

"Q and A with Polly" by Sarah Miller Meigs, Founder and Director of the Lumber Room

1. Your work has been exhibited within many contexts, Minimalism, post-Minimalism, Feminism, Pop, did I miss anything? Can you comment on the many interpretations of your work? Is there any context you have been excluded from and wish to be included? Have you said no to any specific contexts of your work? Can you describe?

I like the fact that the interpretation of the work is open-ended, that these pieces can be chameleon-like, and people bring many different interpretations, contextualize them in different ways. I learn a lot from the ways that people react to the work, but for me there is always something consistent -- Ironically, I think the work has to be strong and specific in order to be open to so many different interpretations. And maybe one thing I'm trying to suggest is that some of these categories are a bit arbitrary, why do we need to buy into these pre-given categories? Recently, at the Perez one of the Power Puff pieces was put in a craft context, which is amusing after all these years of really being put mostly in the painting/sculpture world now there is a new craft dialogue in the air.

2. Your work has been described as painting and sculpture, yet it is also installation and performance. Did I miss any descriptors? Where do you see yourself and your work on this spectrum? Is it even important?

I think descriptions are helpful for other people, if it helps them get into the work, gives them a framework. The basic axis of the work has always been between painting and sculpture - my issues are color, surface and form - painterly issues, but the work unfolds in space, which brings sculpture in..To be honest I am not as comfortable with "installation" I suppose because it has so much baggage today. That said, it's also been consistent throughout my career that I like to react to the space of the gallery, and work with the large scale and site specificity, reacting to the architecture. So if the only word we have for that is "installation," I can live with it, but I prefer Fred Sandback's term: "situational"

3. You have described yourself as an "in-between" artist, "working in the space between sculpture and painting, between narrative and abstraction, between form and color, control and chance, beauty and not beauty." Could you elaborate?

It started with a German friend who called me "the space between two chairs." I liked that image. Turns out it's a common German saying. But I liked it; I felt it was a space I wanted to work in. For me it's about experimentation and surprise, and poaching in fields already well defined.

4. You stated that the Color Stations are "loosely based on the Stations of the Cross, but not in a narrative or religious sense. I was thinking about the movement and order of thought, of color and light, the Annunciations and all the Fra Angelico paintings in San Marco, Renaissance drapery, the way that curtains conceal and reveal, and I was

thinking about monochromatic painting.” Now that you and the work have traveled from its first installation in Rome to be installed for only the second time at the lumber room as Color Stations Portland can you describe the work and your experience from this current place in time?

Devotional work, as you say, is about movement, ritual and focus, as much as any specific religious narrative. This work certainly is tied to the experience of Rome, but I also think about things like pilgrimages, traveling altars, etc. I like the fact that this work is light and portable - it travels well. But one thing that is consistent is the sense of time, and the idea of living with the work, which is one of the things I like about the lumber room. It’s also about the difference between the studio and the gallery - moving from a space of production to a scale of contemplation. It has a real physical presence in this context, much more so than in the studio. But what I also like is that now the art-world associations trump the religious ones - the ready-made, monochrome painting, Blinky Palermo, Fred Sandback, Imi Knoebel...

5. I like your description of the Color Stations being a part of a larger series of Color Sessions “in the sense of musicians getting together for a number of takes, going through the score again and again, not toward some definitive version, but each take being as important as the other.” The words station and session suggest both a pause and then movement. Will this work come to a final destination and how might you know you have reached the end of the line (forgive my train references, it can’t be helped). Is it important for the work to find a permanent form?

Are there other works that have found finality and how was it found?

The fluidity of form -- and of course the use of fabric, drapery -- is an early concern that is still with me. Actually, I am not sure I want to come to the end of the line, to pick up on your reference...my hope is that the work keeps moving, and I can keep moving with it. Another analogy would be a musical score, where you have some things that are fixed, you need to have a structure to work with, but you always want to leave something open to improvisation, to keep the work alive. And you know, I googled “Color Stations” and what came up was a color chart for a subway station, so there is a whole range of possible references...

6. This leads me to ask what role architecture, light, color, rules and the body play in your work. Specifically, their role and importance in Color Stations Portland.

Well, I could spend hours in that space watching the light. What is very specific to that space is the way that the windows are a major part of the room. So the Color Stations become a counterpoint to the windows, and the life of the city beyond. Also, I liked the sense of enclosure of the single room; it gave the work a strong focus. And I tried to balance to symbolic colors - white, black and red - with the more chromatic series. I also found myself drawn to the evening light,

beautiful reflections on the glass mirroring the room. I liked the mood ring quality of the light, moment to moment shifts.

7. Agnes Martin wrote “an artist’s life is adventurous”. How do you understand this statement? There is no doubt you are adventurous.

I totally agree with her. I have been so lucky to travel and I think the work grew a lot last year. But I also think she is talking about being adventurous in a different way - you can be adventurous and never leave home - you travel through the work. I think the artists I like are the ones who take risks with their work, the adventurous ones...

8. Agnes Martin equates happiness with inspiration, beauty, adventure, “and being on the beam with life – to feel the pull of life”. I am going to be so bold as to suggest you and your work stand firmly on the ‘beam with life’. It is robust, exuberant, inspired, and intuitive. Can you briefly speak to the idea of inspiration, beauty and happiness in your work and in particular to the Color Stations Portland?

I hope so, it’s a great expression, and catches the tension in her life and work. You know it’s funny; this fantastic movie just came out, “The Great Beauty,” set in Rome. It was so much fun to see all the places I used to walk, practically every day. And the film is gorgeous, very rich, beautiful music, but very melancholy too... The message of the film is that Rome’s beauty can be overwhelming. I think I was inspired by Rome, but I can also be inspired by everyday things too - I think that’s also what the pull of life’ is about, to be attentive to small things too.

9. What is best and most accurate statement ever made about your work?

Well there are two that I constantly go back to. One is I like Libby Lumpkin’s text “Vive la résistance: Polly Apfelbaum’s Vanitas of Painting.” She is the one who said I have “one foot in the “conceptual world and one in the world itself.” Then there is Lane Relyea “A Dozen Paragraphs Scattered Around the Topic of Stains,” where he says that my work is “both painting and sculpture, and perhaps photography and fashion and formless material process as well. It is all these things--wildly so and wildly not so.” I like the sense of abandon in that last sentence. Both essays are in the small catalogue I did for Mass College of Art.

10. 51% of visual artists are women. Only 5% of art on display in museums is made by women.

“The men liked to put me down as the best woman painter. I think I’m one of the best painters.”—Georgia O’Keeffe

What has been your experience as a woman artist? How has the position of women in the arts changed over the course of your career? Does it matter that you are a woman who is an artist? Is there anything else you would like to add?

I know, this is always a difficult one, and I fight against this all the time, not only for myself, but for my friends and other artists. I define myself as a feminist, but I also think the only thing you can do is make your work and not obsess over it. You would think after 25 years of showing I might be able to say that things have improved; they have, a little, and at least people are talking about it, but the problem is still there. I do think that women have their own way of looking at the world, but I also like what Georgia O'Keeffe said, that in the end its about the quality of the work, and you can't put 'women artists' in a box and use that as an excuse not to pay attention.

Women artists have been so important to my work. That's why it was such a pleasure to curate the small show of some of those incredible women artists who have influenced me: Agnes Martin, Eva Hesse, Hanna Wilke, Yayoi Kusama, Lee Krasner and Lynda Benglis. Without them I wouldn't be here.