

Donald Sultan

Black and White and Color, New Works

Opening Thursday 30th January 2020, 6-8 p.m.
Exhibition 31st January – 25th April 2020

It was a sprig of mimosa blossoms from southern France that inspired Donald Sultan's latest and very powerful series of visual works. While the mimosa plant is the emblem of sensitivity and delicate fragility, Sultan creates his Mimosas from coarse and heavy industrial materials such as roofing tar and linoleum. The tension between motif and materiality, between his subject and its masterful treatment produce the tension for the powerful impact that is a hallmark of the works by this eminent U.S. artist, born 1951 in Asheville, North Carolina, who lives and works in New York.

The unusual association of natural subjects and industrial materials has always played a significant part in Sultan's oeuvre. His use of tar, enamel and linoleum in still-lives of fruit and flowers makes for a bold and unique visual idiom. Exploring art history as well as past and current political and historic issues, Sultan has established himself as one of U.S. America's outstanding and innovative painters. His works feature at international museums including MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, Centre Pompidou in Paris, and Tate Modern in London. Sultan has received numerous awards and three honorary doctorates in recognition of his oeuvre.

Sultan began to paint plant motifs in the mid-1980s, in a fairly idiosyncratic revival of the still-life and flower genre. Neglected by contemporary artists, earlier generations of artists valued floral motifs, not only to demonstrate their painterly skills and compositional sophistication, but also to reflect on color and form, on issues of perception and representation, and on the philosophy of life. Sultan's plant-inspired works toy with the visual impact and symbolism of this traditional art form, which this innovative artist creates from uncommon, harsh, industrial materials.

Sultan's works are not so much "paintings" as constructions that bear a likeness to architectural structures. In previous series he worked downwards as it were, by carving his subject matter out of the depth of his surfaces. By contrast, in the present Mimosa series he employs a wide range of layering techniques, superimposing strata of enamel and tar on a linoleum ground. The use of his materials' potential and properties is highly sophisticated. For example, he applies turpentine to certain sections of a panel of masonite and strata of tar while leaving other areas untreated to create a fascinating range of depths and brightnesses in the raw and grainy surface. Also, both in his Mimosa and in his Lantern Flowers series, the artist combines free brush work with stencils or patterns.

What renders Sultan's Mimosa pieces especially exciting is their bright and lively colors. The artist places the mimosa shrubs with their feathery foliage in dense proximity to each other until they appear to cascade towards the viewer. In Mimosa, June 14 2018, foliage forms a dark carpet that is almost completely opaque in places while delicate mimosa blossoms are symbolised – rather than realistically represented – by small, superimposed vinyl dots or geometric decals in white, orange and green. Their bright colors tell the viewer: This is the flower! This is where life is unfolding! This is the wellspring of beauty!

Nevertheless, Donald Sultan occasionally uses color to a less clearly defined and sign-posting purpose. Take Mimosa With Reds, Nov 10 2019: the foliage is transparent, a luminous pale blue filters through – perhaps an evocation of warm summer evenings in Southern France?