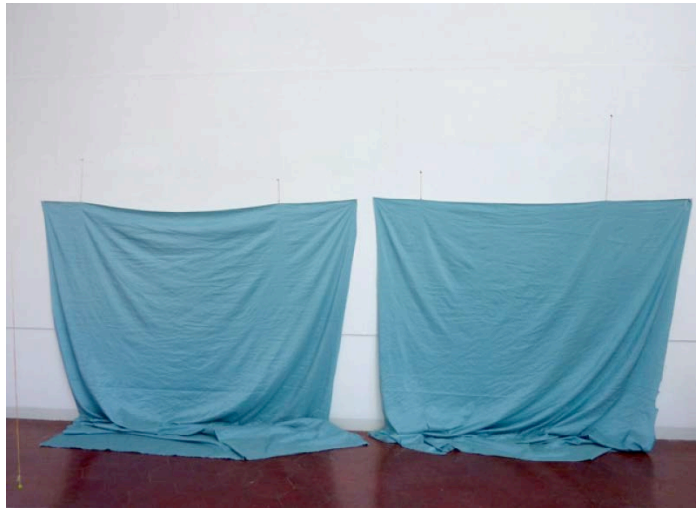


Polly Apfelbaum with Stephanie Buhmann
September 20, 2013
Wall Street, New York



Color Stations, 2013, synthetic taffeta, string, beads, dimensions variable.
Installation: American Academy in Rome.

Stephanie Buhmann: In 2012, you won the prestigious Rome Prize and we are meeting just a few weeks after you returned from spending a year at the American Academy in Rome (summer 2012-2013). I would like to talk about the works installed in your studio now, the ceramics and large wall pieces. Do these stem largely from your time abroad?

Polly Apfelbaum: Yes, everything you see is from my year at the American Academy. The wall pieces and the beads exist together as "Color Stations," the series' title.

SB: The "Color Stations" can be described as large wall hangings made of fabric. These alone make for an impressive body of work, which seems to have allowed for a lot of variety.

PA: The "Color Stations" loosely reference the Stations of the Cross. I was able to get 21 colors of a certain synthetic taffeta from a fabric store in Rome. I think of them as large-scale monochromatic paintings, both minimal and Baroque at the same time. The arrangements related largely to the available wall space in my studio in Rome.

SB: What strikes me right away is that they reveal a strong focus on the subtleties of textural volume. There is a lot of drapery involved here that could relate to Italian Baroque sculpture and painting.

PA: Not so much to sculpture but painting, especially to Fra Angelico's "Annunciation". When you walk into the monastery of San Marco in Florence and see the "Annunciation" you might as well drop dead; it's an amazing painting. Something else that inspired me was the fact that most Roman Catholic churches have the Stations of the Cross placed at intervals along the sidewalls of the nave. It struck me that this organization is in fact an installation that you follow. I loved the inherent idea of color and movement. Meanwhile, in contemporary terms, I was thinking to myself: "Who do I love?" I thought of Agnes Martin and about trying to combine my love of abstraction with all I was experiencing in Italy and the idea of the spiritual in Art. This was something I had never

addressed in my work, as I'm not a religious person. I am not Catholic, but I was taking inspiration from looking at art in churches and monasteries. I was looking at art that was created for religious purposes. I was also interested in spaces like San Marco, where each monks' cells had a painting in it and the monks would have a certain amount of time to contemplate each painting. I was trying to transfer that experience of contemplation and process into my studio.

SB: You can experience a sense of spirituality in works that are not tied to a certain religious, historic or cultural context of course.

PA: Yes, and that is something that was so foreign to me, but also wonderful to discover. Italy pushed me to look at things differently.

SB: And yet there also is a hint of elegant grandeur. I like the idea of viewing the interior of a church as a curated installation, to ponder what decisions were made to shape the overall experience of the space both conceptually and emotionally. It is theatrical in that way. So to clarify, was it your intention to make as many "Color Stations" as there are Stations of the Cross?

PA: No, one doesn't have to make that connection. What was important to me was that my studio became an installation in itself and that I could let it be open to constant change. The "Color Stations" started on the wall and floor and now they are just on the wall. I had the time in Rome to figure out what was innate to them. Also, because of the extreme light in my studio in Rome, there was a lot going on with the fabric; it really glowed. The fabric actually felt alive, and depending on the time of day it had many tones and moods.



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SB: It sounds like you created your own kind of monastery in a sense.

PA: That's a great way of putting it. It was! At the Academy, you are part of a community, but my studio was my

beautiful cell. I was trying to channel Fra Angelico into it.

SB: Meanwhile, your choice of materials in this series condones a sense of physical flexibility.

PA: It's funny to me that my "Color Stations" are made of textiles, because I didn't come to Rome expecting to work with fabrics. The interest in fluidity of form has always been important in my work, and at this point it is still very relevant. Simply moving the fabrics to the wall was a big jump for me. The beads brought a different physicality to the work, partially inspired by all of the hanging decorations in the churches and rosary beads. When I had the open studio at the Academy, I made everyone beads and necklaces. The beads started out on the wall, then I hung them from the ceiling, away from the wall, and they came into their own. The beads also guide the viewer through the space in a similar way that pillars would in a church making you aware of the architecture.

SB: This movement of the "Color Stations" shifts the rhythm of the installation's palette and reflection of light. Let's talk about how the light in Rome, which is so different from Downtown New York, where you are based much of your time, impacted you?

PA: In Rome, I had the most beautiful light-filled studio. It had a large skylight, windows all around, and a balcony; it was just a jewel box full of light. At first I thought, "Oh my God, can I make art in this space?" It was very different from my New York studio, which I've had since 1978 and which is a floor studio with one brick wall and just 3 windows in the front of the space. The iridescent fabric was my cheap magic in the space. These particular fabrics were available in very "Roman colors" – terra cotta, pinks and oranges, which was a nice coincidence. There are strict laws about the color you can paint the buildings in Rome, therefore there really is a particular Roman palette to the city.

SB: Your work has always embraced color so light must be a strong focus in general.

PA: For me, light, color and tactility go hand in hand. There is a sensuousness that's unique to Renaissance color. I went to Rome thinking I would explore the patterned geometric mosaic floors made by the Roman Cosmati family in the 12th and 13th Century. I did go out of my way to see as many floor mosaics as I possibly could, but what I came back with instead was thinking about the Minimalists and color.

SB: Minimalism does seem like an unusual reference when discussing your work.

PA: I was searching. I was looking for beauty in simple gestures and everyday materials. The fact that fabric and installation are involved again is curious to me as it had sort of left my work. The last exhibition I had before going to Rome featured works that involved Plasticine and glitter. I like to think of the "Color Stations" also as installation and a hybrid of painting, an idea I've been working with for a long time.

SB: Going back to your contemplation of the Minimalists, I wonder if your use of line in the "Color Stations" is a key link. In each of these works, the color and the unique folds of the fabric are accentuated by a subtle vertical line, which is not drawn but comes in the shape of a delicately suspended string.

PA: These lines, which come in different colors and lengths, are in fact my homage to Fred Sandback, whom I knew and loved. But I also see a relation to worry beads, rosaries and ritual in general. I also felt that they were like little straps and very clothing-like.

SB: They remind me of eyelashes; there's such intimate delicacy in the detail they add to the overall composition.

PA: People would come to the studio in Rome and they didn't notice the strings right away. When I got back to NY, I was wondering: "Are they part of the work?" Sure, they could go by themselves, but they've always been with the Stations. I hung them up in the studio, and I had to figure that out, but in the end the strings and wall hangings are like friends.

SB: I really enjoy them, because they add a sense of dimension and weight. There also is this interesting friction between the large gesture of the drapery and the fine vertical strings, which move when you walk close by them.



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PA: That's it.

SB: Did you bring a lot of materials to Rome?

PA: No. In fact, before I got to Rome I had made the rule that I would not bring anything I had ever worked with before. And for the first six months, I didn't go anywhere near a fabric shop. I ended up finding incredible things at my favorite flea market in Porta Portese. There was a man who sold old stationary stuff that was just incredible. To visit that market became part of my Sunday routine.

SB: Let's talk about the ceramics you made in Rome, which are very different in nature.

PA: I took a ceramics class near the Coliseum. Whereas in the "Color Stations" I removed the sense of hand, ceramics are very hands on. I liked having the two different ways of working and I liked having this very tactile, hands-on making craft, in contrast to the simple, found gesture of the "Color Stations."

SB: As a career artist with a long independent studio practice it must have been interesting to suddenly make works in a communal classroom context again?

PA: It was very relaxed and very Italian; you sit around a table, drink wine and there were people who do a lot of different things, not necessarily professional artists, it was a good mix. The teacher only taught one adult class, from 8pm – 12am, so you could imagine the space. Surrounded by wonderful kids ceramics, they make the best things. There were all these different clays and glazes and I just went with it. I loved it.

SB: It also must have been interesting for you, who works so freely with color, to get a palette set by someone else, depending on the materials available.

PA: I liked that for a change. Also, ceramics is full of surprises especially in the glazing. My New York ceramics are definitely different from my Rome ceramics. But they all reveal my interest in color and texture. In a way, all my ceramics became the wall.

SB: What do you mean by "they became the wall"?

PA: Well, maybe I should say that the ceramics became vertical. I really feel that I have a flat sensibility, even though I am in the sculptural world. It's honestly more my nature to work horizontally and show the work horizontally, but like the color stations things were moving on to the walls. So for me to think of the ceramics vertically was also a change.

SB: Something between the ethereal and the concrete.

PA: Exactly.



SB: It is wonderful to see where your time in Rome took you in the studio, but it is something that has to come organically and it's something that cannot be planned beforehand. However, did you have the ambition to come up with a complete body of work during your year at the Academy or was it more about finding a new path that you could pursue after settling back in New York?

PA: The best advice I got was from former fellows was to just do everything, go on every walk, go to every lecture, and "collect nuts"; to give myself over to the experience of Rome and Italy. To spend the year looking was the most important thing. I liked the idea of a new path, but that's easier said than done and I learned that you

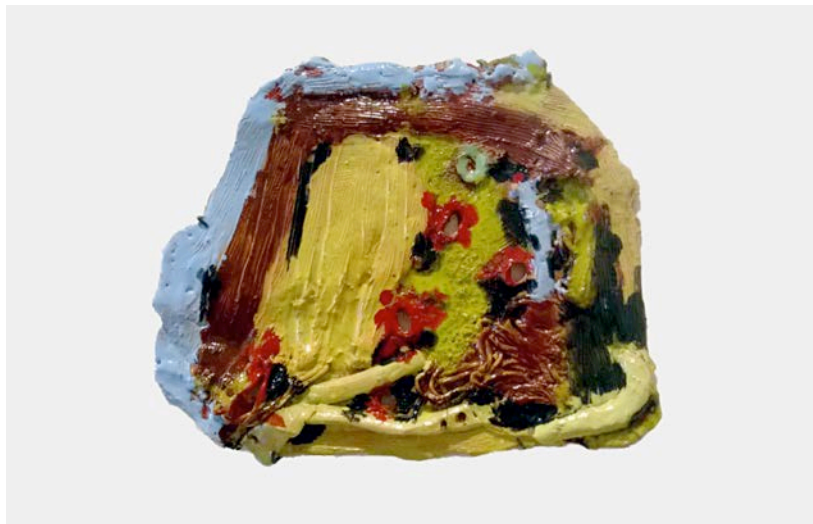
can't force it.

SB: Did you think about how the audience might respond to the pieces you were making, especially as it is somewhat unusual in the context of the work you are known for?

PA: I suspended that thought for the year...

SB: It must be impossible to try to create something that right away can match all these new impressions and experiences.

PA: It is impossible. I also felt very lucky having gone to the Academy at this point in my life. I think there was less pressure, because I had no deadlines. That was very freeing. It was very special to be part of this truly supportive community.



Margutta, 2013

SB: It is also not easy for everyone to outline a creative process, which is inherently unpredictable.

PA: For me, the Academy was a great opportunity to meet people, who do very different work from me, such as classicists and archaeologists and go with the flow.

SB: Due to the nature of the program you have to share some of your Rome experiences with others right away, but ultimately it must have been an individual journey.

PA: Everyone there was incredibly supportive, both in studio time and social time. I think the Academy is about sharing, it's a very important part of the community. I also took some wonderful trips in Italy – Ravenna, Florence, Sicily, and tracking the Piero della Francescas. This is where the “Color Stations” book comes in - it serves as a time capsule by including all of my photographs from that year.

SB: Are the images organized chronologically?

PA: Not at all. The idea came quickly. I had an intern download all the images from my camera and computer -

about 1500 altogether. There are a lot of crappy pictures, and an index at the end. It was nick-named "the giant" it is a pad 9" x 9". It also documents my studio practice.

SB: The book captures a sense of immediacy. It's a slice of time that has not been analyzed yet.

PA: It really was a journal and a great thing to have filled with souvenirs. The whole year was a souvenir.

SB: What are you focusing on now?

PA: Since I've gotten back I've been trying to get organized. I had a survey show at ICA ten years ago. It's interesting being away and then thinking about all of that disparate work after that – I've come up with this title "After the Stain," because I am not staining work anymore, and the staining was so important in the early work. For me, the new work comes out of Italy; it is monochromatic and shows my interest in Abstraction. I wanted to see this work in my studio, that's why you see what you see now. It will be interesting what I do next. Right now, it's up for grabs.

SB: You had a deluge of new experiences and visual input and then came up with something that is serene, calm and tranquil. In that sense the Rome works embody a distillation of the many different things you absorbed. It must be a challenge to now bring the Rome works back to New York and see them (and have others see them) out of context.

PB: You do what you do, and it was such a delight for me to have a year with my work. I changed it at my own pace, and got to spend some time just sitting and thinking and looking in my studio. As opposed to New York, it was more about making an installation for myself in a beautiful space in Rome.