

Roxana Marcoci: Let's start by discussing how you began making your first "fallen paintings".

Polly Apfelbaum: "Fallen Paintings" was a term I started using *after* these pieces first began to be shown in the early 1990's. It was a way of talking about these works as hybrids between painting and sculpture, something that couldn't be easily pinned down to a category. I started working on the floor as a sculptor, which is how I defined myself when I first started showing. My references were Carl Andre, Lynda Benglis, and Barry Le Va. The floor was an emotionally charged, low, irreverent space, a place where you throw things, where you drop your dirty clothes. Something precious like an artwork was not supposed to be on the floor. I was aware of that historical tradition, the whole post-studio tradition, Robert Smithson and the idea of sculpture's "expanded field," which was part of the climate when I was in school. My work has been contextualized by others as a response to that history. *Spill* (1992-93) was shown at MoMA in the 1994 show *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties*, organized by Lynn Zelavansky.

RM: At that time, were you thinking of horizontality in historical terms? Although exhibited on the wall, Jackson Pollock was the first to brand his work "horizontal," but paintings from Andy Warhol's series of dance diagrams (1962) to Lynda Benglis's *Bounce* (1969) were actually displayed directly on the floor.

PA: It was somewhat later that I began thinking about these as hybrids between painting and sculpture, and the dialogue between the horizontal and the vertical - as in Pollock's work or Warhol's *Dance Diagrams* or the piss paintings [Warhol's *Oxidation* paintings] for that matter - talk about low. It was a question of becoming more aware that the issues I was dealing with were painterly issues: color, line, flatness, and certain notions about form. Today there is a wider notion of what painting might be, that is a kind of emotional space as much as a physical space. People are more comfortable with these contradictions. Moving to the floor opened up a new space for painting. I think that the newer work - *Cartoon Garden* in particular - is more about the horizontal field conditions that go back to Warhol and Pop art.

RM: There is something to be said about your use of eye-candy colors and fabrics. Your work seems to relate pictorially to 1950s Color Field abstraction, but in your use of devalued materials you come closer to *Arte Povera* artists. At the same time, your subjects reflect an interest in popular culture and feminism. Can you talk about the sources that inform your practice?

PA: It's interesting you mention *Arte Povera*. I lived in Spain in the early 1980s and saw a big show of that work in Madrid. There was also a show at P.S.1 in 1985. My colors are lush and artificial, which is less *Arte Povera*, but the mix of high and low is similar. I was also aware of the Support/Surface group in France. What was going on in Europe

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- abstract work that was slightly out of the mainstream - definitely had an effect on my work. I have always liked more quirky abstract painters - Larry Poons, for example, or Paul Feeley. Anne Truitt is also interesting because her work is between painting and sculpture. I had originally moved to New York City in 1978 and was also probably influenced by Pattern and Decoration. There were a number of interesting women artists who had emerged around that time, everyone from Elizabeth Murray to Lynda Benglis, Ree Morton, and Jennifer Bartlett; and not only women, but also Richard Tuttle, Alan Saret, Lucas Samaras, and Alan Shields. In those days, it was slower. You didn't move to New York and start showing right away, so I had time to work, travel, and absorb these influences.

I came back to New York from Spain in the mid-1980s and started showing in the East Village. I exhibited in a galley with a bunch of CalArts people. The scene was more about appropriation and Neo-Geo than Neo-Expressionism, which was fine with me. I was working with found and fabricated pieces in series, but with a similar sense of play between abstraction and recognition. It was a very open time. There were a lot of other sources - film, especially Michelangelo Antonioni (*Red Desert*, for example) and things I was reading. Italo Calvino's book on fairy tales or *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, in which he talks about lightness, immediacy, style, and structure, had a big impact on me. One of the things I took from Calvino was his idea that folk art and fairy tales are not sentimental, but touch, even ugly, and full of what he calls "hard logic." I like the immediacy and simplicity of that work, which is very abstract and in a way very close to early cartoons, like the ones that features the Yellow Kid [in the 1980s], which used simple geometries of a circle for a head, eyes, mouth, or ears.



Polly Apfelbaum

Peggy Lee and the Dalmatians 1992

Synthetic crushed stretch velvet and fabric dye.

12' x 12' (365.8 cm x 365.8 cm)

(installation view at Amy Lipton Gallery, New York, 1992)

Private Collection



Polly Apfelbaum

The Dwarves with Snow White 1992/2003

Muslin sacks and shredded paper.

7'6" x 27" x 24" (228.6 cm x 68.6 cm x 61cm)

(installation view at Amy Lipton Gallery, New York, 1992)

Collection of the artist

RM: If I understand correctly, when marking the fabrics you follow a system based on the Sennelier 104-color dye chart. How do you decide on the colors for each piece? Are you experimenting with the psychology of colors or do you use colors as readymade material?

PA: It's true that there is always a structure or a pattern or a working idea behind the color. It's not just arbitrary or expressionistic. But it's also important to say that the system is completely intuitive, something that I am always experimenting with. I like these supposedly structured systems that turn out to be kind of obsessive and crazy - like Alfred Jensen. No one could hope to figure out his systems. It's not what the system gives him as a means to an end or a way of controlling color, but the system itself becomes fascinating in the end. I love the completeness, all the small steps of color charts.

I started numbering with the piece *Ice* (1998). It was a way to ensure that I would use all 104 colors in the dye set (each dyes to black and all the primaries) so that the piece becomes a giant color chart setting out all these relationships. If the dye chart is a structure, then each piece also has a very specific color idea within the available options. One color is always a base color, which may have some sort of outside reference - black for *Ice* or hair colors for the *Powerpuff* pieces. Structure doesn't preclude an emotional response to color. What's interesting about color to me is that, like music, it is always evocative. It's emotionally rich without being specific in content. Color has such a wide range of associations. I don't see a contradiction between structure and emotion. I think that's a false dilemma. Someone I admire a lot is [Warner Bros. animator] Chuck Jones; these early animation artists had to work within incredibly exacting constraints, but the results are so fluid, so effortless and evocative.

RM: What initially prompted you to abstract a scene from Walt Disney? I am thinking of any number of works, such as *Peggy Lee with Dalmatians* or *The Dwarves with Snow White* or *The Dwarves without Snow White*, all from 1992.

PA: The pieces you mention are all from a show in 1992 that I call *The Blot on my Bonnet*. Part of the idea for this show was to work with the stain, the blot, to mobilize imperfection. I started thinking about this supposedly perfect cartoon world, which actually turns out to be much darker and more layered. Sometimes it's easier to deal with certain ideas in an artificial, cartoon world. It allows me to be playful and serious at the same time. In working on pieces, the title always comes afterward. I didn't start out to make a series of Disney pieces. It was more like a series of clues for the viewer, a way into the work, another layer of meaning, a connection to something outside of the work - something that everyone will know - more like an atmosphere than a specific point of departure. I was to open up possible narratives by intermingling form and content. As I work, the titles are also another form of structure. The references may

give me a certain color vocabulary, working rules, or a series of relationships. In other words, it's a very abstract filter. It's important to keep the connection loose.

RM: *Blossom* (2000), which is in MoMA's collection, is one of four works inspired by the popular Cartoon Network animation series *The Powerpuff Girls*. The series features three toylike girls - Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup - whose mission is to fight crime and save the world before bedtime. You invest each work with an implicit feminist discourse. Can you talk about the ascent of girl power in these works?

PA: I was certainly interested in the Powerpuff Girls as a model of feminine strength; a way of putting together "cuteness" and "power." It was appealing to me that those two characteristics don't normally go together. There is something a little perilous about the combination as everything works just on the edge of chaos. It's also about being comfortable with contradiction and different generations of feminism. It's remarkable that the Powerpuff Girls were created by a man. He went to CalArts and knows a lot about art and cartoon history. He had a hard time getting them on the air because the network thought they would turn off fifty percent of the audience (little boys). It did not, but it took him a long time. I was thinking about parallels in how people responded to the feminine in my work. It has taken time to get beyond the obvious.

RM: Although highly controlled and painstakingly assembled, your works articulate the delirious thrill of topsy-turvydom. Would you describe *Blossom* as carnivalesque?

PA: That's interesting. I had not made that direct connection. Thinking about it, certainly the sense of abandon and the highly decorated costumes of Mardi Gras or the Brazilian carnivals fascinate me. I grew up watching the Mummers Parade in Philadelphia. So, there is a shared sensibility in all that color and movement. But I don't see it in terms of a search for some sort of vernacular authenticity. In that sense, what I feel closer to is more of a mass-culture trashy Hollywood sensibility - like Busby Berkeley musicals or Esther Williams or trippy 1960s animation. They encompass that sense of over-the-top pattern and spectacle where the bodies make abstract patterns and shapes.

As I understand it, the carnivalesque is always defined as the other of "everyday" - a delirious escape from the sameness of work. The Hollywood spectacle is more of an extension of the everyday toward a kind of decorative excess. The controlled chaos of cartoons is actually highly structured because it is the product of repetition and accumulation (think of all those separate frames that the old animators had to draw by hand!). This is closer to a pop sensibility, and in the end it's what I feel closer to.



Polly Apfelbaum

The Dwarves without Snow White 1992

Synthetic crushed stretch velvet, fabric dye, and cardboard boxes.

(each) 27" x 16" x 3" (68.6 cm x 40.6 cm x 7.6 cm)

(installation view at Amy Lipton Gallery, New York, 1992)

Brooklyn Museum, New York

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Polly Apfelbaum

Blossom 2000

Synthetic velvet and fabric dye.

Approx. 18' (548.6 cm) diam.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Gift of Donald L. Bryant, Jr., Bobbie Foshay-Miller, Ricki Conway, Susan Jacoby, Jo Carole Lauder, Steven M. Bernstein, and Brook Berlind, 2001

RM: What about the performance-based aspect of your work? It has often been suggested that entering one of your installations is like crossing the threshold of a Benda dot picture.

PA: It's important to me that people have to move through the works so the spectator activates it and participates in the experience. As you move, the color and the nap of a fabric change and the work plays a lot with light. I am always working with site, scale, and the architectural setting. There is a performative aspect to the way in which the same piece will be installed in different locations, like a piece of music that changes each time it is performed. It's also true that making my work is time-consuming, and the process itself is highly repetitive. I do not work with assistants. I do it all myself: dyeing, cutting, testing. Some of these installations take days of bending over to place each piece. It's slow work, but I don't necessarily see that as a performance. For me, it's something more private. I don't want to make a spectacle out of the process, but there is a kind of accumulated time in the pieces. Like in pointillism or a Benday dot picture, you are aware of the parts and the whole simultaneously, you break it down into parts and see the individualism of each point as something made. I sometimes think of the fabric pieces as brushstrokes.

RM: How does the world of comic animation intersect with abstraction?

PA: Much of the canonical Greenbergian ideas of abstraction - flatness, solid blocks of color, etc. - are also characteristics of cartoons. You can make a figure with such simple, flat geometries in cartoons. This is changing with contemporary cartoon animation, which is more about realism, because it has to do with what you can do on the computer. The figures in *Toy Story* or *Monsters, Inc.* are not abstract at all. For me, something has been lost. Flatness, solid colors, and drawn outlines are a part of the vocabulary of modern abstraction.

RM: Culled from films, novels, or comic books, your titles refer to the content of the works. Past the titles, how do you explain that no matter how much you abstract a comic book scene, the vestigial image behind abstraction remains quietly visible?

PA: I hope it does remain visible. I think this persistence of the figure perhaps comes from the way I think and work abstractly. I rely on a certain idea of abstraction to keep the work open-ended. That is to say, if you think of abstraction as something final, absolute, and totalizing, there is no possibility of content of figure or image. This is a very narrow idea of abstraction for me. I'm attracted to a looser idea of abstraction as something provisional, conditional. I think abstraction is part of the texture of modern life; it's always there under the surface. Money is abstract, the internet is abstract, and relationships are abstract. I think this is part of why abstraction shows up in both cartoons and abstract painting.

By thinking of abstraction *not* as an absolute, you open up the possibility of a much richer dialogue between content and form. Think of Phillip Guston's late paintings, for example, which I've always liked. There is room for the viewer to see the abstract as figural or the abstraction in the figure. This has been important, as I've introduced into my recent work more explicit imagery, such as flowers, bones, and eyes. But these

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images are reduced to a few iconic lines. Like a cartoon of an eye or a bone, it's just geometry. In works like *Cartoon Garden* or *Gun CLub* (2002), however, it's also the accumulation and repetition of this image that creates an abstract field. The structure and overall effect is about activating an optical field based on the positive and negative space that relates to fields, gardens, mold, lichen, and lilly pads. It becomes a while series of open-ended references that are more about pattern, structure, and repetition.



Polly Apfelbaum

L'avventura 1994

Synthetic velvet and fabric dye.

Approx. 20' x 20' (609.6 cm x 609.6 cm)

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(installation view at Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 1994)
Collection of the Artist



Polly Apfelbaum

Red Desert 1995

Synthetic velvet and fabric dye.

Approx. 8' x 20' (243.8 cm x 609.6cm)

(installation view at Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, 1995)

Collection of the artist