

How One Artist's Trash (Really) Became Another Artist's Treasure

[nytimes.com/2018/09/05/t-magazine/art/polly-apfelbaum.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/t-magazine/art/polly-apfelbaum.html)

As told to Emily Spivack

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The artist Polly Apfelbaum in her New York studio. Credit Matthew Novak

In this series for T, Emily Spivack, the author of Worn Stories, interviews creative types about their most prized possessions. The artist Polly Apfelbaum has had over 60 solo exhibitions so far during her four-decade career, and has two shows opening this fall: one in Vienna at Belvedere 21, and another at Ikon in Birmingham, England. Here, she tells the story of “The Dripper,” a sculpture by a family member which has become a permanent fixture in her New York studio.

Eleanor Harris, a relative of mine by marriage, might have been the first real artist I came in contact with. She was bohemian, a child of the '20s. She wore pants! She kind of had the look of Lee Krasner. She lived in Minneapolis and had shows at the Walker Art Center and the Art Institute of Chicago.

So many women artists at that point in history were overlooked, so to be a female artist not living in a major city who was showing work was quite interesting.

Every time we visited my grandparents in Minneapolis from the farmhouse outside of Philadelphia where I grew up, my mother took me to see Eleanor. Eleanor would take us into her studio to show us what she was working on. It was filled with all kinds of materials and she would always give me something, like a piece of lace. Each thing she gave me I treasured. Every visit was truly magical.



Apfelbaum's prized possession, a sculpture made by a family member from Champagne

packaging.CreditMatthew Novak

Years later, my mother was visiting Minneapolis and wanted to show her husband Eleanor's house. Eleanor had just passed away but her son was at the house, about to sell it, and told my mother to take anything. She chose "The Dripper" for me, thinking of my early work, hand-dyed fabric that also drips.

"The Dripper" is part of a collection of bottle sculptures that were high up on a shelf in Eleanor's studio. They were Dadaesque, each one a critique on something. They were made from cardboard packing materials used for champagne — this one says, "French Champagne Packaging." She was making collages out of everyday objects. And I've never thought about it before, but it probably would have been exotic for Eleanor, drinking French Champagne.

There was something mysterious about her that sparked something in me. I'm so lucky to have this piece that shows her wit and ingenuity. I keep "The Dripper" in my studio in New York. It's sort of a mascot.

This interview has been edited and condensed.