

Matthew Singer in conversation with Polly Apfelbaum, Joy Feasley and Jesse Harrod upon the occasion of *Learn but the letters forme(d) by heart, Then soon you'l gain this noble art*^[L]_[SEP]
September 17—October 22, 2022

Matt Singer: I was thinking about that recurring feature in the *New York Times* “Book Review” where a writer is interviewed and the final question is “What three writers dead or alive would you want to invite for a dinner party?” I feel this is quite a bit like that. I've been marveling at each of your work for years now and it's been such a source of delight and fascination.

Centuries ago when I was an undergrad, I studied journalism, but I also studied sociology and what I like to call “semiotics without the jargon.” I still have that journalistic sense with art, specifically. When I encounter a work of art that really fascinates me, I want to know the “who, what, when, where, why, how” aspect of it. I feel that, generally, people find those kinds of entry points helpful when looking and thinking about art. So, while respecting the natural desire to not tell people what to think in a specific way about a work of art, and definitely wanting to retain some mystery about things, when Amy [Adams] suggested having a chat with artists featured in *Learn but the letters forme(d) by heart, Then soon you'l gain this noble art*, the very first thing that came to mind is talking to the three of you, specifically, because of your very overt connections to Pennsylvania German material culture. I want to know about your “origin stories” as they relate to your encounters with Pennsylvania German folk art and material culture, and how it came to be part of your practices.

I'd like to start by asking each of you that question, one by one. Jesse, I thought that maybe we could start with you because your work is newest to me and your particular inspiration is not something that had been on my radar.

Jesse Harrod: Well, I think I probably have the shortest connection with Philadelphia. I think Polly, you went to Tyler [School of Art], is that right?

Polly Apfelbaum: Yeah.

JH: And Joy, you live in Philly or have you left Philly?

Joy Feasley: I'm living in two cities now. Philly and Boston.

JH: Oh wow, okay. I've been in Philly since 2016, but it wasn't really until we moved out to the country near Lambertville, New Jersey, that we went to the Mercer tile museum [the Moravian Pottery & Tile Works Museum, which is nearby in Doylestown, Pennsylvania; Moravian Pottery was established by Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930), and its wares are most often referred to as “Mercer” rather than “Moravian”]. In looking for places within our very limited budget, and with my partner being a carpenter, we had a fixer-upper in mind. We got to see early Pennsylvania architecture—these old houses, a lot of which had Mercer tiles as well as examples of Pennsylvania German stove plates in them, which was a selling point for us. Mercer collected the stove plates and lifted their imagery almost 100% for his tiles.

I had a friend visiting recently who I took on a tour of the museum because you can't go enough times. It's so interesting the way that the women—it's almost all women that guide the tours—say that Mercer was very influenced by these German stove plates. I'm like, “He 100% took that drawing, traced it, and put it on the tile.” When I first saw them a year and a half ago, I was very interested in the origin of those plates. When I was invited to be an artist in residence at the Kohler [John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin], I was like, “How can I think about that aesthetic and that material and drawing in this new material [Harrod typically works in fiber and textiles, while Kohler’s residency program offers opportunities to work in pottery, brass, iron, and enamel] that was completely foreign to me?” I wanted to bring my own aesthetics and interest into this and the historic tradition of this place that I've just moved to. That’s a very simple answer.

MS: It's cogent! And I’m excited to learn about the inspiration you found in Pennsylvania German stove plates, of which I was not much familiar, and from Mercer tiles, of which I’ve been a big fan for decades—they’re all over our house. I knew that much of Mercer’s inspiration came from Pennsylvania German sources, but definitely noticed that the particular figures and motifs I saw on his tiles did not correspond with what I saw in fraktur, which has been a particular academic and personal interest for me. I've always wondered about that disconnect—and now I know the reason for it! Mercer’s Pennsylvania German sources were stove plates, not fraktur.

“I wanted to bring my own aesthetics and interest into this and the historic tradition of this place that I’ve just moved to. That’s a very simple answer.”

—Jesse Harrod



Jesse Harrod, Big Swing, 2022, brass, 15 x 9 3/4 x 1 inches.

JH: There are these compilations of his tiles. I think historically they would've been demonstrations of what you could have in your home and they feel very fraktur-ish. I do feel there is an aesthetic relationship between the stove plates and fraktur, especially with the colors. The images that he was lifting from the plates are also, I think in spirit very...fraktur-ish? Is that a word? Can I make that a word? [Laughs.]

MS: Yeah. I actually think fraktur-isch—with I-S-C-H—would be the German. [Laughs.]

Joy, I've thought about your work a lot over the years and know the work you made after visiting the Ephrata Cloister [a historic site in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, that was the home of a Pennsylvania German pietist sect], *Memorial Picture* [2007, private collection], with the flowering rosebush where, if you looked closely, you could see that there were monogram-type fraktur-ish letters inside. So I'm aware of your connection with fraktur, but I'm happy to have this opportunity to learn more about it, and in your own words.

JF: Ephrata was definitely the first time I saw fraktur, or maybe I had seen some of fraktur at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. But Ephrata was the first time I was really looking at the calligraphy in fraktur. I took calligraphy in school and spent time trying to “learn” fraktur's letters.

I just loved the look of the letters and the old bleed in them. The letters that I have in those works are names of friends that I no longer have. I thought "This is perfect. They won't ever know who they were. They'll never be able to figure out what the actual names are." So that was the original leap into the fraktur world. I had, of course, been interested in the Shakers and visiting villages up here in New England. I wanted to visit that cloister because I love those little villages of history—the Transcendentalists' Fruitlands Museum [Harvard, Massachusetts] and the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake [Maine]. I've been visiting those villages for decades.

MS: Ephrata Cloister is probably the most Shaker-like Pennsylvania German historic site because of the community's religiosity, its insularity, and the strictures with which they lived.

I believe I recall you're from New York state originally?

JF: Western New York.

MS: And so you took that New York state and New England interest in folk art and folklore and folk practice and then, after finding yourself in Pennsylvania, picked up on these corresponding Pennsylvanian threads. Was going to Ephrata the first experience of having Pennsylvania German folk art fully in your consciousness? Or did you grow up with some ambient awareness of it? I grew up in the “Dutch Country” of South-Central Pennsylvania, so I’ve always been conscious of it.

JF: I grew up on a dairy farm, so definitely. And, actually, we have a lot of Amish people working in the area.

I love barns and hex signs, things that I saw around me when I was growing up. I love symbols that have some sort of power. The mager disc [a divining or dowsing implement that is an ongoing motif in Feasley’s work] is like a tool and a symbol. And then, of course, the color wheel is everything.

MS: Polly, from what I gather, I believe you grew up in a family that collected Pennsylvania German folk art, or it was otherwise a part of your immediate domestic environment.

PA: I was born into it! My parents were very interested in Pennsylvania German folk art. They were part of the generation that was just starting to have an awareness of folk art and collecting. My parents' good friends include the Johnsons [Joan and the late Victor Johnson], who had an extraordinary collection of folk art. They donated their collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Their house was ten minutes from my family’s house and I babysat their kids, so there I was surrounded by their collection at a very young age. My parents couldn't afford what the Johnsons were collecting, but as my mother said, we got the cast offs. I still have memories of going to auctions in Lancaster as a kid and just being fascinated. So probably that was the first art—and it wasn't art with a “Capital A”—that I was exposed to.

MS: What kinds of things did your parents collect that you grew up with?

PA: Well, I’m actually in my mother’s house right now, as we speak by Zoom. This is all the stuff I grew up with, it’s all still here—furniture, objects, rugs. One of the things they collected, which seems an anomaly to me, but it was so beautiful, is spatterware and also redware. The spatterware, which is something I love, would be known to many people as spongeware. Since I’m doing ceramics

now, this resonates with me. It's a big old stone Pennsylvania farmhouse with a little bit of what was farm, now surrounded by suburbia.

MS: That's fantastic.

PA: It's a dusty old house with crumbling plaster walls filled with beautiful stuff.

MS: To do a bit of a deeper dive here—were there examples of *fraktur*, specifically, in your home?

PA: I think they have maybe four or five *frakturs*, quite similar to the ones in the show. They also have beautiful samplers. There are *frakturs* with hearts and angels, as well as birth certificates [*geburts*], and one that's incredible where the frame is—Joy you would just flip—actually carved with a pattern of hearts. That one is really beautiful. As a kid, I thought this was just normal, these were things I grew up with. Probably the stranger thing was walking into a friend's house with new, modernist furniture, which I thought was interesting. I always say that I lived one-third of my life in Pennsylvania, and two-thirds in New York. But this project at Arcadia University [Polly Apfelbaum: *For the Love of Una Hale*, 2022] has been about coming back home to that work and that period. When you're a young artist you go to what's new and you're trying to reinvent yourself or just invent yourself as a person. But this was a really beautiful point in my life when I could come home and look again at the Pennsylvania German influence in my life.

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—Joy Feasley

MS: Does your family have roots in Pennsylvania?

PA: No. They're Midwestern Jews.

MS: The reason I ask is as a Central Pennsylvania Jew, I grew up seeing a lot of what I would now call Pennsylvania Dutch “visual and material culture.” In school and with my family we’d go on little trips to tourist sites in Lancaster and I was just like, “Oh, this is so old fashioned.” I was interested in modern things and I thought that it was old and I just wasn't into it. I think I needed the perspective of

moving out of that area and decades passing in order to see it fresh. Learning more about my family history helped, as well—both sides of my family arrived in the Dutch Country in the 1880s. Then, while formally studying Pennsylvania German folk art and material culture, I learned that what's considered the authentic period for Pennsylvania German folk art continued to 1910. So, I thought, "Oh, my ancestors were here when it was still authentic." They lived in small, rural communities where—in a classic Jewish American way—they started as peddlers and moved on to being merchants, but served a primarily Pennsylvania German clientele.

My immigrant great-grandfather David Singer arrived in the US in 1886 and immediately settled in Middletown, Pennsylvania, which is a tiny town outside of Harrisburg that at the time was purely rural. He eventually established a new furniture business, but he started in secondhand furniture. I don't know whether this actually happened, but in my imagination he went out to Pennsylvania German farmsteads and collected, for resale, authentic Pennsylvania German material culture that families were casting off—furniture and other homegoods, maybe even some fraktur! I wonder what wonderful Pennsylvania German things passed through his hands. Again, I have no idea whether this truly happened, but it's what I want to have happened!

Enough about me. I'll go back to you, Jesse. We've talked about how you encountered a particular form of Pennsylvania German material culture that attracted your attention. Let's discuss what about it grabbed you to the degree that you then went on to make your own work that was in response to it and how you transmuted it, brought it forward, made it your own.



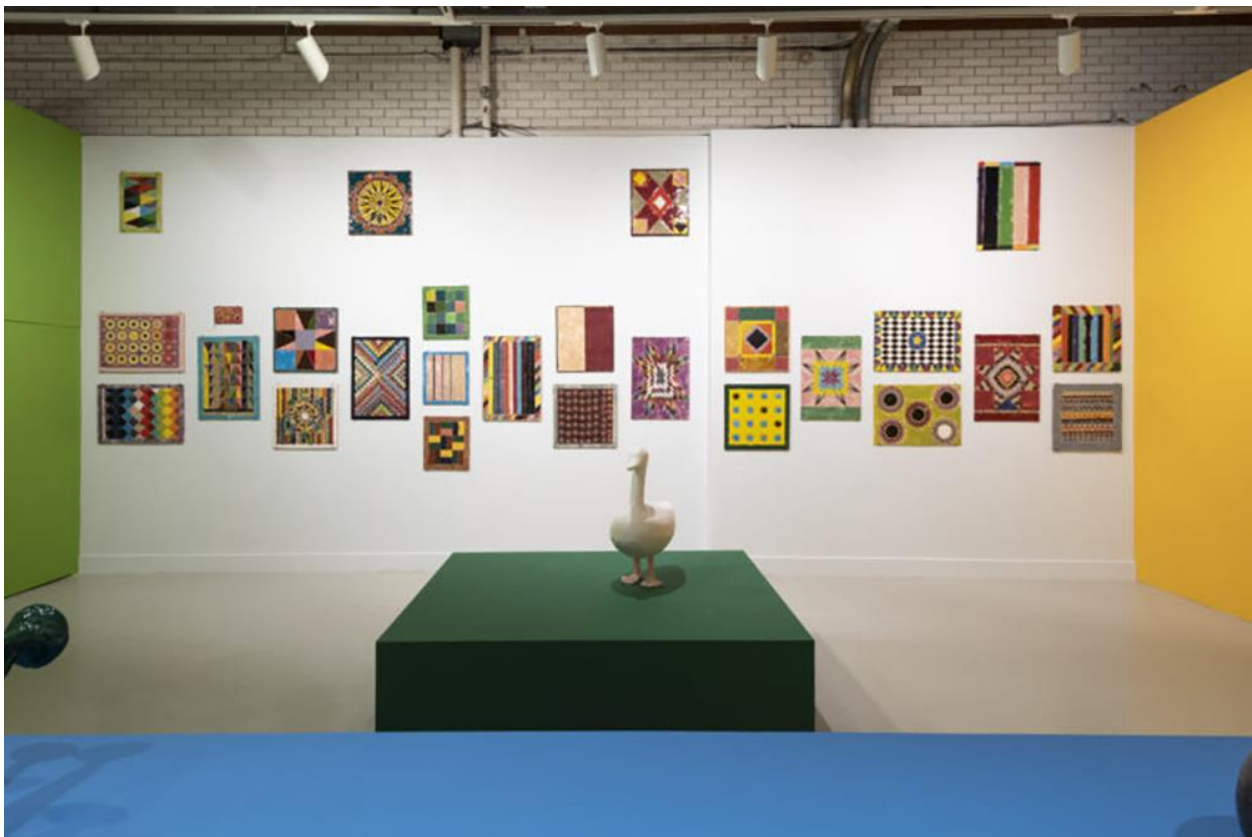
The stove plate room at the Mercer Museum, Doylestown, PA.

JH: Also for context, my family immigrated from South Africa to Toronto. I grew up in downtown Toronto, about as far away from Pennsylvania Dutch material culture as possible. But I grew up very interested in embroidery and textiles. I would buy these samplers, or my mom would buy them for me, that often had a fraktur quality to them. My parents were also very committed to and interested in thinking about hobbyist art-making and challenging values and norms around what was good or bad.

We didn't have money growing up, but they would keep and have around the house artwork and things they found or bought on their travels that were made by, for lack of a better term, outsider artists. So my practice is very influenced by that. And I'm committed to materials that are seemingly inappropriate or hobbyist because, often, things that are hobbyist are things that are done by women or folks of color or queer folks, and the politics of that really resonates. I see this in the stove plates and the things that are happening at Mercer and the found textiles that are so available throughout Pennsylvania. It's amazing when you go outside of the

curated vintage shop—there's so many amazing textiles in this state and it's pretty exciting. With those textiles—I think Polly was talking about this—there's often text in the samplers. It's a very similar aesthetic with the stove plates. It is that kind of bold text. I couldn't figure out how to incorporate text into the work that I was doing at the Kohler just because of the nature of working with brass, which doesn't allow for that level of detail. But I was really interested in this idea—how do I take a hobbyist material or aesthetic or way of working and incorporate that into my practice? Because that feels like a position to take.

MS: Maybe a provocation, but putting something specific forward, making a point.



Installation view of For the Love of Una Hale by Polly Apfelbaum at Arcadia University. Photo: Sam Fritch.

JH: I'm desperately in love with Eugene Von Bruenchenheim. He has been the love of my life for many, many years. So just this history of outsider artists and that aesthetic and political dimension—that feels really important. I also lived in Nova Scotia for a really long time, and outsider art and traditions like that, particularly textile traditions in that part of the country, are so strong and so amazing.

MS: Just as an FYI, there was a large Pennsylvania German community in Ontario called Waterloo. There's a book called *From Pennsylvania to Waterloo* [1991] that's all about this community, its history and material culture. So there is actually a Canada connection.

JH: There you go.

MS: Joy, something that always strikes me about your work is this innate—sometimes it seems overt, other times more embedded—engagement with not only outsider art and folk art, but something more metaphysical, like folk medicine or folk rituals, where the objects that you're making seem like the material remnants of a practice or a ritual that is almost like a portal to some other plane of existence. That's something I feel in your work, although I'm not sure whether that's your intent. In this context, I'm also thinking about your interest in the Shakers, who were more of a New York state and New England phenomenon, and how you later found yourself living in Pennsylvania, and picked up on similar traditions here. What did you see in the folk art of New York state and New England that engaged you? What about it made you think, "I want to process this through my own thinking, my own creative practice, making it new art," and how did that correspond—or not—with Pennsylvania German material culture?

JF: The Shakers had this idea of living every day as though it's your first and your last. And basically that heaven is here on Earth, which I'm totally for—to not be living for the next life. And maybe you already had the previous life and this is the good one. I also believe that certain parts of what we're living are hell.

I definitely love magic symbols and I think we're all always looking for some answer in something. It's like, are there ways to think of things magically? The Shaker "Tree of Life" was a vision that a Shaker sister received and then drew. It raises the question: which things that you're seeing and feeling are things that are somehow being sent to you? I lived up in Maine for a while next to a spiritualist community, so I thought, "Oh, I'm going to get some ideas from them." They have these "message circles" where you can receive messages from the spirit world. I'm a total atheist, but I'm all about hearing what the spiritualist guide is willing to give me.

One of the messages I received from a spiritualist guide was, "I see a woman holding a white flower behind you." And, of course, I had heard that a friend of mine had seen that same person holding a flower behind them. I did incorporate

that image into some paintings of family trees. The work that I have on view at Amy's gallery right now combines the ideas of fraktur with mourning art.

PA: That reminds me—when I was a kid, there was only one piece of art—I think it was in my bedroom—that I asked my parents to move because it scared me. It was a mourning drawing of a cemetery. It was beautiful, with a weeping willow. I think my mother still has it. It's amazing how all of this work had such spiritual meaning and, as a kid, it scared the shit out of me.

MS: You felt it! Joy, again, it makes so much sense that your particular point of Pennsylvania German contact was Ephrata Cloister, which was really doubling and tripling down on being a religious community—it was demanding of its members and intensely spiritual. I was thinking about spiritualism, specifically, and wondering whether that is something that interests you. It's interesting to hear that it is.

JF: Polly, you're reminding me, my grandniece stayed with Paul [Swenbeck, Joy's husband and frequent collaborator] and I recently and we have a lot of skull drawings from different artists like Annette Monnier, and we moved them out of her bedroom because they were scary and she was saying, "Why do you have so many skull drawings?" And I was like, "Well, I'd like to keep one on me at all times." She's nine, so she definitely was like, "Ah, come on."

MS: Okay, Aunt Joy! Jesse, in reading about you, I learned that you are an admirer of Polly's, so it's nice to have the two of you here together. Jesse's discussed their interests in matters of gender, different manifestations of gender, queerness. Polly, I'm not sure to what degree or whether those kinds of concerns have been part of your thinking and your body of work all along. But with the connection with David Ellinger and Una Hale [David Ellinger (1913-2003) was an artist, antiques dealer, and female impersonator with the stage-name Una Hale] in your Arcadia exhibition, those issues are definitely present. So I wanted to check with you and learn about the ways in which gender may or may not infuse what you do, along with matters of queerness and otherness.

PA: I think it's all part of the work, and growing up as an artist in New York—I was living there during the AIDS crisis, and lost a lot of friends—so it's part of our lives. Also, it's bound up with the domestic, the idea that people lived with this art, that it wasn't made for galleries or exhibitions, it was made for people to live with on an everyday basis. And a lot of this art was made by women. I think as artists we need to be aware of all this, it's our community. There's a lot of ghosts and

David Ellinger's ghost was in that show. And I think that for me as an artist, and all the people I know who are artists, there's importance in going back and finding out, there's always a backstory.

And for me, in this case, I knew we had these David Ellinger paintings, I saw them all the time growing up, but I didn't know anything about Ellinger, his life, or his work. So a big part of the early thinking around this show was going back and doing the work of learning about him—and he turned out to be a fascinating and complex character. He was a painter, but also an antiques dealer and a picker. And his artwork had a lot to do with what he collected. He is sometimes described as an outsider artist but he was a trained artist. He lived and worked among the Pennsylvania Germans, who of course have strong religious beliefs; and here is this gay artist, who was also a drag queen, performing publicly in drag, yet making artwork strongly influenced by the Pennsylvania Germans. He was arrested once, his name all over the local papers. Before I started looking into it I didn't know any of this. And I started looking at his work—and a lot of related work—differently. I discovered things about Pennsylvania German art that I didn't know before.

MS: What's an example of something like that? If I can put you on the spot.



Joy Feasley, Family Tree, 2021, flashe on panel, 18 x 23 1/2 inches.

PA: I think what struck me was how personal, how private, this artwork was—much of it was not displayed, for example, it was stored away in drawers. Also, the repetition of motifs—hearts, stars—that are perhaps not specific just to the Pennsylvania Dutch, but are done in a very specific way in this artwork—I can recognize a Pennsylvania Dutch heart motif, even though you can find hearts in a lot of different decorative art. So, it was wonderful to have a partner, to have a “partner in crime,” to look through different eyes, trying to look at this work through David Ellinger's eyes.

MS: You were a spiritualist medium, in a way.

PA: I was motivated by the love of this work, and by curiosity—I wanted to know more. And by the passage of time. You said the authentic period for Pennsylvania German folk art ended in 1910. It’s very interesting that was a marker, just over a century has passed. It’s been a fascinating process for me because I was going back

into material that was very familiar to me, part of my past, but a part that hadn't been processed as part of my work; it was more about my life, in a way, than about my artwork. So it was about going back in time, and back to a familiar place from my past. What you bring up is ghosts and they're restless.

MS: Again, there are interesting parallels. Polly, at Arcadia you worked in ceramics, a medium that I believe you hadn't worked with much previously. And Jesse at Kohler you worked in metal rather than fabric and fiber. So I wanted to check in with you, Jesse, about how new metal was to you and how that might have informed what you made. Another thing I'd like to touch on, again, is the Pennsylvania German stove plates. The ones I've seen are very figural and narrative. But the work you created that is inspired or informed by stove plates is, as I see it and understand it, more like abstract patterning. Almost shapes and patterns that would be framing elements or interstitial elements on the stove plates. It looks like textile—like you could have made macrame and then cast it. I want to talk to you about that material aspect of the work.

JH: I do have to tell a little story about Polly that I think is relevant. In undergrad I was a painting major, but I wanted to do textiles and painting. We went to New York on a field trip and I saw one of Polly's shows and I was like, "Look, you see this person is painting and there's textiles. Why can't I do a double degree?" I wrote a paper about it and I was able, then, to do my BFA in both textiles and painting. So thank you.

I think, from the beginning, I was just drawn to materials. In grad school a lot of my research was looking at textiles, specifically looking at chintz and florals and thinking about the relationship of the flower to the body and becoming and the ways in which, when I was growing up and we would have sex education, the flower was the stand-in for the body. God forbid you should ever actually say real body parts. So it's always been a motif that for me is this stand-in that can be sexualized, but also can be about nature, which is still ultimately sexualized. There's a lot of nice interplay there.

The pieces that I did at Kohler, I call them drawings because they're based on drawings and I drew them in the sand with a Dremel tool. And although I had looked at the stove plates, they weren't something that I'd looked at for very long. The motifs in them, as you said, are also very textile based. They're very much like samplers, just suddenly transported into this hard surface. I think that there's a way that those stove plates are made which is not dissimilar to how a textile is made in that there's a fluidity. They're not rigid, they're not perfect. So they translate really

nicely to a textile. I was also thinking—and I'm going on a little bit of a tangent—about that willow tree that you were referring to, Polly—we also had a print in my house with the willow tree.

PA: Oh yes. Oh yes.

“I think what struck me was how personal, how private, this artwork was—much of it was not displayed, for example, it was stored away in drawers. Also the repetition of motifs—hearts, stars—that are perhaps not specific just to the Pennsylvania Dutch, but are done in a very specific way in this artwork—I can recognize a Pennsylvania Dutch heart motif, even though you can find hearts in a lot of different decorative art.”

—Polly Apfelbaum

JH: It had tombstones and a sad looking family there. I later learned in school that the print was just a copy. Once the printing press was invented, they would make these copies and then print them on textiles, and that was a way to sell a pattern for embroidery. So when I look at those stove plates, I can see how they could translate into this thing that becomes mass-marketed or becomes a repeat pattern.

MS: I think that with the general mortality rate in the 19th century obviously being a lot higher than it is now, and especially with high child mortality, mourning art was a phenomenon throughout the 19th century. But, from my understanding, it really became ubiquitous in the US after the Civil War and its more than 600,000 deaths. The willow tree and the sad looking family standing by it is something you see time and time and time again when you're working with Victorian material.

Joy, on the same theme of change or continuity in materials, looking at the work that you have in the show at Adams and Ollman, I can see a continuity with what you've done before in terms of painting on board. The particulars of the work in terms of motifs they contain, the visible elements in it, seem especially fraktur-ish, to return to your term, Jesse. I would just love to have you talk about *Family Tree* [2021], specifically. How did you arrive at making it? Did you make it in response to the possibility of this show coming up at Adams and Ollman or was it something you would've done anyway?

JF: It's funny. Amy and I have been talking about this fraktur show for a while and she'd been asking me who should be in this and of course I said, "Polly has been making this fraktur." And I sent her the link to the recent talk from Arcadia with

your printmaker, I believe. I made *Family Tree* before we were talking about the show and it relates to what Polly was saying about going back home. There is a family tree in my family home, a needlepoint cross-stitch. I was home just a couple of weeks ago and it's in our entryway, and I thought, "Oh, that's where I got the idea for doing these family trees." That's really where the idea came from. I've been painting trees for a long time and I've started doing a lot of cut-down trees. *Family Tree* has the initials of all my brothers and sisters in calligraphy—in the fraktur-ish calligraphy—and it's a cut-down tree since my mother died.

Right now I'm spending a lot of time at home. My dad is very ill. He is 91 and he has survived so many things. I'm thinking a lot about when you're mentioning ghosts, Polly. He has severe ghost pain from being an amputee. It's generational pain—this ghost pain has affected not just him but it's in our DNA. That's where that work comes from.

MS: Would you mind talking about the mager disk? I have one of your glass mager disks here in the house, and I've had a relatively hard time finding information online about mager disks. I know it's a divining tool, but I'm not sure who used it, how they used it.

JF: Dowsers used that tool, that color wheel, to determine the quality of the water they found. I've taken it as my own visual tool to determine quality in anything.



Polly Apfelbaum, Abstract STA Pattern Patch, 2022, terra cotta and glaze, 22 x 19 1/2 inches.

MS: That's gorgeous.

This has been magnificent, at least from my perspective. Thank you. Is there

anything I missed that you would like to add?

PA: I think it has a lot to do with family. Seeing your *Family Tree*, Joy—it's interesting, I think my generation of artists don't like to think about family. And as you get older—as Joy knows, too, I have a 96 year old mother—family is something that's really important. And so I think that the frakturs are all about family.



Joy Feasley, Mager Disc, 2013, fused glass, 11 inches in diameter.

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