



The vibrant floral patterns of Donald Sultan's "Four Reds April 20 2005" are reminiscent of the pop art silk-screens of Andy Warhol. Donald Sultan

## ART REVIEW

## NEW POSSIBILITIES

DONALD SULTAN PROVES THERE IS A LOT OF LIFE LEFT IN THE STILL-LIFE

By Neil Kendricks

In today's postmodern art world, it isn't hip to paint a carefully arranged tableau of fruits or flowers. But you wouldn't know it from gazing at Donald Sultan's beautifully rendered paintings of flowers that radiate the same aesthetic fervor that first ignited his early signature works of lemons and other natural forms during the 1980s.

The selection of artworks found in the self-titled show, "Donald Sultan" make a good case that the still-life — one of the most familiar subjects in art history — remains fertile ground for further exploration.

Like his earlier paintings, the choice of subject matter in the artist's exhibition at Scott White Contemporary Art gallery through Nov. 4, isn't new or radical. But a still-life can yield surprises and open up new possibilities when it is approached with a striking technique. Likewise, Sultan's chiaroscuro technique creates elegant images where his selected forms are flattened on the pictorial plane.

In Sultan's painting "Four Yellows April 6 2005," the artist's palette offers sharp contrasts between bright yellow flowers and the surrounding pockets of negative space. In the artist's quiet reflective arena for image making, the purity of black set against the stark white

imagery of blossoms in "Seven Black Flowers 11/2/04" has an almost surreal glow that is hardly realistic.

But realism isn't Sultan's intent. Although a major part of his career has been built on creating similar pieces, the bounty of his efforts to really see flowers as a colorful collection of inter-related forms never feels boring or mechanical. Instead, the work is a meditation on the artist's process of gazing at objects and translating these observations into his paintings' monochromatic surfaces.

For instance, Sultan's piece "Four Reds April 20 2005" offers an extreme close-up of flowers that is so tightly cropped that the image straddles between abstraction and a representation of reality. The painting's vivid, exaggerated primary color also calls attention to the artist's fascination with perception as well as natural forms filtered through the mind's eye.



Sultan's "Four Yellows April 6 2005" offers sharp contrasts between bright yellow flowers. Donald Sultan

Sultan's imagery and preoccupation with his paintings' surfaces echo pop-art provocateur Andy Warhol's silk-screen works like 1964's "Flowers" and 1967's "Ten Foot Flowers." At first, the link might seem like a stretch, but

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the similar compositions and color schemes have an undeniable connection.

In image after image, Sultan always circles back to his formal technical abilities to craft lovely paintings by using an unusual combination of materials. It's not unusual to find the artist discarding oil paint and canvas in exchange for enamel, flock, tar and spackle on square tiles mounted on

slabs of Masonite.

Sultan's materials, however, aren't random since these are the items that he used during his much-younger days working in construction during the 1970s. Ironically, he takes these industrial materials to forge delicate, isolated images of the natural world.

During the 1980s, many of Sultan's contemporaries like Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl were drawn to the mythic archetypes and symbolic representations of suburban malaise respectively. But Sultan's art never strayed from its

path regardless of the prevailing winds of the art world's then-in-vogue taste for neo-expressionist works.

Like Warhol's "Flower" series, Sultan's paintings encourage the viewer to study the colorful surfaces as the primary repositories of meaning, even though his pieces are a far cry from the slick, factory-like sheen of pop art. The artist's interests are more rooted in formal issues than probing conceptual ideas or offering commentary on the outside world. Sultan is content with looking inward rather than taking stock

of the world at large.

Artists frequently dedicate their creative energies to exploring a small pool of imagery in search of personal revelations. However, working within a finite arena isn't necessarily restricting. On the contrary, it can offer its own form of liberation and Sultan's art suggests that the artist still finds plenty of creative sustenance by reinventing such traditional fare according to his own methods.

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