

Altoon Sultan

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

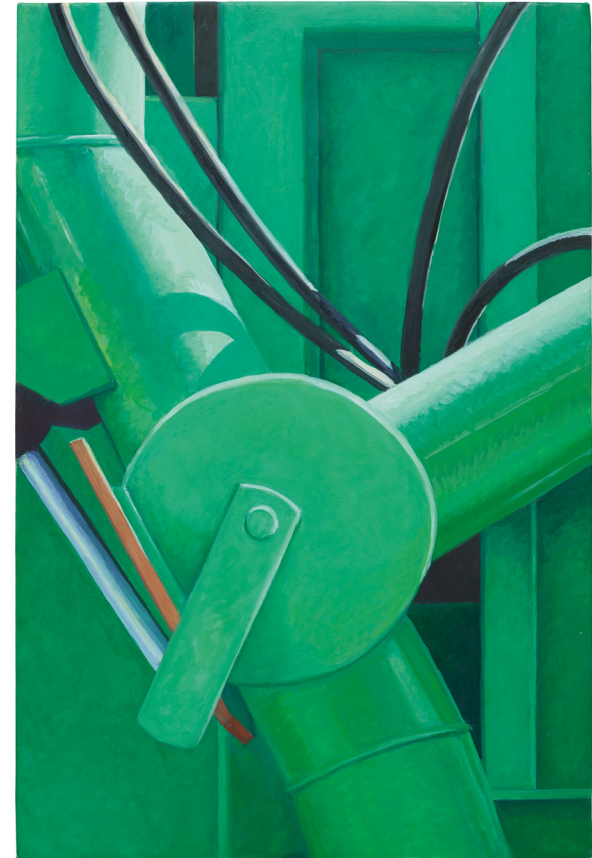
beside the white
chickens

William Carlos Williams



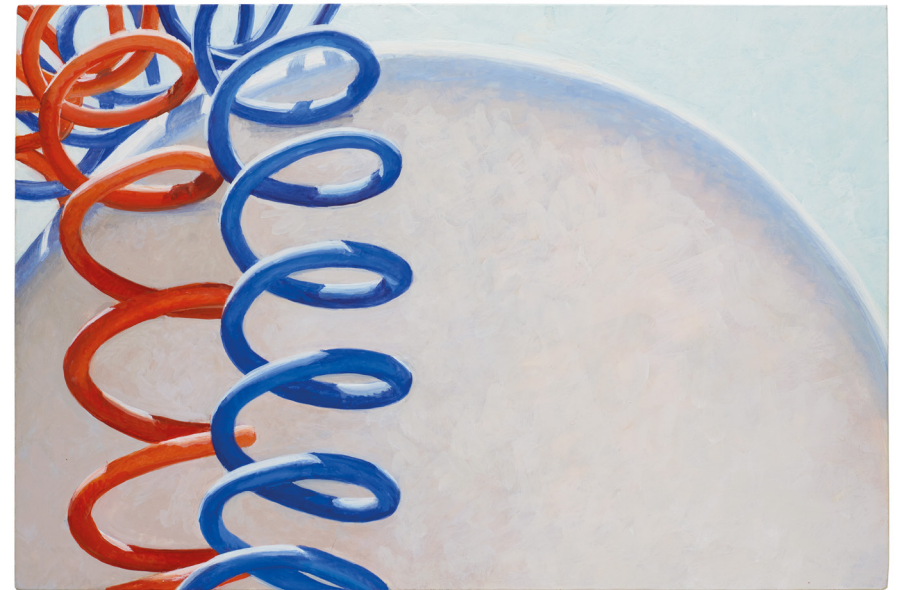














- 3 *Pointed*, 24 × 38 cm
- 5 *Green and Yellow Curves*, 22.8 × 33 cm
- 6 *Orange Mouth*, 20.3 × 29.8 cm
- 7 *Straddle*, 24.7 × 33 cm
- 9 *From a Circle*, 31.4 × 20.9 cm
- 10 *Two Black Curves*, 28 × 21.6 cm
- 11 *Across*, 28 × 19.7 cm
- 13 *Looped Handle*, 30.4 × 21.6 cm
- 14 *Black Handle*, 22.8 × 33 cm
- 15 *Red, White, and Blue*, 21.3 × 31.6 cm
- 17 *Black Bands*, 15.9 × 28 cm

All works egg tempera on calfskin parchment mounted on board, 2022

ALTOON SULTAN'S DECISIONS

John Yau

Altoon Sultan began exhibiting in 1971, shortly after graduating from Brooklyn College, where she studied with Philip Pearlstein and Lois Dodd, artists deeply committed to observational painting at a time when Minimalism, Colour Field abstraction, Conceptual art and Pop art dominated. By the late 1970s, she had gained attention for her meticulously painted, panoramic views of rural New England and New York farms. Rather than limiting herself to this landscape, Sultan also travelled to Louisiana and California and painted there. The focus running through these works was land use and abuse, and different means and methods of extracting from the earth. Their content arose out of an ecological consciousness.

In 1999, after working this way for nearly three decades, Sultan changed her approach. She began painting close-up views of the agricultural implements that viewers first saw in her panoramic landscapes, and ostensibly started pursuing a very different trajectory that to this day remains unlike anyone else's. In 2002, she bought her first digital camera. This inspired her to move even closer to the farm machines, and to take closely cropped views of different sections. In 2010, inspired by an exhibition of 15th-century illuminated manuscripts that she saw at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, she began painting cropped views of the machines in egg tempera on parchment stretched over wood, never larger than 13 inches in height and width.

In an interview with Rob Colvin, Sultan stated:

The heavy-duty content in the earlier paintings [...] began to take a back seat to my love of 20th-century abstraction. This distillation of image has continued today, as I paint small egg temperas that might be said to be a realist/abstract hybrid.¹

There are eleven small egg temperas in this exhibition at Hollybush Gardens, London. Sultan – who lives in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont – first uses a digital camera to take photographs of farm implements and machinery. While based on a detail that caught her attention, she is not

interested in transposing a realist view to a painting or a drawing. This shift from precise realism to abstract clarity leads to a different kind of seeing for both the artist and viewer. In her landscapes, Sultan was faithful to the atmospheric light, the colour of trees and leaves, and the machinery. In her current works, which are just as rooted in the material world, she observes the flat planes and rounded forms evident in compact details of machinery to develop a tonal palette inflected by contrasting hues. This is what gives these works a distinct and compelling twist. They are both real and imagined.

In Sultan's use of geometric forms, we might be tempted to see a connection to American Precisionism, and artists such as Charles Sheeler, Elsie Driggs, and Charles Demuth. Yet her interest in light and colour, the potentials inherent in her use of scale, and the negotiation of abstraction have led her to a place all her own.

In *Across* (all works 2022), Sultan has used a palette of turquoise green hues to evoke a cropped view of an unnameable machine. We cannot tell what is casting the light on the machine's different surfaces. We are not sure where we are located or how big the machine is. A thick, grey and yellow tube, located a little more than a third of the way down from the top edge, spans the width and becomes a kind of visual barrier, underscoring that the surface is a transparent plane (or window) that we are looking through. Behind this horizontal bar we see two thinner, flexible grey tubes that span the height of the work. One runs the entire height of the painting without a visible connection to the larger structure; the other emerges from the lower half of the composition via an exposed section of the machine. Our view is partial. This is one of the things I find fascinating about Sultan's parchment paintings. There is nothing overtly mysterious or esoteric about what we are looking at, and yet I cannot deduce much about the size or the overall shape of the machine. We live in a world where the limitation of description becomes apparent.

We see traces of brushstroke becoming light and surface. Tones shift. Throughout the works on view, Sultan seems to be suggesting that all of us are alienated from the world we inhabit, and from the machinery that makes our life easier and more efficient. However there is nothing didactic about these works, for these paintings also afford the pleasure of contemplating the internal rhythms of shape and colour. Through it all, naming eludes us. This non-verbal state further suggests that Sultan wants viewers

to experience the world she depicts before they can name it. At the same time, we are invited to enjoy the related hues, and interplay of light in shadow, in these carefully considered views.

The real-life counterparts of the metal and rubber forms we see in Sultan's paintings are stiff and maintain their shape, tending toward the geometric. In Sultan's compositions, the space the machinery inhabits is often shallow, and there are no signs of organic life. It is as if we are looking at pristine things that occupy an uninhabited world. For all that they owe to the real world, they are not about realism. Sultan is interested in colour and light, surface and volume, and how they inform each other. She is a formal artist who refuses to completely empty content from her work.

It seems to me that one of the standards that Sultan adheres to can be found in something her teacher, Philip Pearlstein, said:

The character of a work of art results from the technical devices used to form it, and the ultimate meaning and value of a work of art lie in the degree of technical accomplishment.

As an artist, I can accept no other basis for value judgements.²

When Sultan's practice shifted from oil on canvas to tempera on parchment, she essentially had to learn a new process and materials, something she has done more than once in her life. She walked away from what she knew how to do: painting a panoramic view of a farm in a landscape. By deciding to step away from painting in oil on canvas, Sultan elected to extricate herself from the masterpiece tradition that is considered central to Western painting.

The exploration is unironic. *Black Handle*, for example, is dominated by a palette that moves from salmon pinks to warm reds, with grey-black detailing and a suggested backdrop of pale bluish-white. I wonder if the final view that Sultan chooses to alter, and paint, is connected to a vision of the human body, its tubes of circulation, appendages, and openings. This understanding gives us another way to look at Sultan's temperas. For all their visual immediacy, sensuous use of colour and articulation of surface, we cannot pin them down. Sultan's paintings open up a space where we can reflect upon the relationship of language and visual experience, and much else.

1 Altoon Sultan in conversation with Rob Colvin, 'From Landscape to Abstraction', *Hyperallergic*, 3 May, 2012. <https://hyperallergic.com/50846/altoon-sultan/>

2 Philip Pearlstein quoted in: Taylor Dafoe, 'Philip Pearlstein, a Figurative Master Who Preferred Nude Portraits Over New Modes of Abstraction, Has Died at 98', *artnet news*, December 19, 2022. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/philip-pearlstein-has-died-at-98-2232589>



Hollybush Gardens install February 2023

ALTOON SULTAN (b. 1948, Brooklyn, NY, USA) lives and works in Groton, Vermont. She received her BA and MFA degrees from Brooklyn College, where she studied with Philip Pearlstein and Lois Dodd. Sultan's work advocates a tradition of realism in which capturing perceived reality is second only to its stringent, vivid and precise interpretation.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Paintings*, Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles; *Altoon Sultan*, McKenzie Fine Art, New York (all 2021); *Drawings and a Painting*, Feuilleton, Los Angeles (2020); *Altoon Sultan*, McKenzie Fine Art, New York (2017); *Modern Grid and Mystic Forms*, David Hall Fine Art, Wellesley (2015); and *Surface Tension: Lindsay Hook and Altoon Sultan*, Riverside Arts Center (2014). She has participated in numerous significant group exhibitions, including *Small Paintings*, Venus Over Manhattan, New York (2022); *The Stubborn Influence of Painting*, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art (2021); *The Heat of the Moment*, McKenzie Fine Art, New York; *For America: Paintings from the National Academy of Design*, travelling exhibition at Dayton Art Institute; New Britain Museum of American Art; The Society of the Four Arts, Palm Beach; Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis; New Mexico Museum of Art; Figge Art Museum, Davenport; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento (all 2019); *Through Line: Drawing and Weaving by 19 Artists*, Steve Turner, Los Angeles; *New England Now*, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne (all 2018); *The Ritual of Construction*, Kleinert/James Center for the Arts, Woodstock (2017); *Looking Out, Looking In: Windows in Art*, The Heckscher Museum of Art, Huntington (2016); *Going Big*, Central Booking Gallery, New York (2015); and *The Annual 2014: Redefining Tradition*, National Academy Museum, New York (2014).

Her work is held in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; and the Fleming Museum at the University of Vermont.

JOHN YAU is a poet, art critic, independent curator, and publisher of Black Square Editions, whose reviews appear regularly in the online magazine, *Hyperallergic*. He is the author of the recently published monograph, *Joe Brainard: The Art of the Personal* (Rizzoli, 2022). His forthcoming publication is a selection of essays, *Please Wait by the Coatroom: Reconsidering Race and Identity in American Art* (Black Sparrow, 2023). The recipient of the 2018 Jackson Prize in poetry and the 2021 Rabkin Award in art criticism, he lives in New York.

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