

Polly Apfelbaum's 'Waiting for the UFOs' lands at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

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Polly Apfelbaum's exhibit "Waiting for the UFOs (a space set between landscape and a bunch of flowers)" takes visitors to [Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art](#) out of this world.

On the right side of the gallery is a 32-foot painting shining with powerful words, posing as simplistic artwork yet probing progressive conversation. On the left is an exhibit-ready reality filled with colorful décor and careful detail.

Apfelbaum, an internationally renowned New York-based artist, kicked off the museum's 25th anniversary year in January with the exhibit, which runs through April 28. She knows how to work a room, and she does so in color with fabrics, paintings, murals and ceramics. Ceramic tiles and beads — a nod to post-war American art — line the immersive space.

Kansas City Spaces: You travel the world setting up exhibits. Does it ever get any easier?

Polly Apfelbaum: That's an interesting question. No, it doesn't get any easier; I just kind of have to get into the zone. Back in April, I visited (Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art) to get a feel for the architecture. I always ask that they bring down the walls in order for me to really see the space. Working in a new gallery is like building a giant sketchbook.

KCS: Your work is very colorful. How else would you describe your art?

PA: There's usually a pop-cultural reference in my work, and a lot of times, a social and historical one, too. I love the idea that my work is experiential. It's not about doing a show and ending there. The importance of the installation is learning about the work. I keep wanting the journey — terrible phrase 'the journey,' but I love the idea. On the plane here I got so excited thinking 'I can't wait to see this.'

KCS: Often when people think of art, they look to the walls. But you take us in all different directions. How do you visualize in order to get the finished product you want?

PA: It's a hybrid between art and physicality. If there is something that's different about my work and other people's work, it's the fact that you physically feel it. Right now, I'm very interested in the idea that when you come into the space, for instance with the rugs, you can be on the rug. I've walked into my shows in New York City and seen people casually sitting on my rugs and thought to myself 'You're sitting on a painting!' I like this idea of people slowing down and enjoying the space. This different experience of how people look at art and how they physically feel it, is important to me.

KCS: In "Waiting for the UFOs," you chose to make Gilbert Baker's original 1978 rainbow flag a focal point. Why?

PA: One thing I see in every town I go to is the gay flag, and it always makes me happy. Everything is based around this idea of color and meaning. For instance, the pink and another color that we use were in the original flag, but they took them out, and now, they are wanting to include new colors. In the original flag, you never really see the words behind the colors, but I love that through this, you can see a color and the thinking behind it. So, I thought it was really interesting to do that because it has culture. It's a wall, but also a sculpture.

KCS: *Does any color stand out to you in particular?*

PA: Oh, it's the pink. It's a color pulled out of the original flag, and I wanted to put it back in. I work with weavers in Oaxaca, Mexico and it's a difficult color to get, but it's just so beautiful. Also, when you think of the history of pink in fashion and surrealist Elsa Schiaparelli's shocking pink, it's a color that doesn't behave.

KCS: *Graham Parker, who sang the 1979 song "Waiting for the UFOs," came to your opening at The Ikon Gallery in England. Did you plan that?*

PA: Oh my gosh — that was incredible! The title "Waiting for the UFOs" is from a Graham Parker song. I've done a lot of song titles, but this hasn't happened before. The director of education at Ikon called him up and he said yes! He thought it was so weird — so why not! He curated a playlist for the opening. He's a lovely man, and we have since become buddies. His performance was so meaningful to me on a lot of different levels.