

An Artist's Colorful Exhibit Makes The Kemper Kansas City's Place For 'Waiting For The UFOs'

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By Laura Spencer



Polly Apfelbaum installs ceramic platters on the wall for 'Waiting for the UFOs (a space set between a landscape and a bunch of flowers)' at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

The artist [Polly Apfelbaum](#) doesn't just want people to look at her work. She wants them to be in it.

Apfelbaum is a major artist based in New York, with pieces in the Museum of Modern Art as well as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Dallas Museum of Art. She also has a relationship with the [Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art](#) that goes back 20 years.

Now, she has returned to Kansas City with colorful ceramics, works on paper and textiles that amount to an extraterrestrial landscape. Some of the pieces are on view for the first time in the United States.

"She's giving you a space to exist within a painting almost. It's like you're kind of coming in and you're just completely absorbed in color," says Erin Dziedzic, the Kemper's director of curatorial affairs.

The title of Apfelbaum's new exhibition, "Waiting for the UFOs (a space set between a landscape and a bunch of flowers)," was inspired, in part, by a Graham Parker song from the 1970s. Apfelbaum says she'd listened to his music years ago, and then heard one of his songs on the radio.

"I heard 'Waiting for the UFOs' and I just thought, 'That's where we are,'" she says with a laugh. "That is so appropriate for now. And that's going to be the title of my next show."

The second part of the title takes surrealist René Magritte's definition of a garden: "a space between a landscape and a bunch of flowers," and also refers to one of Magritte's landscape paintings, "The Plagiarism."

"It's flat, of course — it's a painting — but you walk into a cutout of a landscape," she explains.

Apfelbaum, who started showing her work in the 1980s, describes herself as "an in-between artist," one who works in a space between mediums like painting and sculpture, as well as between the ideas of control and chance.

"A friend said I'm the space between two chairs. It's that in-between space," Apfelbaum says. "And it's also being a hybrid. I think it has a lot to do with material. Between craft, painting, sculpture, installation, there's a lot of space."

Apfelbaum is probably best-known for installations you have to walk carefully around, hundreds of pieces of hand-dyed and cut fabric arranged on the floor, what she calls "fallen paintings."

One such piece, called "Split," is in the Kemper's collection.

"She was working with dyes on fabric then," says Dziedzic, "and using smaller components to build out these kind of velvety pieces that seem to creep and crawl across the floor, spread out into space."

But "Waiting for the UFOs" displays more recent work. It premiered at the Ikon Gallery, in Birmingham, U.K, before traveling to Kansas City, where it's been configured for the Kemper.

During the exhibit's installation, Apfelbaum placed more than a hundred small ceramic platters on one wall, atop of horizontal bands of orange and yellow.

Credit Courtesy of the artist, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, Frith Street Gallery, London and Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Vienna.

There are also larger works in the exhibition, like Apfelbaum's wall-sized version of the 1978 Rainbow Flag, a symbol of LGBT pride. Vivid stripes of color provide backgrounds for the original words in white print: red for "life," blue for "art," purple for "spirit."

"For me, color is about possibility and that flag is about possibility and openness," Apfelbaum says.

And nearly 400 ceramic beads on strings extend from the ceiling.

"They've been made over time, different glazes, and different clays," she says. "That's porcelain, that's colored porcelain, that's terracotta."

The beads hang over several colorful rugs woven by artisans in Oaxaca, Mexico with Apfelbaum designs.

Visitors are invited to walk on them.

"People can come, they can take off their shoes and sit on the work and spend time, and it's kind of contemplative time," Apfelbaum says.

"I like this idea of it's a secular but spiritual space that the museum can have."

Polly Apfelbaum: Waiting for the UFOs (a space set between a landscape and a bunch of flowers) runs through April 28 at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd., Kansas City, Missouri.

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