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Polly Apfelbaum

NEW YORK,
at D'Amelio Terras

by Nancy Princenthal



Having long made work that straddles painting and installation, Polly Apfelbaum has recently split one decisively from the other. This past summer, she showed discrete little image-objects made of Plasticine and polymer clay at D'Amelio Terras. Flat and either squarish or roughly round, the irresistibly appealing “Feelies” were shown on sheets of wax paper laid atop low, wall-hugging corrugated cardboard shelves. They suggested pint-size Thomas Nozkowskis or Mary Heilmanns—or potholders made by a preternaturally gifted preschooler.

With *Off Colour*, the room-filling installation that followed in the fall, Apfelbaum returned to her work's longstanding support, dispersing eccentrically shaped pieces of sequined stretch fabric all over the floor, which was painted glossy white and further brightened by abundant illumination. (Apfelbaum says that dimmer lighting made the fabric seem too chintzy, so she amped it up.) Slinky and gaudy, and ranging in color from magenta and pink to lime green, gold and orange, the fabric was cut and arranged on-site, in a departure from the artist's established practice. The jagged-edged pieces suggested elements of sewing patterns—sleeves, pant legs, shirt halves—or the scraps left over from cutting them out of a bolt of cloth.

The installation made viewers more than customarily self-aware. Because the fabric was laid down without anchoring or adhesive, and was very thin, you were forced to pay careful attention to where you put your feet in the narrow and irregular intervals between shapes. You had to think about stance, stride and—when the gallery was crowded, as on an especially circusy opening night—how to negotiate social space. You had to consider your shoes.

Indeed, contemplating style, and how it is connected to allure, was forcefully encouraged. *Off Colour*'s titular reference to naughty jokes was buttressed by the exhibition poster, illustrated with four amateurish cheesecake shots of a ruddy-faced blonde framed by green plastic 35mm slide mounts. These are among a group of slides Apfelbaum found at a London market, which served, the press release explained, as a loose basis for the installation's palette.

The new embrace of unpredictability—of serendipitous encounters with color and chance arrangements of form—was balanced with a hint of nostalgia. Along with '70s glam and “bad girls” vamping, the sequined fabric evoked Ree Morton's swags and Lynda Benglis's sparkles in works of that decade. *Off Colour* revived questions much in the air at that time, of how decoration relates to art, and art to craft, or decor, or fashion. With a potent blend of sophistication and mischief, Apfelbaum makes these issues seem both sexy and amusingly periodized.

Photo: View of Polly Apfelbaum's Off Colour, 2010, synthetic sequined fabric, dimensions variable; at D'Amelio Terras.