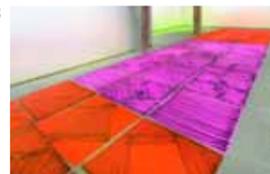


Polly Apfelbaum

“The sequins are the most active material I’ve ever used ... kind of holographic. It’s like cheap magic”



1 **Cartoon Garden** (2005)
synthetic fabric and dye,
762 x 366cm

2 **Pink Crush** (2007)
synthetic fabric and dye,
365.8 x 365.8cm

3 **The Painted Desert** (2007)
synthetic fabric and dye,
457 x 1981cm

4 **Red Light Special** (2008)
hologram synthetic sequined fabric,
dimensions variable

POLLY APFELBAUM came to prominence in the late 1980s with work that lent a poetic twist to found-object sculpture, but she really found her métier in the early 1990s, when she began to work with stained, crushed velvet. With this she made pieces which were like paintings that had dropped to the ground to become sculptures, and then started growing of their own accord. This evolved into the works for which she is best known, which feature colourful cut-out flowers arranged on the floor in sprawling patterns. For her recent show at Milton Keynes Gallery, entitled *Anything Can Happen in A Horse Race*, she used sequined fabric in work inspired by three US casino cities. **INTERVIEW:** *Morgan Falconer*

Where does your name come from?

It's German, it means "apple tree". I think it's a made-up Jewish name – when Jewish people immigrated to the US at the turn of the century, they made up names like this.

Why have you returned so frequently to flower motifs?

The most recent return was back in 2005, and that was because of an interest in line and drawing. The first of this series was *Cartoon Garden*, a black and white, very graphic piece. Originally I was interested in the Pop quality of flowers, because doodling, graffiti, flowers – they're ubiquitous. Everyone loves flowers, everyone doodles. Later I thought there was a new need for flower power during the Bush years. But the new work has no flowers. I've de-flowered.

Why did you start working with sequined fabric?

I think it's a logical extension of my previous work. In the past I've used crushed, stretched, synthetic velvet, which is also a material with cheap connotations, used in fashion craft and decoration, not art. Also, as the work got to be more about drawing and the space of the floor, sequined fabric seemed like the right material for this formal investigation – more hard-edged, as opposed to the softness of the velvet. It almost has the feeling of metal. The sequins are the most active material I've ever used – they catch light, and if the light reflects they can even disappear. Some are dented and produce a different reflection – kind of holographic. It's like cheap magic.

You made all the work for the Milton Keynes show in the gallery. Why not fabricate it in the studio beforehand?

This is something I've never done before, but part of the idea of this new work is that it's always made for the place – I don't really like the word site-specific, I prefer "situational", but in any event, it's important for me that the work is made in reaction to the place.

There is an element of performance, and it helps move the work away from the object, thinking of it more as a series of relationships, not just in space but in time as well – the piece exists only for the duration of the show.

Can you explain the different spaces at the Milton Keynes Gallery?

I did three rooms – a black room, a silver room, and a multi-coloured room. I like the graphic possibilities of black – you really see the negative/positive shapes. And with the silver, I love the idea that it's like a disco ball – it catches more colours than any of the other materials. The multi-coloured room uses 13 colours, that's all the available colours from a single manufacturer's line. I like the fact that this is someone else's system of colour.

You titled the pieces after three great American gambling cities.

Yes – Vegas, Reno and Atlantic City. They all relate to the palette I'm using. The multi-coloured one is Vegas – it's the gaudiest and has the mix of new kitsch and old. Atlantic City is black, because it's probably the most depressed. And Reno is washed out, it has a strong desert light – think of a sequined showgirl on the morning after. Reno is a kind of Las Vegas wannabe. It calls itself the "biggest little city in the world". I like that corny, aspirational quality. During the day, everything looks banal, but at night it is transformed. A lot of the old neon in Vegas has been replaced.

The new work is like your earlier work in that it's floor-based sculpture, but this time it invites us to enter its space.

Yes, this is the first work I've made in a while that you can walk in and around and about. The floor is obviously important in my work, and I like it because of the physicality it suggests – it's very literal. But I don't think I've been using the floor as an equal partner. This new work involves using the negative space that the sculpture creates. The sequins

invite participation because their colours shift and move with the viewer. I think these pieces feel more sculptural than most of my work.

You produced a piece entitled *Red Light Special* (2008) for a show in Santa Fe recently. It's very spare and linear.

That was one of the first chances I had to test the work outside the studio. Two ideas persist from that experiment: one, that cutting is drawing (hence the linear quality), and two, that all of the pieces of material are scraps and leftovers – not figures in space. My work has sometimes been compared to the scatter art of people like Barry Le Va, which is work I like, but it's not a direct reference. I am more linear and controlled, more painterly. I'm looking for informal arrangements, something direct and immediate, even spontaneous, but it's not based on chance or randomness.

The forms in your new work recall earlier styles of abstract painting, like geometric abstraction and biomorphism.

I want it to have the feel of an automatic, unconscious, experimental form of abstraction, a sense of Dada, Surrealism – Arp and Miró. They were hard edged, but still loose. So it's not a rationalist geometry – maybe in another life I was a hard-edged painter! I love to have a dialogue with the past, and I'm interested in quirky abstract painters who don't fit into the usual camps – people like Paul Feeley and Larry Poons. David Smith used to talk about drawing in space, and of course with the cut-outs there is a Matisse reference. Maybe they're all there, or not there; it comes with the territory, but they aren't conscious quotations.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

I'd love to own a bar by André Cadere. The idea that you could move it around, from place to place. I like the photos of him carrying them around New York. And I'd have to see what colour system I'd like.

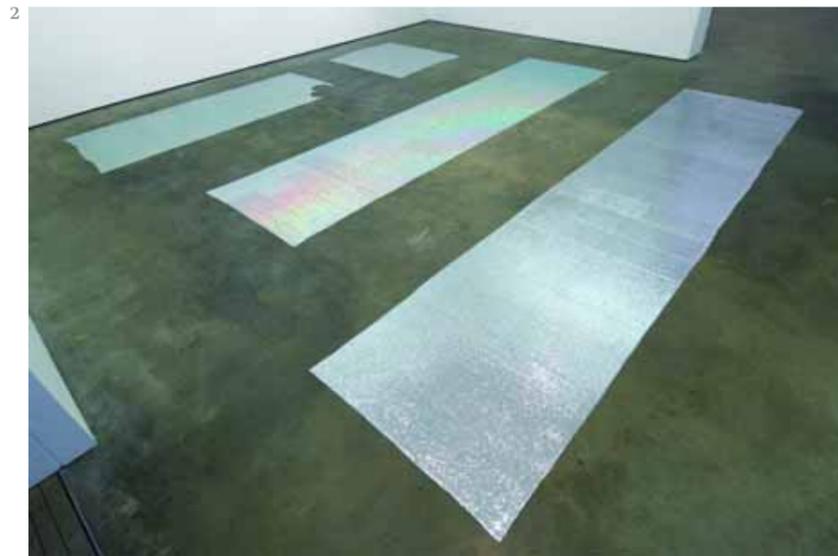
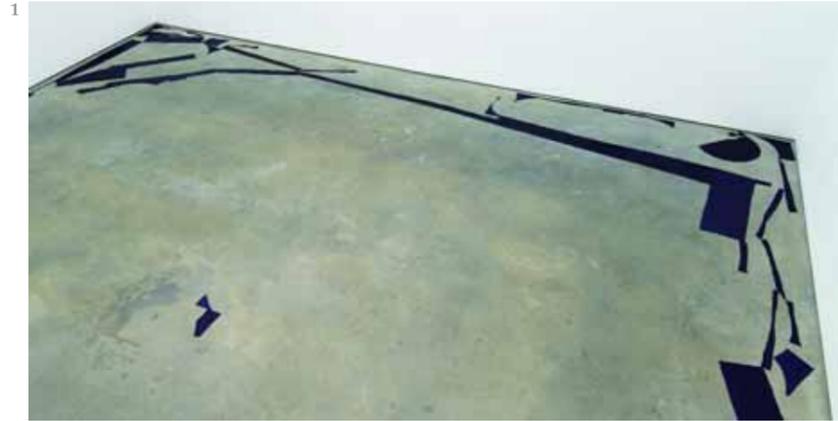
All images courtesy Polly Apfelbaum and Frith Street Gallery



Polly Apfelbaum on her preparatory "sketches"

In the year prior to her recent Milton Keynes Gallery show *Anything Can Happen in a Horse Race*, Polly Apfelbaum made many preparatory "sketches" on her studio floor. She explains: "The studies I do in my studio are about the process. I make a lot of them, they are very casual and quick; they disappear as soon as I move them. I had moved away from an older way of working and thinking, so it was about gradually removing the safety net. I was using new material and so I was seeing how it lays, how it clings to the floor, like abstract sculpture. The sequins react ethereally – it's a very temporal experience as the fabric changes all the time with the light. This new work began with left-over scraps and remnants. With my work, cutting is like drawing, and so when I am cutting I really am sketching. For me there is a very direct line between the two, it's like drawing in space."

Above: A studio sketch for the Las Vegas room at the exhibition *Anything Can Happen in a Horse Race* at Milton Keynes Gallery, 2009



The three rooms of Anything Can Happen in a Horse Race

Polly Apfelbaum's recent show at Milton Keynes Gallery, *Anything Can Happen in a Horse Race* (31 Jan–22 Mar 2009), consisted of three rooms named after US cities famed for gambling. Each room contained what she calls a "situational" installation, made on site, as she explains: "The only thing I decided before the installation was that each room would have a different colour scheme, each one thematically related to a city, so Vegas is full of colour, like Vegas is. But then the spaces gave me the structure – this is why it was so important to wait, and react to the architecture. One room [Reno] is all about the perimeter; that room was tall, and had one entrance. The middle room [Atlantic City] was very minimal and full of light, and the Vegas room was the largest, and the last one you come to. So there was no set plan, the structure emerged in dialogue with the spaces. I cut everything on site, in the gallery."

"I thought I would work in all the rooms at the same

time, but when I got there I really couldn't. So I concentrated at first on the black room. And then I had a sleepless night, got up early, let myself into the gallery and totally undid everything. It was about working really fast, on the edge of not knowing and just going with it. I really didn't stop, starting at 8am and finishing at 10pm every night.

"Even though I make preparatory studies, my work is essentially improvisatory. So, for instance, in the silver room there is a cut that looks like Mickey Mouse ears or a bum – I quickly cut a hunk and when I opened the fabric it just appeared. It was intense but it was important for me to not rely on pre-cut forms from the studio. I could have put these things in a suitcase and unrolled them in the gallery. My artist friends thought I was crazy to risk so much, not knowing in advance what it was going to be. I was interested in pushing myself and seeing what I would do."

Installation views of *Anything Can Happen in a Horse Race*, Milton Keynes Gallery, 2009:

1 **Reno** (2009), sequined fabric, dimensions variable, detail

2 **Atlantic City** (2009), sequined fabric, dimensions variable, detail

3 **Las Vegas** (2009), sequined fabric, dimensions variable