

Masterpiece

Garanti BBVA Özel Bankacılık

MAGAZINE

N° LXXXIII



Seven Reds July 30 2005, kağıt üzerinde Conte ve flock, 2005.

Donald Sultan

Known for his use of industrial materials and monumental still lifes, Donald Sultan is redefining the boundaries of contemporary art. From his signature poppies to his unconventional techniques, he delves into the philosophy behind the process as he ponders the balance between fragility and strength.

Reported by Aylin Kumdagezer

Your father was the owner of a tire brand and had painting as a hobby, while your mother was active in theater. Did growing up in a family surrounded by art shape your artistic style?

I grew up in Asheville, North Carolina, a mountain town that, like most mid-sized post-war cities, was largely a mix of owner-operated industries, family-owned shops, and craftsmen. My father owned a tire shop that he inherited from his father. I worked with him from the age of 12. In those days, most of the tire sales were retreads, done in a room full of mountains of retreaded rubber, grinding the worn tread down to the belt underneath, applying heated rubber, and placing the new tread in heated molds to bond it to the old tire. It was dark and smelled of asphalt. I spent a lot of time in that dark room with this old guy who ground treads off. He was an Australian veteran with tattoos and certain habits—a perfect role model for a young boy. I also worked in a warehouse that was accessed by a wallless elevator that was operated by pulling a steel cable sharply downward and stopping it by pulling it back up at the correct floor.

When I moved to New York, the elevator in my first studio worked the same way. My interest in industrial landscapes took root in that shop. My mother also introduced my siblings and I to a children's theater called Tanglewood. We performed in many musicals, which were quite sophisticated for a children's theater. That's where my love of theater was born. I worked in the college repertory and then at the Falmouth Playhouse on Cape Cod, learning all aspects of theater production, including acting, staging, lighting, props, and costumes. This continued throughout my high school and early college years. Eventually, I got bored with theater and realized that I was not going to make any progress in it academically, so I decided to pursue television and movies. When I realized how collaborative and how high the costs were when it came to making movies, I switched to painting, where I felt free to do my own art. These two parts of my family life formed the ethics I embrace today: the postwar American method of painting with brawny physical work and the performance aspect inherent in the performative act. I think of the platforms I make for my works as stages where the action takes place and as boxcars to haul around meaning. The works create a kind of theater; the theater of the object.

Your work is known for its use of industrial materials such as tar, linoleum and enamel. What made you move away from traditional art environments?

My working methods stem from a desire to physically make images rather than the traditional result of brush-to-canvas work: illustration.

Before moving to New York, I was running the woodshop in the graduate painting department at the Art Institute of Chicago.

That's where I began making my work.

I also immersed myself in urban landscapes, including the smokestacks of steel mills in Gary, Indiana, the life of Chicago, and the architecture of Chicago.

I began to see signs of the slow demise of powerful industrial centers—abandoned factories, the shrinking of giant automobile assembly lines, and the emptying out of the cities that housed them. I saw boutiques moving into shopping malls, the disappearance of cities and small-town life. As new construction sprung up, I used new standardized urban landscape materials for quick architecture. Striated linoleum dominated the interior and everything else followed - foods were genetically manipulated to standardize the transportation and lifespan of fruits and vegetables. I based my images on these influences.

In the 1980s, you created the “Disaster Paintings,” depicting industrial landscapes affected by catastrophic events. What inspired this series and how do you perceive its relevance in today’s context?

It dealt with the events of collapse, as well as wars, riots, forest fires, and the soot and ash left behind. I was inspired by the increasing global wars and the life-changing demographics of the Cold War and the

human systems' reactions to rebuild or abandon. I gave up on it in the mid-1990s because these destructive forces were already very much present in other mediums, and I felt that I had already said what I wanted to say.

Although your work is described as abstract, it contains recognizable objects. How do you maintain the balance between abstraction and representation?

At the same time as the Disaster Paintings, I simultaneously painted still lifes and flowers. The flowers combined the industrial with the generic; the vases in the lower panels mimicked smoke stacks, while in the upper panels the flowers spilled out chaotically like smoke and burnout flares.

These images were presented together to encourage the multiplicity of images of everyday life. In print media, a disaster was displayed alongside a wealth of random thoughts. Like the images of war among advertisements for socks, soft drinks, toothpastes, and recipes. A cup of coffee, a bouquet of flowers, a glass of water at the breakfast table, accompanied by the daily diet of life. Everything was of equal value. This led me to the conclusion that I had to portray the three great themes of painting: landscape, flowers and still lifes. They were all standardized interior landscapes of the buildings we live in.

You have collaborated with poets and writers such as Robert Creeley and David Mamet. Did these interdisciplinary encounters have an impact on your artistic perspective?

My art ideology never changes, but my approach changes from time to time. I fluctuate between expressionism and hard edge and back again. This is an ongoing relationship. Usually my drawings are a



Firemen March 6 1985, fayans üzerinde lateks ve katran, 1985.

counterpoint to my paintings. When the paintings are more hard-edged, they become more chaotic and expressionist, and then vice versa. There was a period in the 1970s when I made my structures active participants in the theme of painting. For example, I made *Seascape* with linoleum, tar and plaster; it formed a curved structure representing the movement of the sea. This changed in the 80s and painting began to contain both hard-edged and chaotic elements. After flowers and still lifes, I shifted to hard-edged images. Poppies became glossy varnish, the most unnatural way of depicting the subject. Later, I turned to photographs and paintings of smoke rings, which were expressive and gestural. I have frozen the most melancholy and fragile image imaginable (smoke) and made them sculptural; I have fixed them for all time. Each new work is born out of the previous one. Almost against my will, I am compelled to move forward into a different approach. I am guided forward.

As one of the leading figures of the “New Image” movement, what is the importance of this movement for you?

This movement was very diverse. It was a new way for me to go beyond the purely abstract work that I admired in the late sixties and early seventies and to start an additive method of painting.

When you think about your career, can you say there is a series or exhibition that holds special significance for you?

Of course, all of my exhibitions are important, but my black lemon and freesia exhibitions at MoMA in New York were exciting, as was the Disaster exhibition a few years ago.

I should also add my first traveling museum exhibition, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. One of the most enjoyable ones was “New York Tendencies” in Barcelona and Madrid. This selection led to the first exhibition of new Spanish painters in New York, “Five Spanish Artists” at Artists Space.

In today’s digital age, social media platforms have also changed the way artists interact with their audiences. Do you see social media as a useful tool for sharing art or as a distraction?

In its simplest form, social media is for branding and advertising. Images can be used to reach more people because real art is harder to see.

However, these platforms are more misleading and only tell half the story. Social media is very dangerous and confuses the concept of image with reality. On the other hand, the vast majority of people will never know the difference between the original and the image.

This is the definition of kitsch:

The imitation of reality. Social appropriation distorts the power of the original so that the world can understand it as the truth.

With the power of social media, the majority of people will not know the difference between the original and the image. That’s the definition of kitsch: the imitation of reality.



June 2 2005 28 Blues, masonit üzerine fayans üzerine emaye, flok, katran ve macun, 2005.

*Red Poppies Nov
20 2002, Ahşap
üzerine fayans
üzerine emaye,
flok, macun ve
katran, 2022.*



*Black and White
Mimosa With
Anomaly July 18
2024, masonit
üzerinde emaye
ve grafit, 2024.*

