

Polly Apfelbaum

Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA

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This refreshingly selective and well-installed survey of the work of Polly Apfelbaum focuses on fourteen sculptural pieces and installations created between 1989 and 2003. *A Pocket Full of Posies*, 1990, is the first to articulate the stakes of her artistic practice. Composed of unpainted steel plates cut into simple floral shapes and arranged in a circle on the ground, the piece recalls Carl Andre's floor sculptures, while its floral subject matter could be said to introduce a "feminine" sensibility. *A Pocket* was soon followed by more floor pieces, now made of fabric dyed in effusive hues. If some have claimed that Apfelbaum's work represents the "feminizing of Minimalism," in this grouping that view appeared reductive and limiting; for these pieces unleashed a destabilizing force that upset secure notions of gender or medium and proposed an uneasy and considerably more compelling hybridity.

Largely made up of synthetic velvet, dyed with increasingly hallucinogenic colors and arrayed on the gallery floor, Apfelbaum's installations blend the mediums of painting and sculpture. Yet the act of looking eventually overtakes physical interaction, as intense optical sensation and evidence of painterly process dazzle the viewer. Also, unlike Andre's, Apfelbaum's visitors can't walk on the work. In *Blossom*, 2000, near-modular petals of fabric radiate out in concentric circles from a dense center. The individual pieces are edged in white where the dye tapers out; this differentiates them and heightens the sense of vibrating chromatic patterns. But in contrast to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, to which they're often compared, Apfelbaum's scatters are not expressive gestures or indices of psychic energy--they're closer to self-generating organisms. *Split*, 1998, is a mesmerizing proliferation of irregularly shaped, dark gray drops of fabric; from the main, disorganized body creep velvet extensions like genetic sequences, stained in alternating colors that bleed slightly into one another. The dimensions of the larger installations, like *Split* and the rectangular *Ice*, 1998, correspond roughly to the surrounding architecture--it's as if they tumbled off a specific wall or seeped from a particular corner.

If this work evokes an anxious imaginary of genetic mutations and viral infections, it also reassures with the pure optical power of its sumptuous, saturated colors. The visual "stun" is overwhelming and, perhaps, critically disabling. If earlier avant-gardes committed themselves to raw industrial materials and neutral tones, it was to remove commercial appearance from the art object. To inject decoration into Minimalism with such a vengeance may expose the latter's suppressed connection to the world of commodities, but it also potentially surrenders the ability to resist that world. In fact, the bright, kitschy dyes, rolled-up bolts of fabric, cardboard boxes stocked with store-bought colored streamers, and even the works' titles, with their references to popular culture (*The Dwarves with Snow White*, *Wonderbread*, *Love Boat*), indicate a celebration of commodified experience. With the work mixes popular culture and abstraction, attempting to mark out a creative space somewhere in between, its vulnerability lies in its exposure to the potentially empty discourse of "beauty," which may be ready to absorb it in turn.