125 NEWBURY

ISSUE 2 | RYAN SULLIVAN | DEC 9, 2022 – JAN 28, 2023

INSIDE THIS ISSUE: INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST and NEW ESSAY BY WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

FREE PRESS

RYAN SULLIVAN

Arne Glimcher

I first encountered Ryan Sullivan's paintings as tiny images sent to me on my phone by Oliver Shultz. Sadly isn't that often how we first see images of paintings? It makes it so easy to dismiss an artist, whose work in reality may be very good. I see so many images, so many artists, so many paintings flooding the digital ether in my hunt to be astonished.

Even so, I sensed immediately that Ryan Sullivan's paintings were something special, beautiful and accomplished. I took them for abstract expressionist canvases. However it seemed as if they had fallen out of the sequence of time and looped back to the era of Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning—an era I'm lucky enough to have lived through but did not think was in the consciousness of most young contemporary artists working today

I called my friend Douglas Baxter who said he had seen Ryan's work in Garry Garrels's popup space in the North Fork over the summer. I mentioned my attraction to the work but also my reservations. Douglas admonished me to reserve judgment until I had seen the paintings in the flesh. "They could not have been painted at any other time than the present," he insisted.

So my trusty team and I made the drive to Ozone Park to visit Ryan Sullivan's studio. What I encountered was a set of paintings as perplexing as any I had ever seen.

My first impression was that I was looking at photographs of paintings. On closer examination I realized it was something else entirely. The paintings were almost a kind of *trompe l'oeil* of abstract expressionism, like photo-realist renditions of abstraction. They couldn't be more different stylistically from Roy Lichtenstein's brush stroke paintings but they projected a similar riff on painting itself.

Remarkably, the paintings had almost no surface; or rather, the surface was perfection, as slick as that of a digital print. But these mysterious surfaces softened and gave way the kind of depth one sees in opulent marbles and stone. The colors and forms seemed frozen, as if encased in a sheet of ice, their combustible energy arrested.

I had recently seen the exhibition at the Metropolitan of trompe l'eoil and Cubism, organized by Emily Braun and Elizabeth Cowling, and flashes of those works flooded my thoughts: a folded or burned corner of a sheet of music; a violin string, so perfect you could hear the music. I felt the same looking at Ryan's gray painting in which a white brushstroke leapt from the surface only to fool the eye again by the surface's flatness.

These works fit into the language of Modernism and yet, they seem unthinkable without all the provocations of the Pictures Generation, and all that has come since.

I don't think that these paintings are abstract paintings at all. The subject is abstraction, but the result is realism. They are as real as the substance from which they're made, which creates not only the image but the support.

Sullivan "scrambles the logic of painting and sculpture." That scrambling is achieved by painting face-down: not on canvas, but into a rubber mold. He paints not with acrylics or oils—or even enamel or house paint or spray paint, as he did in previous bodies of work—but using pure pigment. He has adapted this process from sculpture, but reimagined and refined it as integral to painting. He makes his paintings "in reverse," starting first with the foreground—which lies at the bottom of the mold—and gradually building successive layers of background. As he works, the face of the painting becomes more and more obscured. The final image reveals itself only after the resin has cured and the work is removed from the mold. Unlike traditional paintings the work cannot be revised or changed once it is complete. The painting is "locked in."

I think a great deal about how abstraction can be rescued from the moment we're living through: a time of nostalgic, figurative, and narrative art. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been a war between abstraction and figurative painting. And at this moment in history, it appears figuration is winning. But here comes Ryan Sullivan to keep me optimistic for other possibilities.

Abstraction remains at the heart of what Sullivan does but his paintings are more about abstraction as a process. The product is an examination of the perceptual processes itself.

Ryan Sullivan's paintings are filled with the optimism that there are still new avenues and trajectories to be discovered and explored in abstraction.

I'm proud to devote the second exhibition at 125 Newbury to this new body of work. Ryan is carving a path forward for painting and developing a totally unique language of abstraction that is all his own. For me, he is a knight in shining resin.

Ryan Sullivan studio, Queens, New York, November 2022. Photo: Richard Lee

Ryan Sullivan studio, Queens, New York, November 2022. Photo: Richard Lee

Untitled, 2022. Cast urethane resin, fiberglass, epoxy. 88½ × 79½ inches. Photo: Ron Amstutz

Untitled, 2022. Cast urethane resin, fiberglass, epoxy. 88¾ × 79¾ inches. Photo: Ron Amstutz

RYAN SULLIVAN IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER SHULTZ

New York, November 2022

OLIVER SHULTZ:

To make the paintings that you're showing at 125 Newbury, you've imposed a unique set of controls on yourself through a process you invented: painting with pigment suspended in resin.

RYAN SULLIVAN:

I think all abstract painting—every abstract painter—is doing that. That's what creating a language is: World-making, which requires you to figure out what the controls are. I like the process of developing my own controls.

OS: Having those controls allows all kinds of other possibilities to emerge. It means moments of accident, chance, or unpredictability in the paintings are functions of this larger system you've created. They're very much yours.

RS: It's creating a stage for things in the painting to happen, things that I'm not specifically controlling. I'm creating an opportunity for those things to happen.

OS: Was that always true in your painting even before you started working with resin?

RS: Yes. I made paintings for a number of years with industrial paints and spray paint. In some ways, I now see the resin paintings as coming full circle back to that series. They're different, especially as objects, but I think that formally there is a lot of overlap.

OS: Were you painting throughout art school?

RS: Yeah, I took it very seriously. Probably too seriously. Like many students, I was trying to find a language of my own. But when I moved to New York [around 2005], it became very clear to me that the way I had been working wasn't a process or a technique that complimented the way my mind works. I like discovery, and in college I was painting in a very flat way that didn't allow for error.

In the first three years that I lived in New York, I worked for Ross Bleckner in his studio. He was an artist who was really customizing his materials a lot. There were pots and cauldrons of wax, linseed oil, pigments—potions, basically—that were very tuned to the imagery that he wanted to paint. It was unclear which came first: the imagery or the material. The material mixture suggested a kind of possibility.

Ross has these paintings of falling birds. There was a very specific blue that he made that sat on the canvas in a certain way, had a particular drying time, and other qualities that made the execution of those paintings appear effortless.

OS: The end point of a much longer process.

RS: Yeah. It did plant a seed in my mind that materials are very customizable. Around that time, Van Hanos gave me a book about faux finishing, which contained instructions about glaze recipes and tools that are used in that trade.

OS: Like, antiquing furniture?

RS: More like if you wanted to paint something to look like marble or wood.

OS: Oh sure, like *faux bois*.

RS: There were very specific directions for exactly how you would make that happen. And then what would come out at the end was this kind of realism.

OS: *Trompe l'oeil*?

RS: Yes, which was amazing. I didn't ever perfect that, but it got me further into this idea of moving away from something rendered, toward a kind of painting that was achieving a realism through a back channel.

Around that time, I had a very important studio visit, which changed the trajectory of things for me. Jack Pierson came into Ross's studio one day. He had a studio in the same building. He was an artist I was interested in, and so I introduced myself. That was probably not appropriate to do as a studio assistant, of course.

OS: Though that is why one works as a studio assistant, to have those kinds of encounters.

RS: Yes, and Jack was so nice. Since he had a studio upstairs, I would then see him in the elevator. One day he said to me: "Invite me to your studio, I'd love to see what you're working on." It took me months. I kept seeing him in the elevator all the time and he'd always ask me about it.

OS: Why did you hesitate?

RS: I suppose I wanted it not to be a wasted opportunity. When Jack finally came, I hung the paintings up precisely in my tiny, tiny studio. I hid all the messy ones in the corner and really made a presentation. Over the course of maybe an hour, he proceeded to take them all down and take all the ones that I had hidden, which were way more unresolved and open-ended, and put them all on the wall.

It sounds like a dramatic gesture, but what it really was, was him telling me I didn't need to have this level of perfection. That, in fact, these loose ends were way more interesting. And over the course of the next few years he continued to visit from time to time.

As my work developed, I started to get really into error and accident and incorrect mixtures and things that would crack. In those paintings, I think the primary discovery I made was that I could use the canvas parallel to the floor... I was making layers of paint on top that, that would stay distinct from one another.

OS: By letting them dry?

RS: No, keeping them wet. Some would be dry, yes, but often times there was a layer of very wet house paint, then spray paint and enamel paint. The spray paint would just sit on top and make kind of a skin that was totally separate. I'd use enamel paint, which is thick, to make [another] skin. Eventually I discovered that the canvas could be moved and these skins would generate lines (wrinkles) and messes (spill). That then gave me something to work from.

Using spray paint applied directionally, I was able to accentuate something that was happening in the studio in real time. What happened when it was fully dry was that a lot of the stuff would flatten out and

Ryan Sullivan studio, Long Island City, New York, 2015.

evaporate. You'd be left with this almost half-photographic seeming residue of this messy process that was happening, usually quickly.

OS: We're now talking about your work circa 2010, the year you were included in the closely watched group show *Greater New York* at MoMA PS1. By the time of *Greater New York*, had you already started painting on the ground?

RS: Yes. Once I started layering paints, it was essential to keep the paintings still. The thicker layers would trap in the messy wet ones. So, I wanted them to be stationary. Then, when I started *painting*—i.e., activating those surfaces—I started using cinderblocks to prop them up, bang them, or whatever. It was about physically moving them in order to create a situation, basically, a situation that needed to be responded to.

OS: In a way, it's almost like preparing an emulsion and then doing something to the surface and registering a kind of indexical act.

RS: Indexical was a term often used to describe those paintings because they were images of themselves. They weren't a performance in the sense of Yves Klein performing with bodies and paint, this was painting, but also trying to squeeze imagery and content out of the material, and the act itself. And as a young person who was always confounded by the idea of what to paint, that kind of resolved that question. It could just become about the act itself and the decision-making in the moment.

OS: In a forthcoming interview with Jacqueline Humphries, you talk a little bit about that in relation to this idea of what is real, or a weird realism about your work, because, in a sense, what you're doing is making a painting and saying: Here, they're like us, paintings, because things happen to them in the world. They're just physical things like our bodies. Your engagement or contact or encounter with those objects, that was *making something happen*.
In a way, that's what links you to Lynda Benglis most directly for me.

RS: I'm such a fan.

OS: Not the use of materials, which is also interesting, but more so when I think about how her pours happened. It was when she was doing the wax pieces and using a little blowtorch to melt those channels. She started to get fascinated by the dripping wax, just falling on the floor, how that transformation and movement of materials from one form to another—from one surface to another—ended up being the most generative experience.

RS: I just saw these two plays by Susan Lori Parks, and I'm in awe of her too, she's brilliant. She talks about being visited by her *muse*. I do think that there's something to that—you have to be there in the studio and sometimes, something just happens, and you run with that. That, I think, is really part and parcel to probably everyone's way of working, but I'm very interested in how to capture that condition as much as possible.

OS: There are these forces happening all the time. You make them available for capture. It's like: When are you in tune with them and able to use them? Gravity is one of those forces.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES ON PAGE 14

Untitled, 2022. Cast urethane resin, fiberglass, epoxy. 88 × 79 inches. Photo: Ron Amstutz

Untitled, 2022. Cast urethane resin, fiberglass, epoxy. 88 × 79 inches. Photo: Ron Amstutz

RESIN AND RAPTURE

Wayne Koestenbaum

Orgasm, I almost said. Or recklessness. Ryan Sullivan, in his car, picked me up in front of a high school because I got lost en route to his Ozone Park studio. I'd fed the wrong address into Google Maps and it led me erroneously to a high school.

Sullivan's paintings don't have supports. They *are* the support. His art begets curiosity: how was it created? Sullivan tells us, but the description goes over our heads. So we're left with our ignorance. And our rapture.

Do experiences have edges? If you ask too many questions about a sensation, you could fall off its outer perimeter. Sullivan puts frames around the edges but you can still detect the dangers that the quixotic painting's brink might pose to the uncautious explorer.

Sullivan's paintings resemble monumental pools. An artificer has put cornstarch into the liquid, as if into hot and sour soup, to make it gelatinous. Think of the stuff that oozes out of okra when you heat it. I imagine that a similar mucilage has "set" the custard of Sullivan's paintings. Because of the medium's transparency, you can peer into the painting and discern, leagues below the surface, gestures and marks that arose a billion years ago. Earlier ambitions, earlier intimations of the human, drowse at the ocean's bottom, and we can see straight down there, thanks to the magic of mucilage. I call it mucilage because I like the kindergarten resonance of that word and because I like Robert Musil and because age (Ice Age, Stone Age, Iron Age) seems relevant to Sullivan's work, which happens to be cast urethane resin. Its appearance is clean, but it summons a sticky sensation. My eye gets caught in it, like gum in hair.

Thinking happens far below the painting's sea-surface. Thinking contains huge chunks of the unthought. I see sharp lines in Sullivan's paintings but also blobs and smudges and blurs. Because I like to dichotomize, I can get "hepped up" on dividing the smudged and the sharp. I can imagine that I'm answering large metaphysical questions by noticing where a globular and glassy area gives way to a pointed mark.

For example, we experience blurry days and sharp days. Today, chez moi, is blurry, because I came down with COVID. Linked by a virus to collective woes, I start to wonder if the oscillation between blur and spur in Sullivan's work describes consciousness in a world marred by ecocide. We live, half-aware, within the blurry prognosis of our future engulfment by flood and flame. But the prognosis ceases to be unfocused if you are the bird or the person already touched by disaster. Sullivan updates the inherited notion of large-scale epic painting as reenacted engulfment (think of *The Raft of the Medusa*, larger than a viewer's body) to include the depradations of what Jason W. Moore has called the Capitalocene. Capitalism's fallout engulfs us, though we sometimes deny the ruin. Sullivan turns our divided response to engulfment—sensing it, muting it—into visual metaphor, a tension between keen marks and blurred mucilage. The death-wave has started to pour its gunk over the vessel. Decisive pocks, chunks, and scratches swim suspended—as if atemporally—inside our urethane, our spit-clear resin.

All images: Ryan Sullivan studio, Queens, New York, November 2022. Photo: Richard Lee

Remember, the resinous thickness of a Sullivan painting has no support. Fiberglass affixes the painting, a poured entity, to a mechanism that lets the finished object hang on a wall. Each Sullivan painting consists not of paint poured *onto* a canvas, but of the pour itself—a liquidity arrested by coalescence. We behold, on the painting's surface and below, a dynamic process of pigment and resin becoming congealed enough to become lonely as a cloud on the wall—congealed enough to become Romantic, an idealizable harbor for monstrous figments.

I've confessed to being a dichotomizer, so may I throw *form versus unform* and *figure versus disfigure* into the centrifuge? Sullivan's paintings dramatize a turn away from disfigurement; and the seizure or coalescence that the painting undergoes and then incarnates ("I am coalescence," the painting might murmur, tossing in fevered sleep), distances the dreamer from traumatically beholding an abomination in the mirror.

Can you hear Frankenstein, or his monster, draw near? Listen, in these paintings, to the schismatic tread of ignorance versus knowledge, anesthesia versus sapi-

ence, outcast versus divinity. The paintings, recalling this art-form's earlier historical condition as a Romantic practice, albeit fallen, speak the predicament of the unformed soul on edge. The engulfment experience (drowning in multitudinousness) queerly consists of freakish, epiphanic singularities. Contemplating isolation, Wordsworth wrote, in his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood": "—But there's a Tree, of many, one, / A single Field which I have looked upon...." I depended on that epochal poem thirty years ago, and I'm surprised to hear myself bring it up again. The marks inside Sullivan's resin revive a dream of microscopic (monadic) intactness surviving the tempest, as if cyclonic apocalypse left behind, in its wake, a percipient thread, a sensate scratch, a nerve-laden nail.

Sensate survivor: that's the role of orange brushstrokes in one Sullivan painting. Orange horizontal lines (atop a clotted cream cloud) repeat our delusion that a fragment of consciousness—a flash of decisiveness—might survive shipwreck. In another painting, survival's lurid stigmata consist of a Twombly-esque, fluorescent-turquoise graphism and a cadmium-orange, gumption-fueled squiggle, misleadingly suggesting an oil pastel crayon's imprint. These colorful singularities—moments of graphic impact, of outspoken pigment—often occur in lines that beckon toward horizontality. Hesitating to become actually horizontal, the lines agree, momentarily, to playact that consoling levelheadedness.

We're not wrong to feel warmed by the presence of decisive marks, however fictional our suppositions about their origins. Everywhere in Sullivan's paintings I find intention's prehensile evidence, the dropped hairpins of facture—the impulsive, willful hand's presumed traces. In art's motel room, intention and accident share one twin bed. We'll never know if intention or accident motivated a mark. Fact #1: intentions happen in response to accidents, which are themselves catalyzed, however haphazardly, by intentions. In Greek tragedy, intention always wins, whether the revenge-dispensing god's, or the rude mortal's, whose misguided actions enrage the equilibrium-seeking cosmos. A half-unthought intention plunges the world into eschatalogical whirlwind. Sullivan's paintings dramatize intention rising up against accident. Intention hurts: we respond with heartbroken vindication to the presence, within each painting's nervous system, of marks that resuscitate the hubristic wish (and the dismal knowledge) that our decisions might set up a chain reaction leading to a crisis.

I don't ask for a painting to prove a hypothesis, but in the presence of Sullivan's dauntingly *completed* paintings I remember that the process of thinking—of intending—is combustible. And: magically, the painting remains. The artifact outlasts the storm its manufacture unleashed. The painting reproduces in our viewing bodies the sensation of survival—the story of how a lone mark, a smear of blue-gray, dimensional but flat, the first mark made in the painting's evolution, was not buried under the tide of subsequent events. Paradoxically, that first mark winks on the painting's outward skin, as if this glimmering instigator were the arriviste rather than the dinosaur.

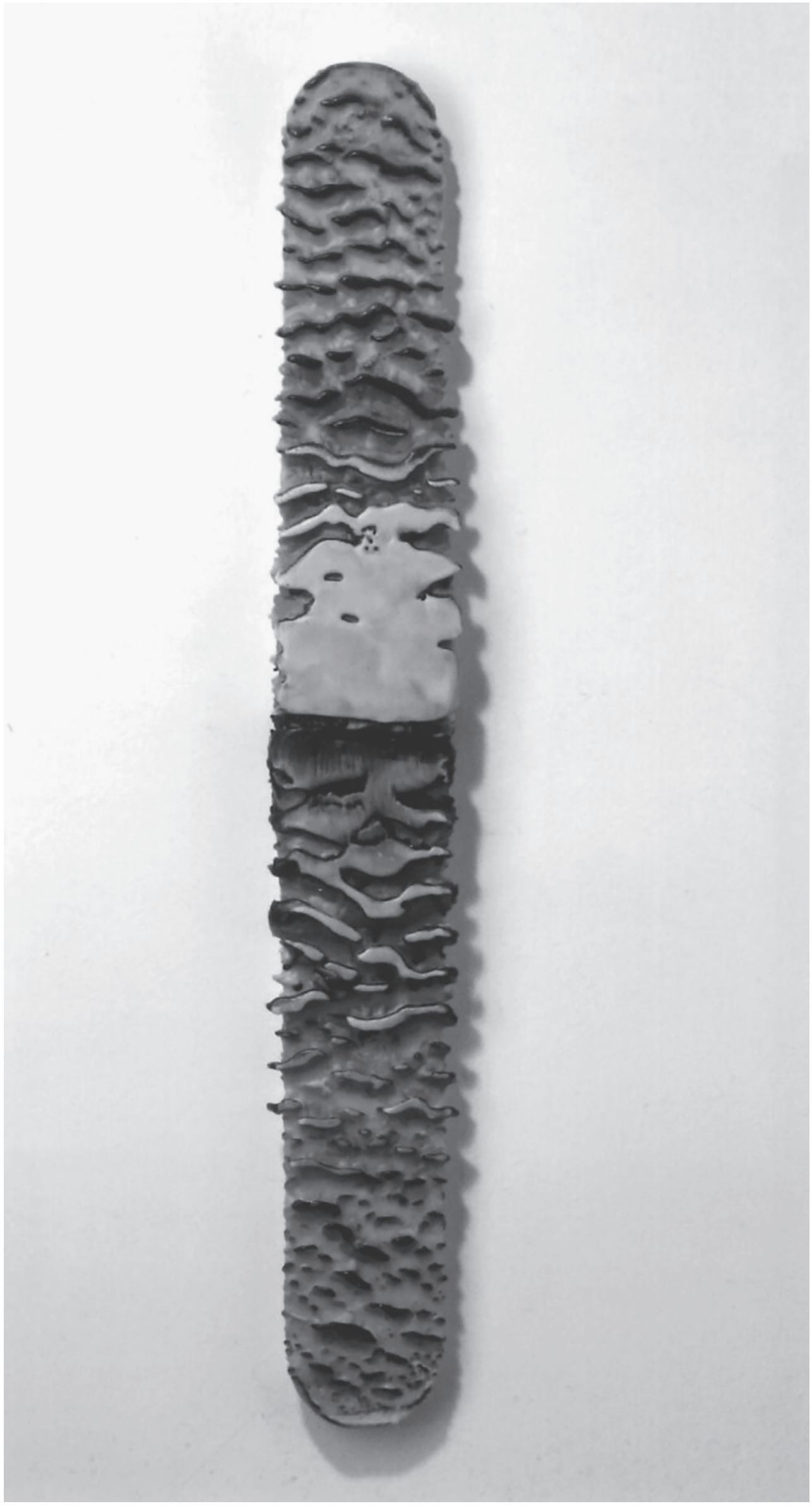
Something as matter-of-fact in its sublimity as a slab of cast urethane resin offers us techniques for thinking about the unpictured termination, when each of our abilities to think will no longer pose as the universe's defining fulcrum. Fact #2: our capacity to reason was never the galaxy's center. But when we look at one of Sullivan's paintings we start thinking; and we put our cerebration at the painting's center; and the painting pushes our minds out of its way; and then our mental scripts revive and pretend to have choreographed the dance that holds us captive. The painting narrates our cognition's appearance and disappearance. Mark by mark, haze by haze, the poured entity completes its story by means of its sly method, its untoward marriage of resin and pigment. Even if you understand the method, the painting will manipulate you into amnesia. The painting wants you to unlearn its genesis.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned rapture and recklessness. I had something specific in mind. I was thinking about the pitfalls of inebriation that often (in myth and in biography) accompany the experience of being ravished by artistic process. Beholding Sullivan's work, I surmise that he has sided with focus and concentration, rather than with the more reckless path of self-loss through inebriation, even if I am, perforce, pro-inebriation, pro-revelry, pro-excess. Sullivan's paintings speak the language of the totalizing "high," a limit-subsuming plunge into extreme experience, but in their methods of construction and in the specific details of the itineraries that the eye makes, traveling across the poured surface, the paintings have sided with pointedness. I think of Sullivan's art as being a rendering of self-loss staged as a drama of fastidious control, in which, paradoxically, accident and error are the goods he seeks. Suspended in the mucilage of error, the shining chromatic insignia of human agency flash their signals to those of us who wait on shore, not certain of the messages that the travelers will bring back to us, but confident that within the coded reports, we will detect instructions for how to swim toward a justice in whose pursuit we remain, however foggy our system of assessing the effects of our Frankensteinian actions.

Untitled, 2022. Cast urethane resin, fiberglass, epoxy. 87½ × 79 inches. Photo: Ron Amstutz

Untitled, 2022. Cast urethane resin, fiberglass, epoxy. 88½ 79¼ inches. Photo: Ron Amstutz

INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7



Lynda Benglis, *Untitled*, 1968–70. Pigmented beeswax, damar resin and gesso on wood and Masonite. 36 × 5 × 3 in. Photo: Chris Burnside. © 2022 Lynda Benglis/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

RS: Definitely, for me it is. Especially in the paintings we're showing in this exhibition. There's gravity in all of them. I got this heavy-duty, industrial car jack, which I was using to quickly prop up different sides of a painting, allowing the paint to move all at once. There's the big grey painting, that has a prominent movement of paint all in one direction; that's just using the car jack, which is something where you can—without breaking your back—lift an object for whatever duration is necessary and then very quickly have it set down. So that's like my new cinderblock, the car jack.

OS: That's fascinating.

RS: I've gone through a few of them now. The resin ruins them fairly quickly.

OS: So, at a certain point you had a radical change in your materials. Even as you were pushing the traditional materials of painting—layering acrylic, enamel, oil together on the same surface and letting various effects ensue—you were also making paintings on canvas. At a certain point you stopped doing that.

RS: I was, and I was also really committed to them being read as paintings, as I am now. But yes, at that point they were made on canvas. They were face up, so it was about choosing when to say 'stop' as opposed to my recent work.

After that, I had another important studio visit. My friend came, and I had all these paintings out and I was really proud of them. They were for this show in Miami [at the Institute of Contemporary Art], and we were making this book, and it was all really exciting. She came and she was like: "These are so great, you've made an entire language, it's such an accomplishment. Now, take all that capital and use it to do something else."

I think I took it more literally than she ever meant it to be. I thought, well, these paintings are just done. And I only made two more after that, maybe three.

OS: Some people never figure out how to do something else.

RS: It took a while.

Installation view: *Ryan Sullivan*, ICA Miami, Apr 16 – Aug 9, 2015.

OS: It's risky, too.

RS: I didn't have anyone to my studio for a year. Except my amazing assistants, Valerie Keane and Daniel Peterson. I also hired a fabricator through Carol Bove, who still works with me. He's Bulgarian and is traditionally trained—he could build this whole room and everything in it if you gave him enough time. He taught me a lot of stuff that I would have learned if I had been a sculpture student. Mold making, how to work with these materials, what resin was, safety stuff, plaster, all of that.

OS: But what made you know you wanted to learn those things in the first place?

RS: When I had that show in Miami, I wanted to make a huge painting for the lobby. The way that they were made at the end was by popping a pinhole in spray paint cans and letting them stream out all at once. I was using hundreds of cans of spray paint in a week. It was very unhealthy. That stream, from the pressure that was in the spray paint can, projected about 9 feet. When, all of a sudden, I wanted to make a 25-foot-long painting, that became a major obstacle.

OS: It just wouldn't go far enough.

RS: It wouldn't go far enough or I'd have to do it twice, and I'd kind of get out of the moment. At that time, the parameters that I had set—these kinds of household paints and graffiti paint, which I was using—revolved around the fact that their material qualities weren't particularly customizable.

OS: You felt like you were hitting a limit.

RS: And it just seemed like sculptors could build anything. It was so amazing. Maccarone Gallery, where I was showing at the time, had a lot of sculptors in it, like Oscar Tuazon and Alex Hubbard, artists who were welding steel and casting. All this stuff that I knew nothing about at all. If you showed me aluminum and steel, I wouldn't have been able to tell you which was which. It seemed like there was this huge realm that had all this potential, if you knew how to weld, you could build a whole pavilion, or whatever. Then I started going to the sculpture material store. That was also an amazing place. You could just tell there was a lot of potential in the materials.

OS: I often think painters find a kind of solace, even joy, in not having to worry too much about materials because you know exactly how they function, you've inherited a technique that's been honed over centuries, and within that tradition, you're free to do your thing. But you were always thinking about those materials in a way that is maybe uncharacteristic of painters.

Installation view: *Ryan Sullivan*, ICA Miami, Apr 16 – Aug 9, 2015.

RS: I wanted to get to the part that was exciting for me. And that was not glazing layers of oil paint. Even in high school, looking at Rauschenberg paintings, I was interested in the immediate, just gluing a picture on and putting a piece of red over it or something. Really feeling like there was something special in the act of making that, if you had the right language, could be powerful. My interest wasn't in the realm of rendering and depiction.

OS: Even if you're not depicting something, you can still use the effects of, let's say, layering glazes of oil paint. With painting, traditionally, at the end of the day, the materials fade, and the effect of the materials stays. Certainly, that happens in your paintings, including the spray paintings. But for me, I also never lose the sense that something else is happening, because of the strangeness of your materials and the way the works provoke doubt about their nature. In that way, I find you're doing something in excess of what painting knows how to give us as an experience.

RS: I just see them as paintings. I can't have that experience you're having, but I do think that in high school and college and after college, I was extremely self-conscious, like all young artists, because so much had already been done. So it's just really liberating and freeing to say, well, I'm just going to do it a different way. Because people have squeezed these techniques so dry.

OS: I think that's very true.

RS: It was just like: How do I get to that place of, say, early video artists, who felt like, 'Oh, I can do anything. I can just make videos in the kitchen of my SoHo loft.' Or like Rauschenberg making the Combines. Anything's possible.

OS: There's something unencumbered about what you're doing.

RS: It's trying to find freedom. I was getting to a place with the spray paintings where I knew what the materials did so well, that I'd have to really do backflips to surprise myself and feel like I discovered something. And at the time that was how I knew that the artwork was authentic.

That was probably a limited way of understanding painting, but I had to really feel like something, which I didn't know existed, had occurred.

When I'd try to make a second version or something, it always felt inauthentic. It didn't have the power of *capturing* something. So, getting to the sculpture thing: Yeah, it was a long slog. It went through many different iterations. At first, they were really graphic. Solid colors, no transparency. I exhibited one of those.

OS: Colors made in resin?

RS: Yes. Same technique. I remember I was invited to be in a show at a gallery and I had this one resin painting—the first one I exhibited—and I was like, 'Well, it's just a group show.' And a well-known collector came up to me and said, 'Well, that's brave.' At which point, I guess I was like, 'Oh fuck.' But the ball was already rolling.

Of course, it didn't sell, no one wrote about it, no one cared at all, they just thought I was crazy. I still have that painting. Then maybe six months to a year after that, Sadie Coles bravely invited me to make an exhibition of what I was working on.

I had a number of resin paintings that were corrugated. Those were quite difficult to paint, but they were definitely a transition from my old paintings because I was catching color on a three-dimensional surface. They're pretty cool actually, but also very limiting because the form is predetermined.

OS: Limiting because you were constantly dealing with the corrugated surface?

RS: Yes. Imagine pouring water on corrugated metal. It's always going in the same place. And it was like a race against time to get it to do something else. It was an extremely limited scope of possibility. I was very interested in making these things that, as objects, were weird. It wasn't appropriated from anywhere, it was a completely invented shape.

OS: You essentially sculpted the surface.

RS: Yes, and it took a long time. I started learning the same thing that my painter friends who work with fabricators learn: it's not as immediate as we're used to. It's not very gratifying because it takes forever. It's so much labor and money, so I kind of abandoned that in a way because I wanted to be able to do it myself. I wanted something that had more possibility for expansion.

So that's when I started doing the flat ones—or maybe I did it concurrently—but I started focusing on the flat ones. Then over the course of the last five or six years, just discovering a lot, still discovering a lot, and developing. I really think of them just as paintings. But I'm really thinking about something that you said earlier: I'm thinking, which one of these can I put in my house and feel like it's going to look different to me in a few years, reveal itself in time, and change the tenor of my home?

I'm really trying to understand what painting does in a way that's not physical and isn't about the object, but is like some borderline mystical thing, something open-ended enough that you can't domesticize it. You can't categorize it. I want to avoid giving people the opportunity to say, 'Oh, it's a volcano!' or, 'Oh, it's an aerial photo!' I'm trying to push people into an uncomfortable place of looking, because all of my positive art experiences have been arresting. They're the ones where I'm arrested by something that I don't understand. Being confronted with, someone's whole life work and language-building, world-making, whatever you want to call it, being confronted with it all at once in a still image, that is *not* moving, that is *not* time-based. It's an intimidating experience.

OS: Because life never stops.

RS: Of course, part of the change is happening inside you. So that's what I'm trying to say, by not allowing it to be categorized in that way, it has to kind of have elbow room. And I didn't understand painting that way until a few years ago.

OS: To me they very much feel like ontological objects, insofar as you stand in front of them and what you get is not an answer to the question of what am I looking at, all you get is the question itself, the question of: What is painting? What is the nature of and in this activity?

Ryan Sullivan studio, Brooklyn, New York, 2016.

RS: I feel like maybe a common denominator in artworks that are arresting—especially ones that are continually arresting—is either something you thought was essential that is missing or something you thought shouldn't be there is there. I am thinking always of Polke, but since we were talking about Christopher [Wool's] word paintings earlier, there's something missing in those and yet, there's nothing missing at all. It's all there. And they're not just provocations—they're great. SFMoMA has this huge Polke with meteor dust in the resin or beeswax, where you're like, 'Holy shit, it's something that shouldn't be there,' and it's all there, everything's there, it's magic. It's like one plus one equals three.

OS: It reminds me of what Bataille called "the accursed share," this excess that's produced by a certain kind of libidinal quality to experience that is also very much economic. It's sometimes referred to as "nonproductive expenditure." You work very hard to have an experience in which you don't really get some product out of it, yet you do get something else, which can't be accounted for by the kind of economics of your labor. It's an excess or remainder that everything actually depends on, that your whole life depends on—pleasure, rapture—but which has no way of being recuperated. It's also connected to desire in that way too.

RS: Which is what's so perverse about the way art is often written about in the press now, where often stories are centered around the economics of art.

OS: Yeah, and no matter how much paintings are valued by the market, that will never account for what makes them good. Very often it's the opposite. Some of the best things are highly undervalued, and some awful things, people pay

Sigmar Polke, *The Spirits That Lend Strength Are Invisible II (Meteor Extraterrestrial Material)*, 1988. Meteoric granulate and artificial resin on canvas. 158 in. × 118 in. (401.32 cm × 299.72 cm). The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © Estate of Sigmar Polke / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Germany

enormous amounts of money for. But that is connected to what people desire in things; they desire a certain kind of experience, or cultural marker, when they come to a painting. There are all sorts of expectations now, which are outside and around the painting, but not of it.

RS: That is definitely a thing you have to both think about and not think about, because you can't control people's experience of your painting. You can provoke them, you can take away certain lines of thought, however.

OS: Have you ever read Derrida's essay *The Truth in Painting*?

RS: No.

OS: In a sense, you could say he spends most of that essay talking about frames. He never says it explicitly, but one take away from that essay is that what's really true about painting—what we know for sure about it—is that it has a frame.

RS: Interesting. That reminds me of one of the only good experiences I've ever had going to a collector's house—in the dining room there were all these small Picassos where they had taken the frames off. They felt very fresh without the frame. It changed them.

OS: It's not as though there wouldn't be a frame when you take the actual frame off—the edge becomes the frame. But by making your steel frames for the resin paintings, it's a gesture, a statement that's undeniable. You are securing the viewer into an experience of expectation and suspending disbelief about what this thing is, at least until one approaches the surface. You are allowing the work to be a painting, fully, right up to the moment when all of that collapses, and you suddenly don't know what you've actually encountered.

RS: Right, so my framework is flatness, and the template of painting … a particular proportion or size and shape, and the fact that [the paintings] actually are framed, they sit on the wall, and they are colorful.

OS: And of course, the funny thing about flatness is that, on the one hand, they're radically flat—their surfaces are so smooth and almost licked—they couldn't be more flat in a way. But then of course they're not flat at all.

RS: Yes, and they're made out of a process that should actually result in a very messy, layered, crazy surface. But what you see is more like a slice or cross section.

OS: For me, they're almost serene when you first encounter them. There's a clearing out that happens. Then the more time you spend, the more time you become involved in the drama of what's going on inside them, of which there's no shortage.

RS: I'm trying to make them less loud. It was part of my development as a painter to realize that I didn't need to be so loud. I didn't need too much 'wham bam.' The paintings I want to live with are pretty quiet, I've found.

OS: Ryman's an interesting point of comparison for what you do.

RS: I'm so obsessed with him. At Dia:Beacon this summer they have three rooms of Ryman, and there are these small ones that he's done where the frames are hand-made, almost with cardstock, like you'd use for the covers of a book. They're not frames, but they're frames. They're just amazing.

OS: You don't think of what you're doing as risky in some way, do you? I think of Ryman's work as all about risk in a sense. That also goes back to your process, which requires you to set up a scenario, which requires fairly extensive and resource-intensive preparation, and then you must work quickly. And it's not inexpensive.

RS: I don't think about that. Though I do now since Covid, as all the material costs have doubled.

OS: Do you re-use the same molds?

RS: They wear out. The resin is aggressive, so with anything rubber, at first it comes out easy. Over time, it starts ripping the rubber off and then you have to throw it away.

OS: So in fact you have to build quite a few molds?

RS: Less so now. In the beginning I was making tons of molds and working all at the same time every day because I was really trying to get out of that preciousness and just try to become more carefree about it. Now I am more carefree about it. I just think, oh I have X amount of money to work with. With that, I can make a limited number of paintings. So that's 2022: twelve paintings.

OS: That takes a real commitment to your process, because it requires resources, time, and careful planning. If you're doing that, you're certainly not going to do something else. You're fully committed to this.

RS: I am. I miss it right now. In my old studio complex in Brooklyn, the buildings were so giant that I'd just open my studio doors and the ventilation would take the ambient air from the buildings and it would be decently warm. Now I have to open the windows, because my new building has air-tight windows, green standard, so I don't know what to do in the winter anymore.

OS: Do the materials need a certain climactic condition to function?

RS: Yes. Low humidity and temperate weather.

OS: Well, that's no problem, because you have at least three days a year in New York like that.

RS: I mean, it changes. If it's really cold, it means that the paint is liquid longer. So it just changes the painting. It's the same thing with my old paintings. My studio in Long Island City where I made those spray paintings, it was basically an outdoor studio. The fans ran 24 hours per day. Somehow it didn't freeze the pipes. In the winter, the paintings came out a certain way, and in the summer, when they dried fast, they came out a different way. That was interesting to me.

OS: So these environmental conditions have always had some impact.

RS: Yes, I'm totally interested in that. It's just a gift. It's hard to start. To know that the weather, this thing that's much bigger than one human being, is going to kind of get the ball rolling in one direction, or it's going to say, 'You must paint today! Because it's 30 percent humidity and 73 degrees.' That's all you need to get started, and really all you need to do is get started. Or it says, 'Sorry, you can't work.' I do kind of like that.

OS: It feels very concrete.

RS: It's very concrete, but it's like, an artist's studio has no rules. So you invent rules. I've heard the Mardens are obsessed with numerology. So many artists have been.

OS: John Cage and the *I Ching*.

RS: Yeah, exactly. You invent rules and that's how it works.

OS: But it's funny that you talk about weather because the paintings are like weather reports, in a way. They report back to us about a certain set of conditions, some of which you have set up and invented for yourself, others are imposed on you. Part of your materials are those conditions.

RS: Pictorially, some of them look like weather, which I'm trying to undercut. But definitely with my spray paintings, often it was like, they look like a topographical map, they look like such and such, and I really cringed at those interpretations. It was so far from what we were talking about earlier, this idea that they were like, I wouldn't necessarily say, *indexical*, but it was that. It was this other thing. And I felt deeply misunderstood by people who, I thought, were actually some very astute art observers. And it was very frustrating.

OS: When in fact, it was just that so many of the same kinds of processes that you were setting into motion are analogous to things that happen in nature. That's the opposite of the idea of your doing a topographic map.

RS: I had to learn that part of my job is to shut down those conversations. That's what the Polke with the meteor dust does.

OS: One last question. Do you care about beauty?

RS: Of course. But to me, beauty is the feeling of that moment of being confounded with something. That is what beauty is. I don't think it's, 'Oh, I'm taking a picture of this beautiful allium flower and I'm going to choose to work with those colors and translate that because it's beautiful.' It's much more like: How can I create the effect of beauty?

Ryan Sullivan studio, Queens, New York, November 2022. Photo: Richard Lee

ON VIEW IN TRIBECA

52 Walker
52 Walker St

Tau Lewis: Vox Populi, Vox Dei
October 28, 2022–January 7, 2023

81 Leonard Gallery
81 Leonard St

PAUSE: Lucky Charms
December 8–January 19, 2023

Alexander and Bonin
59 Wooster Street

Portraits: Dalton Paula, John Ahearn, and Rigoberto Torres
November 18–December 16, 2023

Artists Space
11 Cortlandt Alley

Yasunao Tone: *Region of Paramedia*
January 13–March 18, 2023

Renee Gladman
January 13–March 18, 2023

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery
7 Franklin Pl

Accompanied: Jennifer Paige Cohen
December 8–January 14, 2023

Ugo Rondinone & Quentin James McCaffrey
December 8–January 14, 2023

Bortolami Gallery
39 Walker St

Leda Catunda: *Geography*
November 4–December 23, 2022

Apple Red Cranberry House: Lena Henke, Michael Craig-Martin
November 4–December 23, 2022

Broadway
375 Broadway

Meg Lipke
December 8, 2022–January 14, 2023

Lars Fisk
January 19–February 25, 2023

CANADA
61 Lispenard

Carol Saft: *The Cynnie Paintings*
November 4–December 22, 2022

Xylor Jane: *Second Saturn Return*
November 4–December 22, 2022

Lee Relvas: *Frisson City*
November 4–December 22, 2022

Chapter NY
60 Walker Street

Antonia Kuo and Pauline Shaw
January–February, 2023

CHART
74 Franklin Street

More Light!
November 10, 2022–January 7, 2023

Isabella Cuglievan: *The Wallpaper of the Forest*
November 10, 2022–January 7, 2023

Carrie Schneider: *I Don't Know Her*
January 13–February 18, 2023

James Cohan Gallery
52 Walker Street

Yun-Fei Ji
November 17, 2022–January 7, 2023

48 Walker Street

Firelei Báez: *Americananana*
October 27–Dcemeber 21, 2022

Elsa Gramcko
January 6–February 11, 2023

Deli Gallery
36 White Street

Sergio Miguel: *Army of Angels*
November 17–December 23, 2022

Lila de Magalhaes: I*nvoluntary Earthling*
January 6–February 18, 2023

Jeffrey Deitch
76 Grand Street

Urs Fischer: *Xmas Drop Shop*
December 8–December 23, 2022

18 Wooster Street

Isabelle Albuquerque: *Orgy For Ten People In One Body*
November 12, 2022–January 14, 2023

Denny Dimin Gallery
39 Lispenard Street

i am an old phenomenon
November 4–20, 2022

Judy Ledgerwood: *Sunny*
January 7–February 11, 2023

George Adams Gallery
38 Walker Street

Sue Coe: *Political Television*
Through December 17, 2022

GRIMM
54 White Street

Gabriella Boyd: *Mile*
November 18, 2022–January 7, 2023

Dave McDermott: *The Varieties of Religious Experience*
November 18, 2022–January 7, 2023

Volker Hüller
January 13–February 25, 2023

The Hole
86 Walker Street

Carolyn Salas: *Five Ways To Reverse A Curse*
Through December 31, 2022

JDJ
373 Broadway

Heather Guertin: *The Changer and the Changed*
November 4–December 17, 2023

JTT
390 Broadway

Christine Sun Kim: *How Do You Hold Your Debt*
October 28–December 17, 2022

Marlon Mullen
Opening January 5, 2023

Kapp Kapp
86 Walker St

Brianne Garcia: *Screaming in a Whisper*
November 4–December 17, 2022

Gilbert Lewis: *Portraits*
January 14–February 25, 2023

Anton Kern Gallery
91 Walker Street

Ryan Wilde: *Circus of Solitude*
November 12, 2022–January 8, 2023

Andrew Kreps Gallery
22 Cortlandt Alley

Cheyney Thompson: *Intervals and Displacements*
November 11–December 21, 2022

55 Walker Street

Henry Shum: *Hex*
Through December 21, 2022

David Lewis
57 Walker Street

Alex Mackin Dolan: *Really New God*
November 4–December 22, 2022

LOMEX
86 Walker Street

David Flaugher: *Yard with Lunatics*
November 12–December 17, 2022

Luhring Augustine Tribeca
17 White Street

Philip Taaffe
November 11– December 22, 2022

Tunga: *Vê-nus*
January 13–February 25, 2023

Martos Gallery
41 Elizabeth Street

Arnold J. Kemp: *STAGE*
November 3–December 17, 2022

Mendes Wood DM
47 Walker Street

Antonio Obá: *Outras águas / Other waters*
November 16, 2022–January 21, 2023

Mother Gallery
368 Broadway

Anders Hamilton: *Brief but Tedious*
November 3–December 17, 2022

Off Paradise
120 Walker Street

Paint the Protest
Through January 27, 2023

Ortuzar Projects
9 White Street

June Leaf
November 4–December 21, 2022

Visual AIDS: *Postcards from the Edge*
2023 25th Anniversary
January 5–8, 2023

Joey Terrill: *Cut and Paste*
January 19–February 25, 2023

Patrick Parrish Gallery
50 Lispenard Street

Chris Beeston: *Purpose*
November 3–December 30, 2022

P·P·O·W
390 Broadway

Anton Van Dalen: *The War Comes Home*
December 9, 2022–January 28, 2023

Allison Schulnik: Purple Mountain
November 4–December 10, 2022

kaufmann repetto
55 Walker Street

Re-Materialized: The Stuff that Matters
January 13–February 18, 2023

Kerry Schuss Gallery
73 Leonard St

Mona Kowalska
November 3–December 17, 2022

Storage
52 Walker Street

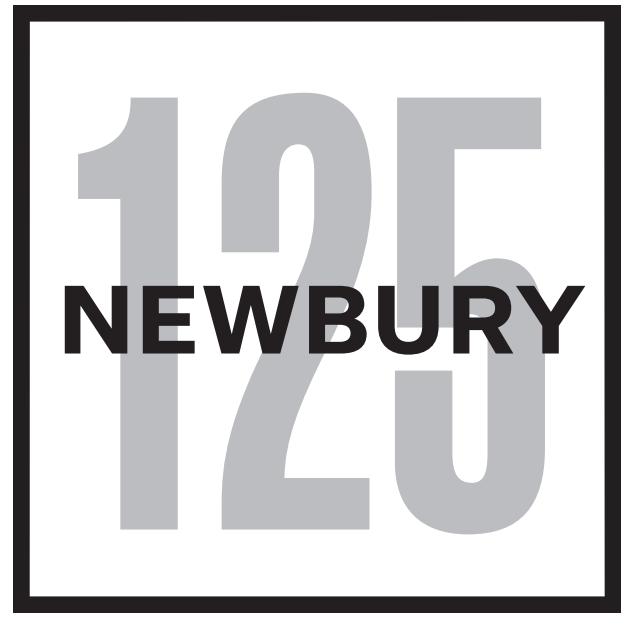
Press Release
September 9–December 18, 2022

Theta
184 Franklin Street

Militant Joy
Loretta Fahrenholz, Gritli Faulhaber, Nicole-Antonia Spagnola & Bedros Yeretzian, and SoiL Thornton
November 4–December 17, 2022

ULTERIOR
424 Broadway

Gaku Tsutaja
January 12–February 18, 2023



125 NEWBURY FREE PRESS

Publisher
Arne Glimcher

Editor-in-Chief
Oliver Shultz

Graphic Design
Vance Wellenstein

Contributing Editors
Kathleen McDonnell
Talia Rosen
Sarah Park

Rights and Permissions
Vincent Wilcke

Exhibition Manager
John Feely

Gallery Associate
Tumi Nwanma

Printing
Linco Printing

Cover photo: Richard Lee

125 NEWBURY

395 Broadway, New York, NY 10013
+1 (212) 371 5242
info@125newbury.com
125newbury.com