

ARTFORUM

Altoon Sultan

Chris Sharp Gallery

By Red Cameron



Altoon Sultan, *Repeating Curves*, 2023, egg tempera on calfskin parchment mounted on wood panel, 6 3/4 × 13".

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The recent paintings of Altoon Sultan, which were on display in her exhibition “New Paintings” at Chris Sharp, defy simple genre categorization. Lacking human figures, these were not portraits; largely devoid of recognizable objects, the paintings were not still lifes; and given their lack of clear horizon, it would be difficult to argue that Sultan is painting landscapes. The bright, flat hues and occasional hard angle in each composition suggested abstraction, but the carefully rendered shading of raw daylight implied representation of a world inside the image, not only on its surface. Installed with ample space between them so that each indeed seemed like a world of its own, the twelve small paintings on view here offered close, angular, and idiosyncratic views of industrial agricultural machinery.

And what object is more naturally industrial than the photograph? As the press release for the exhibition stated, the paintings were “based on photos that the artist takes herself in the summer.” Yet the source seemed self-evident. The small scale and sizing of each panel revealed a ratio derived from its 35-mm, 4 × 5”, or panorama source, and the cropping and framing of each composition suggested the camera’s propensity for elision—the viewfinder’s ability to cut out the rest of the world and focus on the details. Indeed, objects within these paintings were generally larger than what was seen, continuing somewhere out of frame. The wheels in *Red Circle* (all works 2023) turn outside the image, the tubing in *Repeating Curves* pumps liquid to and from elsewhere, and the domed pipe in *Tall Orange* is connected to something seemingly massive but largely unseen.

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This is not to say that the paintings represented a straightforward selection of the world's details; these were thoroughly constructed compositions, and Sultan has worked hard to make the viewer aware of that fact. Small attacks of brilliance punctuated the pictures: In *Open*, a rectangular white smear forms a highlight that doesn't quite assist in rendering the curve of the surface on which it is supposed to sit; in *Around*, the watery drip of shadow coming from the green coil approaches but does not meet its geometrically curved outer edge; *squiggles* includes thin channels of red on the twisting blue tube that suggest a reflective high-gloss sheen. These are all examples of paint's unique capacity to emphasize the distance between apparent image and material reality.

A similar distance between the technical processes of photography and the manual craft of academic easel painting inhabited Sultan's artworks, which thus divulged another set of relationships to the world. The Photorealist use of one medium as the content of another medium may now be commonplace and certainly has a substantial art history. Sultan subverted that history by allowing for the cropping and framing of her compositions to suggest the photographic source of her paintings rather than traditional verisimilitude. This allowed her to focus on the particular means by which the world revealed in each painting was ultimately constructed by form, color, and the deft application of paint, despite their source in a technical reality. Vision was here directed at and through the machinery of modernity to arrive back at the particular and nonrational eccentricities of human sight.

Thus, Sultan's diminutive paintings stand in slant contradiction to Edward Weston's suggestion that "it is difficult to see too personally with the very impersonal lens-eye" or that "a photograph, done in this spirit, is not an interpretation, a biased opinion of what nature should be, but a revelation—an absolute, impersonal recognition of the significance of facts." Sultan seems to photograph industrial details with an eye focused on interrogating precisely such technical revelation of the world and then sets about recomposing the significance of facts in painted worlds. How shallow is the other undulation coming from the left in *Mint Green and Yellow*? How wide and deep are the openings and crevices that appear central to that depicted machine's construction, and how does it seem apparent, despite the many tonal transitions of the painting's titular colors, that the thing seen in the image is made of metal or, even further, of steel? These are purely formal questions, to be sure, but in them and in the small stature of these paintings, larger questions loom. Something here suggested greatness come to very little and the monumental reduced to constituent parts, beauty beaming forth in the haze of industrial objects stripped of use or value and made image, and the artist's gaze directed past reason and its many uses toward the world's free realm of appearances simultaneously found and constructed.