

Polly Apfelbaum: The Potential of Women



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Review by Torey Akers

In many ways, the year 1963 posed a turning point for the progression of women's rights in the United States. President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act into law, effectively pledging to end wage gender-based discrimination in the American workplace. Five months earlier, Betty Friedan's seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*, caused a stir with its forceful assertions of female relevance beyond the domestic realm. But just a few weeks prior to Friedan's release, a far less storied event took place at UC San Francisco's Medical Center. *Man and civilization: The Potential of Woman*, the publication accompanying a January 1963 symposium of the same name, featured panel discussions and academic presentations by thirty-four psychologists, physicians, historians, and philosophers, only a handful of whom were female. Chapters like "Women's Intellect" and "The Direction of Feminine Evolution" provide the contemporary reader no shortage of galling insight; despite its provocative intent, the project's import rang insufficient at best and condescending at worst. Still, just in case nostalgia should tempt us towards any spurious feelings of superiority, let's fast forward to 2017— the American wage gap persists, Vice President Mike Pence won't conduct one-on-one meetings with colleagues of the opposite sex, and reproductive justice across the U.S. remains under fire from every imaginable angle.

It is all the more appropriate that Rome Prize recipient Polly Apfelbaum's first show at Alexander Gray Associates, *The Potential of Women*, borrows both its title and central design symbology from the decades-old symposium publication's cover, a stylized graphic illustration by Rudolph deHarek. Her appropriation of this essentialist feminine image, denoted as such by the suggestion of a bob haircut, signals a further call to equity while contemplating the scope of modern identity politics itself. The gallery's first floor contains a plethora of deHarek-interpretive gouache tessellations, all *Untitled* (2017). These polychromatic pieces, heavily indebted to Albers, function dually as color studies and feminist commentaries unto themselves. Apfelbaum's surprisingly varied paint application and seemingly endless shade pairings reinforce her move to pluralize the show's title - womanhood is a personal, diversified experience, and can't be represented by a single icon. The act of patterning heads should amplify this communal aesthetic, but instead, an eerie vacancy reigns, steeping the viewer in unexpected, creepy quiet. A play on agency and its depiction begins to emerge, the complicating forces of which battle on a larger stage in the gallery upstairs.

The show's centerpiece, on the second floor, *The Potential of Women* (2017), takes the form of an immersive installation that incorporates indigenous Zapotec rugs and a fleet of clay "portraits"- small-scale, two-dimensional slabs fired in a dazzling array of hues and textures. Shoeless viewers are invited to step on carpets emblazoned with deHarek's motif, and his original color scheme, orange and pink, is repeated in panoramic wall stripes framing the horizontal ceramic hang. The results allude to Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, but eschew her latent didacticism in favor of a murky, muted ambiguity. Apfelbaum has lent the environment an ineffable religious ethos, but the viewer's physical relationship with the space feels less like one of beholding than cold archaeological inspection. Each portrait invites one-to-one study, and their gorgeous inscrutability further abstracts onlookers from both artists' principal insignia. We are made complicit in reifying this nameless woman's erasure - she exists underfoot, she is reproduced and condensed, she is everything, nothing and no one all at once. In quite literal terms, she cannot speak for herself. Apfelbaum toys gently with this irony, but never goes for the throat. *The Potential of Women* stops short of pointing fingers, preferring to enshrine social progression's endemic haziness in timeless material form. At Apfelbaum's expert behest, the viewer is rendered actor and subject, and we are reminded again that true equality has a long way to go.

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