

Contemporary Art Daily

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Polly Apfelbaum, Isa Melsheimer at Galerie nächst St.
Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder.

In our double exhibition Polly Apfelbaum and Isa Melsheimer are showing new ceramics as well as paper- and textile-based works that highlight the artistic focal points of both artists. After two solo exhibitions at Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder for Polly Apfelbaum and three for Isa Melsheimer, it is their first collaboration. The exhibition owes its title to an encounter on the Appian Way in Rome in 2013 when Polly Apfelbaum was on a scholarship from the American Academy and Isa Melsheimer on a scholarship from the German Academy Villa Massimo. Both had been equally enthralled and captivated by the block paving of the famous road lined with cypress trees and the relics of tombs and graves dating from Ancient Rome. Such was their shared interest in architecture and in ancient and modern ruins that they would subsequently meet up again many times in Rome.

Polly Apfelbaum's works resonate with echoes of Minimal Art, Pop Art, but also PostMinimalism and Appropriation Art, without underscoring the established art canon. Apfelbaum's approach is fundamentally antiauthoritarian, and her specific ability is one of reverse psychology, applied with a sense of humour and a degree of scepticism. Her work combines both high and popular culture, and she sees it as radically provisional, highlighting procedural aspects rather than end results. Her ceramics and her textile- and paper-based works featured at our exhibition are microenvironments, small scale landscapes that vividly evoke the Appian Way, the sky, the vegetation, and the paving stones. Apfelbaum is intrigued by the ancient tradition of ceramics and its craftsmanship, for the time factor that is involved but also the changes wrought during the firing process. The spiral motif is one that has fascinated Apfelbaum since the late 1990s. Unlike Louise Bourgeois, for whom spiral shapes represented control and freedom at the same time, Apfelbaum in her snail works references nature, its emergence and evolution. Snails slowly make their way along a path that is open-ended; inwardly, they symbolise the awareness of

nature from its beginnings; outwardly, its helical evolution.

Isa Melsheimer explores in her work urban habitats and the circumstances under which they are shaped and altered. Arrayed alongside sculptures made of concrete, glass and ceramic are textile-based works and ensembles comprised of living plants. The sculptural works are accompanied by gouache paintings, their imagery overlaid with quotes from genres such as art, architecture, design and pop culture. Melsheimer's new ceramics are hybrid structures made up of the constructed and the organic, as if the plant kingdom had chosen to reclaim buildings and cities. The Appian Way symbolises the transition between the urban and the rural. Melsheimer has studied theories of architecture and urban planning at length, most recently with Metabolism, a Japanese architectural movement of the 1960s that focused on a flexible form of urban planning, both in the air and above water. Like an organic metabolism it was designed to respond and adapt to changes in living circumstances as required. Melsheimer is also interested in the ruins of modern and contemporary architecture that have been left to decay as a result of badly planned urban development. One of her ceramic sculptures references the decaying Macaranã swimming stadium built for the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, which could stand as a sculptural entity, but also as a Roman amphitheatre. The craftsmanship aspect of working with ceramics is as crucial to Isa Melsheimer as it is to Polly Apfelbaum, coupled with the fact that the outcome of the firing process can never be predetermined down to the last detail; in other words, the works continue to undergo change even during the actual production process itself.