

I've titled this show *Saint Stephen (with a Rose)*. A double homage, to the 1969 song by the Grateful Dead, and to the Galerie nächst St. Stephan, which takes its name from the nearby cathedral dedicated to the Saint.

*Saint Stephen with a rose
In and out of the garden he goes*

I've always said that for me, cutting, either paper or fabric, is like drawing—think Matisse and his cut-outs, his jazz series in particular. With these works on paper (which I consider drawings) I wanted to have a fresh eye on the process, a new way of making a drawing. Matisse cut-outs and painted paper were my starting points. Simple forms, color and light. Italo Calvino's maxim (borrowed from Paul Valéry): *One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather*. Deconstructing drawing: the *Supports/Surfaces* movement from the '60's and '70's was also in the back of my head. I liked the idea of shaking things up.

*Country garland in the wind and the rain
Wherever he goes, the people all complain*

I began with drawings, painted paper. But I wanted to get away from a preconceived aesthetic order or judgment, so I thought of cutting them into different line weights, who cared what it looked like, they were parts of something to come.

Preparing for an upcoming residency, a friend suggested some new materials. Different paper, crayons and a change of context: three weeks at Yaddo, in Saratoga Springs, New York. This was the change I needed to see this work, but it also made me nervous. The texture, and tone are different than what I am used to. The spontaneous nature of children's drawing was something I related to, physically very different but with a sense of touch and connection to the process of making. As I did with the gouache drawings, but now with the immediacy of the crayons, I make drawings which are ordered by the logic of the cuts, but there is a chance element as well. Which I was very excited about. I love scribbling. I have 70 colors on hand. No color order, no set rules. The paper curls and flaps of its own accord, it has a mind of its own.

*Stephen prospered in his time
Well he may and he may decline*

A reference that came to me is the children's game "pin the tail on the donkey:" blind folded, disoriented and spun in circles, a child attempts to pin a paper tail on a paper donkey. An appropriate metaphor for these times. You can think of these as tails (or tales), which took over the studio, many colors, so many lengths, so many widths, covering the walls. At first random, later forming lines. Structured like sentences, or musical scores. A collection of linear marks, an abstract language that can't be translated. When I was younger, I remember painting a big donkey but I don't remember making tails.

*Did it matter? Does it now?
Stephen would answer if he only knew how*

About the Grateful Dead: I was never a Deadhead, it was part of my youth but it's only recently that I came back to them. I drive a lot and spend a lot of time listening to them in the car. The Dead were about improvisation and live performances, and never repeating themselves. Part of the counter-culture, something I look back on not with nostalgia but for hope. They were in it for the music, true believers.

*Sunlight splatters dawn with answers
Darkness shrugs and bids the day good-bye*

So is the song about the martyred saint, who was stoned to death for preaching that Israel had deviated from God's word? Or, as some accounts have it, Stephen Gaskin, the Haight Ashbury spiritual leader who founded The Farm, a commune in Tennessee (and later ran for President on the Green Party ticket). By all accounts, a prickly character, once known as "San Francisco's acid guru."

*Speeding arrow, sharp and narrow
What a lot of fleeting matters you have spurned*

None of this really matters and the song lyrics can't be pinned down to any specific figure. More suggestive to me is the rose in the first line—which became the emblem of the Grateful Dead. It symbolizes desire and decadence, divine presence brought down to earth and spiritual knowledge. I think of Jay de Feo's monumental work *The Rose*, which she called "a marriage between painting and sculpture," or Hilma af Klint's symbolic use of the rose in her paintings.

These hybrid drawings point to the future, but also point back to two early works of mine. In 1990, I made a series of wall drawings: the *Wallflowers*, drawn and installed directly on the gallery wall, more than 500 crepe-paper roses tacked in dense concentric circles. A few years earlier, I had made a piece with hundreds of fortune cookie fortunes: the tiny paper strips strung with beads on a thread. That piece was called *All is Not Yet Lost*. An actual fortune that I got at the time, and I'm still hopeful all these years later.

To the memory of my mother Nancy W. Abel, 1926 to 2026

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Polly Apfelbaum, New York, 8 FEB 2026