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JOURNAL SENTINEL

Apfelbaum and Westfall unpack abstraction at The Suburban



Courtesy Shane McAdams
Polly Apfelbaum and Stephen Westfall at The Suburban in Riverwest.

The Suburban, a gallery that's recently moved from a garage-like structure in the Chicago suburbs to a white cube fashioned from a former laundromat in Riverwest, has rolled out its second show, a collaboration between two very established and respected art world practitioners: Polly Apfelbaum and Stephen Westfall.

Apfelbaum is known best for her "Fallen Paintings" – dyed arrangements of pieces of fabric that have spilled out luxuriously across the floors of institutions the world over. Westfall's large-scale geometric abstractions applied to walls and canvases find extraordinary variation within what would seem to be very narrow parameters. By looking to sources as wide ranging as Roman terrazzo flooring and modernist skylines, he

has managed make profound statements about the language of painting with the sparest of vocabularies.

Both Apfelbaum and Westfall share an interest in the structural integrity of formal art making and how simple contextual tweaks can utterly reposition entire lexicons of form. That's why, as long time friends and sounding boards for each other's ideas, it's curious that they have been rare collaborators inside a white cube, a fact that becomes all the more surprising after one experiences their compelling choreography in the current exhibition.

Apfelbaum's colorful, walnut-sized ceramic beads hang from black nylon strings like planets in a grade school diorama of the solar system. It's a departure from her most familiar work, but not unexpected given her willingness to experiment. Her recent understated triumph at the Lumber Room in Portland, Oregon tossed off expectation by filling the cathedral-like space with large, flowing, richly colored wall hangings and hanging beads. That exhibition felt somewhat airy and celestial, where her work here seems more grounded. Even comical. The hand-fashioned, knucky beads hover statically at eye-level throughout the Suburban's interior, in biting contrast to the perfectly plumb, evenly spaced, sleek, vertically rising suspenders. It's both a graceful visual statement and somehow an art world version of a Vaudevillian fat guy/skinny guy routine: the Abbot and Costello of the Bead Belt.

In addition to playing it straight, the strings create an accidental architecture within the gallery, parceling it into rows that subtly direct traffic flow. As with installations by the minimalist installation artist Fred Sandback,

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viewers find themselves ducking and shimmying around the most insubstantial and delicate textile barriers as if they were studs, joists and I-beams.

Apfelbaum's architecture naturally steers the viewer toward the walls where Westfall's woven rugs hang. Their geometric patterns echo that of his paintings, and anyone who knows his work in advance will recognize the colorful combinations of wedges, diamonds, zigzags and chevrons. But given the medium here, associations with Navajo and Hopi rugs are unavoidable. Westfall in fact collaborated with a traditional craftsman in Oaxaca, Mexico to assist in the production of the work for the show — specifically, a master weaver of master weavers named Geronimo. One wonders how much Westfall's imagery is directly influenced by traditional motifs, or is simply a continuation of the formal vocabulary from recent works on canvas. Most likely both, given his omnivorous interests. Still, it's satisfying, knowing his thoughts about language, to consider the possibility that the similarities are a convergent evolution. Imagine: two extraordinarily unique and divergent modes of making (hard-edged formal abstraction and indigenous decorative patterning) arriving at the same optical coordinates, governed by completely unique meanings and purposes. How many traditional Anasazi weavers braiding a signature diamond pattern into a rug in 1000 AD could have imagined the intellectualized rhetoric formalist art critics in the 20th century would apply to the same visual motifs?

Both Apfelbaum and Westfall practice in a world that has inherited the ghosts of essentialist, formal art theory, but have remained agnostic in the face of it. They've sought breadth rather than height, continuing to search and evolve kaleidoscopically over the years, sharing an abiding faith in the potential for abstraction to unpack more significant truths. But ultimately it is self-awareness, openness and expansiveness that has grounded their work in this collaboration, even as it soars in spite of itself.

Westfall and Apfelbaum manage to do visually what the Suburban has aimed to do socially and institutionally by trying to give the exclusive and elevated art world some needed grounding and humility. We'll see how that goes, but this is a fine sophomore effort.

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