



Above: *Night Flowering* (detail), 2009; Woodblock print on handmade paper, 15 x 15 in.; NMWA, Gift of Steven Scott, Baltimore, in Honor of Chief Curator Kathryn A. Wat and the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the National Museum of Women in the Arts; © Polly Apfelbaum; Photo by Lee Stalworth

Cover: *Little Dogwood 71* (detail), 2012; Woodblock print on handmade paper, 20 x 20 in.; Courtesy of Durham Press; © Durham Press and the artist; Printed and published by Durham Press



Chromatic Scale

Prints by Polly Apfelbaum

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NATIONAL MUSEUM of WOMEN in the ARTS

1250 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. | nmwa.org | Two blocks north of Metro Center

Vibrant woodcut prints by Polly Apfelbaum (b. 1955, Abington, Pennsylvania) reflect her dynamic process focusing on color and form. Although she studied printmaking as an art student, Apfelbaum focuses mainly on large-scale installations and “fallen paintings,” compositions of dyed synthetic fabrics that she places directly on the floor. In 2002, she began to revisit printmaking processes at Durham Press in Pennsylvania. Creating most of her prints at Durham, Apfelbaum often collaborates with master printmaker Jean-Paul (J.P.) Russell to create her colorful, abstract images. She incorporates her performative installation practice into her printmaking, improvising compositions from myriad wood blocks that are carved, inked, and placed individually. Reflecting influences of Pop and Minimalist art, Apfelbaum uses geometric and organic shapes to create abstract patterns in a saturated spectrum of exuberant color.



Apfelbaum discussed her printmaking practice with NMWA Curatorial Assistant Stephanie Midon.

S.M.: *Your previous work has been based on color systems and charts—is this still true in your current print work?*

P.A.: I am very interested in color systems and still use them as direct references, like in the “Hudson River Valley Nirvana” prints. As far as the prints in *Chromatic Scale*, obviously *Rainbow Love Mountain Ranch, New Mexico* [2007] is simply a rainbow, but the rest were totally intuitive. At Durham Press it is often the case that we prepare a large palette of colors on the inking tables, and I select the colored blocks and place them in an improvisational fashion.

Opposite: *Love Alley 4*, 2012, in progress

Above: *Love Alley 4*, 2012; Woodblock print on handmade paper, 32 x 68 in.; Courtesy of Durham Press; © Durham Press and the artist; Printed and published by Durham Press

All images except for back cover courtesy of Durham Press



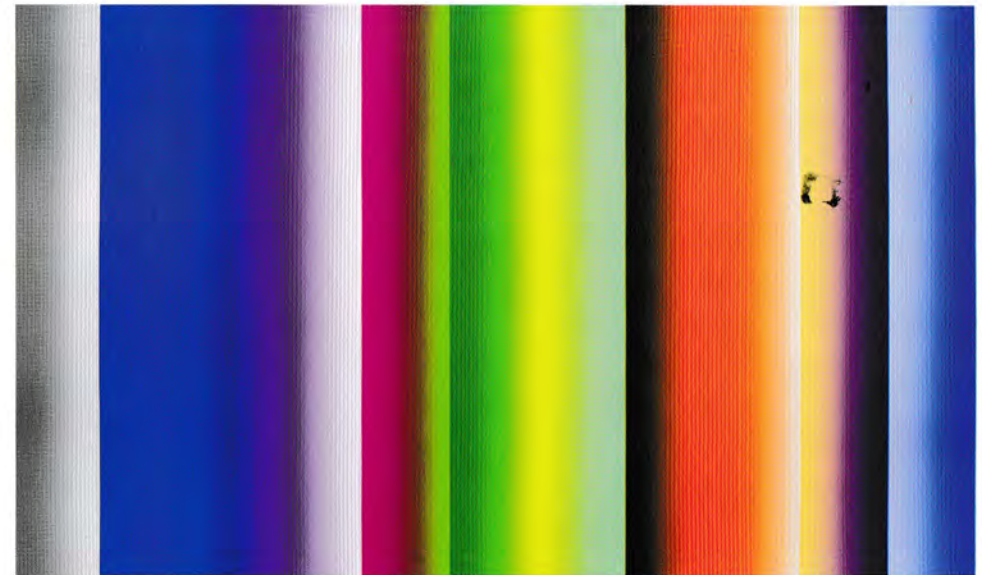
In the studio, creating a gradient with a rainbow-roll inking technique

S.M.: In a 2012 interview, when asked about your color choices for *Pink Crush* (2007), a synthetic-velvet floor installation, you said, "It's more a question of light than color," noting that light affects your large-scale installations by interacting with the fabric and reflecting within the space. Is your approach to color different when working on paper?

P.A.: Yes, I would say they are two totally different approaches. Most of the large-scale installations like *Pink Crush* are site specific, and therefore that approach is very subjective and a reaction. The prints aren't site specific, so it's a matter of intent from the start. In many of the prints, I am finding ways to depict a subtle, spiritual light using the more graphic tools in the printmaking vocabulary.

S.M.: You don't typically work with assistants, and you do all of your installation work yourself. But in your woodblock prints, you work with a team at Durham Press. How does this affect your artistic approach?

P.A.: With Durham especially, it opened up so many technical possibilities. The work still has a lot to do with my hand as far as placement and color choices, but collaborating with such a skilled team gives me so much fuel and freedom in the realm of ideas. I also have total confidence in the execution of my ideas with them.



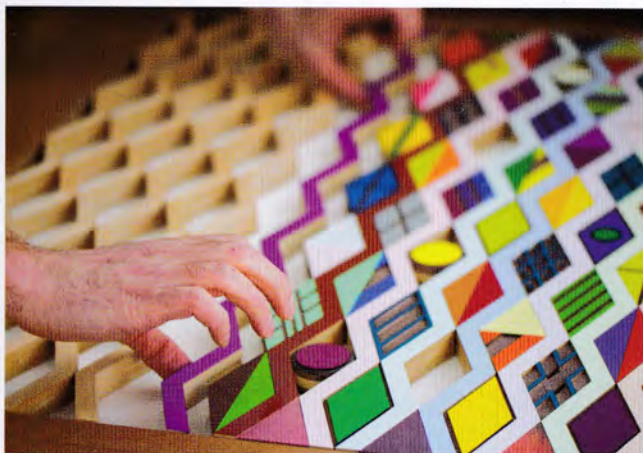
Byzantine Rocker 6, 2014; Woodblock print on handmade paper, 24 1/8 x 37 in.;
Courtesy of Durham Press; © Durham Press and the artist; Printed and published by Durham Press

S.M.: Even though you studied printmaking in school, it appears you didn't make prints for about twenty years. When and how did you return to the medium?

P.A.: I have artist Beatriz Milhazes to thank for inviting me to Durham to see her prints, and J.P. Russell for inviting me to print with them. It took a while for me to feel comfortable with printing again, but J.P. was really patient. I knew there was going to be a big learning curve with printmaking, so I have to give Durham credit for getting me interested again. Our first edition came out in 2002, though, so it's safe to say the printmaking dialogue has become really important to me as an artist.

S.M.: Your printmaking practice includes silkscreens and lithographs, but more frequently woodcuts. What about the woodcutting process appeals to you?

P.A.: The process that we've developed is not what you would typically think of as woodcuts. It doesn't have that much to do with the grain or carving. At Durham I'm able to order these beautifully crafted wood blocks on the spot, even as we are in the middle of assembling a print. Many times these are a vocabulary of shapes that fit into each other perfectly, but also interchangeably. This allows for a wildly fast and intuitive process, where it would be impossible for me to work like this by myself.



*Empress Shout, 2015,
in progress*

S.M.: How does your choice of paper affect your prints?

P.A.: Almost all of my prints are on Hiromi, a handmade Japanese paper. I like the scale and the weight of it—beautiful stuff.

S.M.: Your recent prints, particularly *Emperor Twist* (2015) and *Empress Shout* (2015), are remarkably intricate. What inspired your color choices and rainbow-roll technique [in which several colors blend to show gradient tones]?

P.A.: Any excuse to use a lot of color, but I am really partial to rainbow-rolls. In the print world the technique is considered really cheesy, and that makes me like it even more. As far as the process goes, we lay out two-color and three-color combinations, which get rolled onto the shapes. I then place the blocks face-up until I'm satisfied with the composition. We either use a hydraulic press or an etching press. If we use the hydraulic press everything gets flipped over.

S.M.: How do you come up with titles for your prints?

P.A.: The titles come from my life, the books I am reading, the movies, music, places. . . . The “Dogwood” prints [cover] were made from the wood of a dogwood tree, the Pennsylvania state tree. I grew up in Pennsylvania, Durham Press is in Pennsylvania on Dogwood Lane, and a dogwood fell down on their property. So we put it to work. There is a Love Park in Philly with a Robert Indiana LOVE sculpture in it. That was one of the thoughts behind my love titles.

Stephanie Midon is the curatorial assistant at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.



Emperor Twist, 2015; Woodblock print on handmade paper, 25 3/8 x 25 3/8 in.;
Courtesy of Durham Press; © Durham Press and the artist; Printed and published by Durham Press

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