

Donald Sultan Recent Works

Opening Thursday 16th January 2014, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 17th January - 15th March 2014

The painter Donald Sultan is a key figure in contemporary art. Having completed his studies in Chicago, he left for New York in the mid-1970s. The city was a vibrant art metropolis where many contrasting branches of contemporary art intersected and overlapped, including Abstract Expressionism (Jackson Pollock, for example), Minimalism and Installation Art. As painting was considered an obsolete art form, most aspiring artists were advised to stay away. From his beginnings Sultan nevertheless opted for the traditional genre of still-life to express a core theme in his work.

He developed a new kind of figurative painting inspired not only by Pop Art but also the Old Masters and still-life painting, most importantly Edouard Manet's Le Citron of 1880-81. Sultan's earliest works feature large-scale geometric representations of clearly outlined everyday objects in starkly contrasting colours – a structure that continues to inform his works to this day. His choice of subjects is wide-ranging. Earlier series featured monumental objects done in the Pop Art style, including fruit, billiard balls, butterflies, buttons and domino tiles – all elevated to iconic status. Most of the flower paintings in his most recent series are again works on a large scale.

In stark contrast to his classic subject matter, Sultan's 'trademark' is his innovative and unique technique: square standard-size linoleum flooring tiles are glued to a plywood frame before the tiles are covered with tar. Next, Sultan cuts his composition out of the half-dried, resistant and sticky substance. The empty spaces are filled in with gesso or spackle and overpainted with several coats of enamel. Most of Sultan's tar paintings feature clearly delineated fields of glossy paint against a solid black ground. The complexity of his technique underpins an ostensibly decorative, yet clear and unambiguous iconography. In Lantern Flowers Nov 25 2013, silhouettes in luminous colours rise out of a pitch-black ground. In Navy Flocked Poppies Nov 16 2013 and the smaller paintings presented in the exhibition, however, Sultan increases the tension by setting the black tar against very dark blue and various hues of black.

Deep black is a colour often associated with mourning. It features in many of Sultan's works where it feels elegant, distinguished, lively even – as well as fragile, perhaps betraying a degree of morbid charm after all. No tar is used in Yellow Poppies Nov 14 2013; the glossy yellow of the flowers is set against the white gesso ground instead. In his relief-like paintings, paint has been applied very densely, leaving barely a trace of the brush-stroke.

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Works on paper are represented by several variations from Sultan's Trumpet series. Each of these features a large velvet-black flower in whose centre a delicate, fragile-looking circle has been drawn – each in a different colour. His smaller Trumpet drawings and their vibrant colours are loosely evocative of Andy Warhol's pop icon, Flowers, 1964. Of course, Sultan again conveys the subject matter in his unique, unparalleled style.

Donald Sultan was born in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1951. He earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill before attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he graduated as a Master of Fine Arts in 1975. Having arrived in New York City, he embarked on his career. Aged just 37, he was the Museum of Modern Art's youngest-ever artist to be given a solo show in 1988; soon his works formed part of numerous significant museum exhibitions. Sultan's works feature in major international museums and public collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; the Singapore Museum of Art; London's Tate Modern; as well as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In 2010 Sultan received the North Carolina Award for Fine Art, the highest accolade a U.S. state may bestow upon a civilian. In 2011 he was awarded the Houston Fine Art Fair Lifetime Achievement Award. The great significance of his art is further underscored by the fact that he has received three honorary doctorates.

Marie-Louise Teichmann