

"Sometimes a Flower Is Just a Flower?"

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Polly Apfelbaum's Crazy Love, Love Crazy is delightful, sensual, and most of all evocative. Using the quintessential icon of femininity and ephemerality, the flower, Apfelbaum has created an environment entirely of her own imagination and hand that, while Edenic and tempting, is not quite paradise. Apfelbaum is known for her floor installations comprised of hundreds of hand-cut and hand-dyed pieces of fabric that explore issues of domesticity, femininity, and decoration. Crazy Love, Love Crazy-a new installation created specifically for the Contemporary-also represents a revived interest in drawing, line, color, and the performative quality of each. Apfelbaum exploits the metaphoric attributes of her chosen iconography, and pushes them into a contentious relationship with the formal qualities. A sublime kind of "Flower Power" results, and while her work is superficially happy, a slight gravity lingers, the product of the face-off between meaning and form.

Apfelbaum's work consistently challenges not only definitions of painting and sculpture, but also the habits of viewing and experiencing art, be it on the wall or the floor. For this installation, Apfelbaum was inspired by the architecture and light qualities of the Contemporary's first two galleries, as well as the unique patterns that characterize the building's concrete floor. Apfelbaum has created two large floor pieces, separated by a single wall, composed of hundreds of gestural flower drawings on hand-cut synthetic velvet. One piece is square and warm, in various tones of red, orange, and pink; the second piece is rectangular and cool, in shades of blue, green, and turquoise. Also included in the exhibition is a series of framed Polaroids that Apfelbaum created during a recent residency at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, where she utilized MassArt's 20"x24" Polaroid camera to fashion a unique series of color and black and white "linear drawings" entitled Funky Specials and Spooky Love.

Apfelbaum has for years challenged conventions of materials and techniques in the history of artistic practice. Male artists such as Carl Andre, Richard Long and Richard Serra pioneers sculptural floor installations using heavy, industrial materials and arrangements of rock and earth. A generation later, Apfelbaum approaches the form using fabric, ink, the stain, and the "feminine" processes of folding, dying, cutting, and repetitive labor. Her installations are lively, hypnotic works that claim the floor and take ownership of architectural spaces in a manner entirely different from that of her male counterparts.

After years of attention to more controlled abstraction, Apfelbaum has with this installation embraced the random quality of the line and gesture, where the process of drawing becomes foremost. In Crazy Love, Love Crazy, the stain dictates movement, a departure from her more mathematical abstractions. Here, her flowers build upon each other (and the memory of each other) in seemingly chaotic randomness. Apfelbaum has referred to her floor pieces as "fallen paintings" and as "hybrid works that exist in a contentious, ambivalent space between painting, sculpture, and installation. This tedious effort," she continues, "is liberating. My work is improvisational, intuitive, and process oriented. I want to see every possibility and then I'll make up my mind."

For her installations, Apfelbaum uses squeeze bottles of fabric dye to draw directly on bolts of synthetic velvet. Starting with carefully selected colors, Apfelbaum inserts line liberally from above, allowing them to take their own form as the dye bleeds. Unlike her previous works, in which each fabric cut-out is stained with several colors, each flower in Crazy Love, Love Crazy possesses only one color that is lyrically defined by the black, bleeding line created by the spontaneous gesture of the artist's hand. The ink bleed delineates the form and becomes the form, while the repetitive acts of drawing, staining, and placing so critical to the production of Apfelbaum's work moves it into the realm of performance, sculpture, and installation.

In *Crazy Love, Love Crazy*, Apfelbaum revisits Warholian flower iconography that she has referenced in previous works. While Warhol's flowers derived from photographs and seed packets, Apfelbaum produces flowers with her own hand, allowing gesture and accident to take their places within the works. Each flower is influenced by its neighbor's scale and tone, and the accumulative form would be thin and permeable if not for the hard concrete floor peering through and balancing figure and ground. Indeed, this fragile, permeable installation possesses a remarkable degree of solidity and control as well, as the multitudes of flowers are corralled into a geometric shape informed by the grid, light, and architecture.

Apfelbaum takes her title from a 1964 Cuban-Soviet propaganda film, *I Am Cuba*, in which nothing is as it appears. *Crazy Love, Love Crazy* conveys the artist's interest in irony, literalness, and the seduction of material surfaces. *I Am Cuba* is pure propaganda, but it is beautiful, stunning propaganda that delivers a sly, agenda-driven punch. Apfelbaum's title, like the film, creates an opposition, a binary or a flip, that relates to her interest in how things that appear to be one thing are often quite another.

Like her title, Apfelbaum's use of color is playful. Her palette is full of bright, artificial hues, saccharin and squeaky at times, often evoking the supergraphics of pop art of the 1960s. In this, her work is similar to that of artist Jim Isermann, who deftly reworks retro colors, but Apfelbaum imbues her hues with a hand-made quality that denies any regard for either high design or nostalgic yearning. Along with color and line, material is at the crux of Apfelbaum's installation. Velvet fabric is associated with luxury, adornment and sensuality, and Apfelbaum draws on these associations, as well as velvet's traditional function of adorning the body, to bring to her work multiple layers of social and historical meaning. Despite its modernity, *Crazy Love, Love Crazy* would be Victorian if it were not so liberating, Medieval if it were not so vivid, and Romantic if it were not so ironic. And paired with the rich, velvet floor works are large format Polaroids, framed and hung on the wall, which function to arrest Apfelbaum's choreography, complete with all its sweet imperfections. The fixed imprint and instant gratification yielded by the Polaroid counters the performative and impromptu aspects that characterize her floor pieces.

Additionally, Apfelbaum plays with scale and proportion within her installation. Flowers are small. They are delicate, short lived and even overlooked. As Georgia O'Keeffe has observed:

Everyone has many associations with a flower-the idea of flowers. You put out your hand to touch the flower-lean forward to smell it-maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking-or give it to someone to please them. Still-in a way-nobody sees a flower-really-it is so small-we haven't the time.

Apfelbaum's flowers, on the contrary, delightfully command your attention because her flowers are huge and synthetic, with a density that grows directly from the imagination. In their accumulation they evoke what may have gone through Dorothy's mind when she first encountered the poppy fields of Oz, or what Alice's experience of being both small and tall in Wonderland felt like. While not as hallucinogenic, Apfelbaum's work is equally escapist, planning a desire to live the fantasy and take a journey of pure color and proportion.

Apfelbaum's work also possesses attributes that are, for lack of a better term, undeniably "girlish." However, much like a Kate Greenaway illustration, the girlishness is deceptive-Greenaway's heroines are as naughty as they are nice and subversive in their resistance to the very mores they are meant to impart. Apfelbaum is also more interested in belying the pretty surface, and thus she can be aligned with another Victorian figure, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and particularly her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the author masterfully addresses the trope of feminine madness as it is encoded in a decorative, flowery pattern. Both Gilman's and Apfelbaum's aesthetics appear to pose the same question: are the realms of love and madness exclusively a feminine phenomena?

Apfelbaum claims that her work is not altogether optimistic. It delivers instant pleasure with a sense of abandon, but along with it comes a hint of subversion. *Crazy Love, Love Crazy* is a seductive gesture, a blossoming installation that boldly addresses the (bitter)sweetness of life and its inherent ironies. The

flower, symbol of beauty and fertility, is also a symbol of fragility, transience, and ultimately even death. Her treatment of the flower is so simple and joyful that it appears to claim, "sometimes a flower is just a flower." And to that, Polly Apfelbaum wryly responds, is it?