and form, for example?

PA Your question reminds me of one of my favorite passages in Italo Calvino's book Six Memos for the Next Millennium. What he said about folk art has always stuck with me, that folk art, authentic folk art, is never sentimental or sweet. Rather it's very tough and sometimes a little ugly. I just looked it up and what he says is this: "If during a certain period of my career as a writer I was attracted by folktales and fairytales, this was not the result of loyalty to an ethnic tradition... not the result of nostalgia for things I read as a child. It was rather because of my interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm and hard logic with which they are told." So I am very attracted to that notion of a hard logic that is found in an unexpected place—in a world where everything is supposed to be simple and beautiful, things often turn out to be more complicated. I like the idea of doing pieces that are very beautiful and intuitive, seductive even, but that turn out to be more complex, to have more layers and more structure than people thought. In the end it's more interesting that way.

For me, this is essential when you talk about abstraction—there is no pure abstraction, and even though I consider my work abstract, there is always some reference outside—a connection to place, to memory or to popular culture. On the other hand, I don't want to make these references too explicit, too much of a narrative, critical or otherwise. You want to be open to change, because your ideas change too. I want the pieces to have a life beyond my control. By keeping the content indirect, I try to leave space for viewers, so they can bring their own experience to the work. The idea is to make the work rich enough, dense enough, or complex enough so that there is always something unexpected that may come out of that experience.