

# Art in America

## Polly Apfelbaum

NEW YORK,  
at Alexander Gray Associates

by David Ebony



View of Polly Apfelbaum's exhibition "The Potential of Women," 2017, at Alexander Gray Associates.

A tone of whimsy, eccentricity, and pop irony permeated "The Potential of Women," a colorful and engaging exhibition of recent work by Polly Apfelbaum. The New York-based artist is well known for elaborate installations featuring small pieces of hand-dyed and cut fabric that she typically arranges on the floor in complex, abstract designs radiating out from the gallery walls, corners, or support columns. Textiles remain central to her most recent endeavors, but ceramics and paintings on paper have also become prominent features.

"The Potential of Women" was inspired by an image of an abstracted female head created in 1963 by the American modernist graphic designer Rudolph de Harak (1924-2002). The hard-edge, logo-like motif consists of an oblong head with two black dots for eyes and a helmetlike black hairdo. The original design was used on the cover of *The Potential of Woman*, a book of essays by authors who participated in a 1963 San Francisco symposium on the emancipation of women and the shifting dynamics of gender roles. Though regarded as progressive at the time, the event featured a discussion of the patronizing notion that one day women would make important contributions to society. For Apfelbaum, the book provided not only a unifying visual motif for the show but a conceptual one as well, since it subtly links her work to a broad range of feminist issues and themes.

The street-level gallery was filled with medium-size gouaches repeating the schematic head image in grid patterns and various high-key tones. Apfelbaum derived her palette from the studies in *Interaction of Color*, Josef Albers's seminal theoretical work on design and perception published the same year as *The Potential of Woman*.

The main, upper-level gallery featured a striking installation. Four wide horizontal bands in pink, red-orange, and white were painted along the walls, matching the palette of the book cover. Viewers were required to remove their shoes or wear cotton foot coverings to walk on the four large carpets that covered most of the gallery floor. Woven in Oaxaca, Mexico, by Zapotec artisans, the panels are emblazoned with the de Harak head. In working with these artisans, Apfelbaum alludes to the profound influence that Zapotec weavers had on Anni Albers when she and Josef first visited Oaxaca in 1936.

A welcome respite from the precisely rendered motif, more than seventy funky handmade glazed ceramic wall reliefs, rather like shaped abstracted canvases, were hung along the central white band on the walls, just a few inches apart from one another. These abject-looking, irregularly shaped platters, which the artist produced over the past three years, could pay homage to artists like Richard Tuttle and Lynda Benglis. They also introduced a welcome absurdist element into the show. While the works are completely abstract, their titles bear proper names. *Joanne* has a richly textured surface covered with pink and white blobs, bifurcated by a line of green; *Myra*, an elongated composition in red, is punctured by three perfectly round holes.

On some level, the installation begs comparison to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), but in contrast to the overt feminist iconography featured in that work, Apfelbaum's ceramic pieces appear as painterly abstractions. Nevertheless, their titles make reference to individuals, and, hung in close proximity, they suggest a community, or perhaps a symposium. Indeed, in "The Potential of Women," Apfelbaum proposed a new kind of gathering, echoing the one documented in the book but with a stronger, more knowing, and more playful feminist agenda.