

ART MONTHLY #324 March 2009

■ Polly Apfelbaum

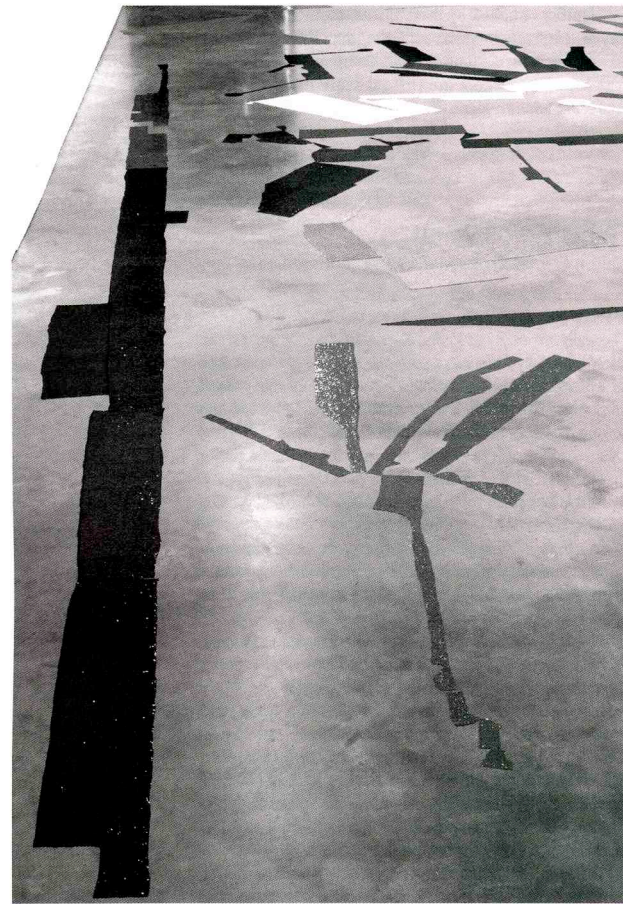
Milton Keynes Gallery January 31 to March 22

The walls are empty at Milton Keynes Gallery, but that's precisely how Polly Apfelbaum prefers it. For the last 15 years or so Apfelbaum has been producing sumptuous floor-based fabric installations, often using synthetic crushed velvet and commercial dyes to compose vibrant celebrations of pattern, colour and form. It is somewhat surprising then to discover that in this, her first solo exhibition in a UK public gallery, Apfelbaum has departed significantly from her former working methods.

'Anything can happen in a horse race' presents three new installations that use cut pieces of sequined fabric to create distinct, idiosyncratic portraits of three popular American gambling cities: Reno, Atlantic City and Las Vegas. While today they evoke tacky showgirl costumes, romantic glamour and the veneer of opulence common to these casino capitals, sequins – if we trace the etymology of the word – find their roots in currency: gold coins to be precise. In choosing this tawdry material for her formal abstractions Apfelbaum astutely exploits its rich conceptual connotations. This seductive, shimmering fabric sits on the floor of all three galleries, drawing antsy children like magpies to its sparkly, glinting surfaces – much to the trepidation of gallery invigilators who know that none of it is stuck down.

Unlike previous installations that saw Apfelbaum fabricating each component part in her New York studio beforehand, here she has created everything in situ, responding to the idiosyncrasies of each space. In some ways, what we are presented with are the remnants of improvised performative actions; it's a performance in which viewers too are implicated as they complete the work by moving through and around it.

Entering the Middle Gallery we are confronted with *Reno* (all works 2009), comprising four large pieces of silver sequined fabric cut straight from the roll and laid out unassumingly on the floor. It all seems rather nondescript, but walk around the work and its iridescent surfaces sparkle wildly, creating dazzling visual effects as refracted light bounces off in all directions. Reno was once the gambling capital of the US but now, because of the popularity of cities like Las Vegas, it has become a shadow of its former self. During a recent visit, Apfelbaum became fascinated by how this drab city still managed to come alive at night in a burst of showy glamour – an observation echoed by the work.



Polly Apfelbaum
Las Vegas 2009
installation view

In the adjoining Cube Gallery *Atlantic City* is a far more sombre affair. During Apfelbaum's infancy Atlantic City was depressingly impoverished, filled with crumbling buildings and faded dreams. Memories of childhood visits to this abject city are the impetus for this work, made from what appear to be offcuts of black sequined material. Apfelbaum has clustered these ragged fragments around the gallery's perimeter, forming a thin, minimal border of irregular shapes which animate the negative floor space in between them. Somehow their twinkling surfaces seem forlorn and the largely empty room seems imbued with a deep melancholy.

Moving into the Long Gallery, the two previous works with their unassuming mien pale in comparison to the preponderating presence of *Las Vegas*, a sprawling, polychromatic work inspired by the titular city and incorporating every available colour of the sequined fabric. Las Vegas is, of course, the capital of gaudy glitz and over-the-top excesses, characteristics that Apfelbaum has sought to capture in this expansive piece. Myriad shapes and colours recalling Matisse-like cut-outs or the flaccid biomorphs of Jean Arp and Joan Miró litter the floor like resplendent archipelagos in a cold grey sea. Laid out in sequence according to the manufacturer's prescribed colour system, the dizzying plethora of saccharin colours shimmer and glisten, delivering an instant hit of aesthetic gratification. Although the shapes appear to be purely abstract, some configurations lend themselves to figurative readings: is that a cocktail glass? Are those shapes meant to be swizzle sticks?

The exhibition's title, besides alluding to notions of risk and chance, refers to a phrase overheard by Apfelbaum during the radio broadcast of a horse race in which the odds-on favourite failed to win. Perhaps an adventitious moment or maybe Apfelbaum is partial to the odd flutter now and again; either way, she has certainly taken a gamble with this show. Arriving at the gallery with little more than some rolls of material and a pair of scissors was taking a brave risk, and while it's one that appears to have paid off, the question remains whether the exhibition's successes can be attributed to much more than the mesmerizing formal qualities of her chosen material. ■