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Art Reviews

A Supersaturated Return to the Spirit of the Punk Era

May 10, 2002 | DAVID PAGEL | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

A gigantic Technicolor Rorschach blot covers every square inch of the floor at Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, forcing viewers to stand in the doorway and gawk like club-goers who can't get past the velvet rope. On seeing New York artist Polly Apfelbaum's "Gun Club," titled after an L.A. punk band from the 1980s, your first thought might very well be: "Forget this, I don't need any more art that's so enthralled with itself that it leaves no room for me."

But hot on the heels of this knee-jerk reaction follows the impulse to keep looking. It's irresistible--and a lot stronger than the desire to walk away.

Part of the draw of Apfelbaum's work (like a moth to a flame) is the volume and intensity of its supersaturated colors. What keeps you there is its wild riot of shapes, textures and tints. Their sheer abundance makes your head spin, but the deliberate composition makes you see method in the madness.

On the 400-square-foot floor, which is painted the same icy white as the walls and ceiling, Apfelbaum has laid out more than 1,000 oddly shaped swatches of crushed stretch velvet. Some are the size of dimes. Others are as big as T-shirts. Many resemble the silhouettes of chains, whose links are thick enough to pull tractors or as delicate as finely fashioned necklaces.

She determines the shape of each piece by dripping and pouring various measures of fabric dye onto long bolts of the material. When the stains dry, she cuts them out with a scissors, forming circular shapes that have the presence of glowing halos, tiny targets and cells undergoing mitosis. The longer you look, the more likely it is you'll start seeing things--fat caterpillars, pudgy bumblebees and coral snakes stretching themselves out to maximum length.

Apfelbaum has composed her work on a diagonal axis. It's nearly symmetrical but filled with too many irregularities to be a mirror image of itself.

It's impossible to say just what "Gun Club" is. A two-dimensional sculpture that does double-duty as a dysfunctional rug? A multi-part painting whose position and materials push the boundaries of the medium? An installation that cherishes its privacy? Or a fusion of drawing and collage in which crisscrossing lines trace larger-than-life gestures?

Conventional descriptions fall short, calling forth more poetic interpretations. It could be a liquid rainbow that crash-landed, splashing puddles of vibrant color in every direction. Or tie-dye outfits, autumn leaves, flying carpets and melting ice-cream cones.

Apfelbaum explicitly links her work to dreams by gluing more stained circles of velvet to a bedsheet and six pillowcases, which hang on the walls outside the main installation. Whatever the case, you don't need to be a privileged insider (or a rocket scientist) to get it. There's a world of difference between literally entering a work and doing so in your imagination. The first is often beyond your control, but the latter leaves you free to do whatever you want. This do-it-yourself spirit, which fueled punk in its heyday, comes back for a rip-roaring encore in Apfelbaum's drop-dead installation.

Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 525-1755, through May 25. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

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Like the Real World Only Crisper

If the world suddenly turned into a cartoon, Monique van Genderen would be its court painter or perhaps its painter laureate. The artist, who earned a master's of fine arts at CalArts 11 years ago, wouldn't even have to apply for the job. Her works would simply be recognized as those that best combine the formal rigor of classic abstraction with the snap of animated graphics and the dreamy romance of high fashion.

At Sandroni-Rey Gallery, the colors are more luscious than those in the real world, and they change right before your eyes. Everything is a little crisper than usual, like L.A. mornings after nighttime rainstorms or those adrenaline-fueled moments when every blade of grass crackles with the clarity of a vivid hallucination.

In cartoons, anything is possible because the rules do not apply. The same goes for glossy fashion magazines, which are an adult version of comic strips. A similar feeling is embodied by Van Genderen's playfully commanding pieces, which never let you forget that the best fantasies ambush the rational mind with their deceptive simplicity.

Technically speaking, her works are collages. Each begins as a smoothly sanded panel ranging from 1 to 7 feet on a side. After applying an even coat of bright white paint, she adheres oddly shaped sections of vinyl film to it, sometimes overlapping translucent layers and other times cutting them to fit together.

Most are reflective and do funny things to the light that bounces off them. Like hyperactive (or telepathic) chameleons, they change colors when seen from different positions.

The film Van Genderen uses is the same material museum and gallery wall labels are made of. In the old days, sign painters painted this information right on the wall. Today, it's designed on a computer, printed on adhesive sheets and stuck to the wall. When the show is over, the information is peeled off and tossed in the trash.

Van Genderen knows the ins and outs of this material. At her day job, she's a partner in a company that makes such specialized signs. She made her early works by cobbling together scraps left over from contract jobs. Her new works include vast expanses of vinyl, which flaunt her compositional skills and talents as a colorist. In some, boulder-shaped forms play off squiggly insect silhouettes. In others, dazzling sunset colors provide tacky backdrops for elegant arrangements. It's a rich mix that makes odd bedfellows of Emerson Woelffer's painted collages from the 1950s and the latest glossy advertisements from Prada and Gucci.

Sandroni-Rey Gallery, 1224 Abbot Kinney Blvd., Venice, (310) 392-3404, through June 1. Closed Sunday through Tuesday.

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Some Things Old, Some Things New

A fascinating exhibition at Acme Gallery juxtaposes Chinese antiquities from the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (which date from 960 to 1911) with contemporary art from L.A. and New York. Organized by antiquities dealer Chip Tom, "Strolling Through an Ancient Shrine and Garden" is a treasure trove of gorgeously proportioned furniture, vigorously chiseled sculptures and a handsome selection of decorative objects.

It includes a scholar's rock, a fishbowl and an incense burner that fills the gallery with its sweet scent. Functional pieces are predominant, with lacquered doors, stone walls, a round window frame and a stylized beam-support. The pristine showroom is transformed into a domestically scaled space that excites all the senses.

The ancient artifacts outnumber the contemporary works, most of which function as modest yet highly refined accents. For example, small works on paper, panel and canvas by Ruth Root, Katie Grinnan and Laura Owens play off the weighty solidity and weathered splendor of the antiquities by adding just the right touch of delicacy. Kevin Young and Michael Norton do something similar with color. Their abstract paintings provide a shot of high-keyed brightness to the muted organic palette of the Chinese pieces.

A few of the contemporary works depict vaguely Asian subjects. But they pale in comparison to the real thing.

The most felicitous juxtapositions are between pieces that seem to have nothing in common. Monique Prieto's wall-size painting and a 500-year-old sculpture of a reclining lion are a match made in heaven. Likewise, Uta Barth's blurry photograph and a lacquered wine table look as if they were made for each other. In both pairs, simplicity and sophistication commingle, delighting the eye and thrilling the mind.

Contemporary art, this exhibition demonstrates, is much better at providing decorative pleasures than teaching history lessons. The show also makes you wonder if the contemporary works will have the longevity of the ancient ones, which casts a bittersweet shadow over the show's enticing display of exceptional things.

Acme Gallery, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 857-5942, through May 25. Closed Sundays and Mondays.