

Polly Apfelbaum review – a trip into a technicolour dreamscape

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4 / 5 stars 4 out of 5 stars.



Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

Don your slippers: the American artist beckons you into an extraterrestrial landscape of vibrant ceramics, immersive installations and patterned paintings



  A planet with an orbit of pottery ... Waiting for the UFOs (a space set between a landscape and a bunch of flowers)
by Polly Apfelbaum. Photograph: Stuart Whipps/Ikon Gallery

In 1979, British singer-songwriter Graham Parker was “waiting for the UFOs” in his song of the same name. He stands on the edge of an endless American landscape, staring at the stars, waiting for that magical moment to connect with another world. Polly Apfelbaum combines the song title with René Magritte’s poetic definition of a garden for the name of her latest exhibition at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham: Waiting for the UFOs (a space set between a landscape and a bunch of flowers).

Just as Parker stares into space, Apfelbaum stands on the threshold of Ikon and imagines what wonderful colours and concepts can inhabit that gap between seeing and believing. She views the gallery as a vast landscape, ripe to be filled with her works and the visiting public. The wait is over for Apfelbaum: her extraterrestrial visitors have landed in the form of technicolour ceramics, immersive installations and patterned paintings.



Right on target: Polly Apfelbaum, *Aquarius* (2018). Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London

Born in Pennsylvania in 1955, the American artist – whose collectors include MoMA, the Whitney and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – is fond of site-specific works involving giant rugs and vibrant coloured walls that create a unique environment for her visitors. Apfelbaum admits to being intrigued by “space, obsession and otherness” – interests she brings by the bucketload to Ikon.

In the first gallery, a giant version of Gilbert Baker’s LGBT Rainbow Flag stands proud. A central dividing wall has been reinterpreted as a canvas and Apfelbaum has painted over the eight stripes with their original meaning. It feels celebratory to step into a space awash with bold colour and read the words sexuality, life, healing, sunlight, nature, art, serenity and spirit. The flag is flanked by 140 ceramic plates with a Kenneth Noland-inspired target motif. Each plate is positioned on a line of orange and yellow paint that runs in a band around the wall of the gallery – as if the flag is a planet with an orbit of pottery.

These works set the tone for the rest of the show and reveal Apfelbaum’s obsession with certain patterns and colourways. In the upstairs gallery, her target formation reappears in 77 paintings, three large tapestries and an installation of paper flowers. Rainbow colours jump off the floor and scale the walls – particularly in *Halfpipe*, where oversized painted pride stripes run down the walls and join a rug that spans the length of the room.

Everything has been produced in response to Ikon’s space. More than 50 coloured ceramic beads hang from a beam by carefully spaced, individual black threads. The vertical black lines mirror the window frame, which reflects the sharp stripes in *Halfpipe*. The bead installation is repeated twice more in the gallery, guiding the eye around the room from string, to frame, to painting and back again.

Apfelbaum’s main concern is how we experience being in the gallery, how we move from work to work – she even provides slippers for visitors to walk on the rugs. She is eager to point out that the rich vibrancy of the fluorescent pink doesn’t replicate properly digitally – this is not an

exhibition to see via Instagram. It is, of course, temporary: much of the work is painted straight onto the walls, which will become another artist's playground on 19 November. Apfelbaum's UFOs are earthbound for now, but that flash of light across the sky can't last forever.

At Ikon Gallery, Birmingham until 18 November.