

INDEPENDENT

ALTOON SULTAN'S ENIGMATIC RESISTANCE

by Francesca Gavin
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Altoon Sultan's intimate paintings exude outsized energy. Her compositions depicting abstracted details of industrial objects vibrantly use intense blues, oranges and greens. The results, which are the subject of a forthcoming solo presentation by Chris Sharp Gallery at Independent New York, sit between the abstract and the figurative with a certain, enigmatic focus. These are works that dive into the concept of form and depth, while simultaneously saying something about the industrial, capitalist underpinnings of contemporary existence.

Sultan's history is impressive. The Brooklyn native initially focused on French and art history at Brooklyn College in the 1960s, before switching to art. "I was lucky enough to have fantastic teachers—among them Philip Pearlstein and Lois Dodd—and I was inspired to take it seriously and continue," Sultan recalls. "Lois Dodd was my first drawing teacher in 1968. An experience in her class is still important to me as I think back on it: she invited the class to her studio on Manhattan's Lower East Side for a life drawing session. For an unsophisticated kid from Brooklyn, this was a great revelation, and an invitation to enter that world." Pearlstein mentored Sultan in graduate school, helping her gain a scholarship to Tanglewood and supporting her application to Skowhegan's famous summer program.



Altoon Sultan, *Striped Cylinder*, 2021, egg tempera on calfskin parchment mounted on board, 8 × 9 1/2 inches, courtesy of the artist and Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles



Altoon Sultan, *Wings*, 2021, egg tempera on calfskin parchment mounted on board, 9 × 11 inches, courtesy of the artist and Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles

The artist had her first exhibition at Marlborough Gallery in New York City in 1977. Here she exhibited paintings of domestic, largely Victorian, architecture. Over time agricultural landscape, transformed by human intervention, became her subject. Today her paintings balance the figurative and abstraction in an immensely original way. A lot of her work appears to represent details of industrial objects. In fact, these crops are taken from photographs of agricultural machinery and other implements that the artist takes at dairy farms in her area of northeastern Vermont, an area called 'the Northeast Kingdom'. "I look for strong compositions of shape, form, color, and light. I shoot close to the subjects—their details—in order to hide real-world references, and emphasize those abstract elements. I find a wealth of interesting compositions in these subjects."

Sultan's colored forms feel structural and almost architectural but reduced to the point of abstraction. She organizes shape, volume and depth with strongly tactile results. Her work originally emerged from a realist practice, depicting expansive agricultural landscapes. Overtime, she came closer and closer to the objects in her landscapes. "I was focusing on the ambivalent nature of agriculture, its use of plastics and fossil fuels to provide us with food. Gradually I became more interested in the forms I was depicting, their abstract qualities, rather than their meaning," the artist notes. After 50 years of working with representation, she wanted to continue exploring the physical nature of the world. As she explains, "my current, almost-hybrid, work satisfies my desire for clear, concise depiction, while presenting an image that is an enigma."

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She notes she is attracted to "abstraction's ability to carry deep feeling with minimal means." In a text she wrote about Malevich and Suprematism in 2011, Sultan explores his relationship to the real, "it seems to me that Malevich was searching for a means to express a bedrock reality, apart from pure visual sensation. It is this search for essential form and clarity that is so compelling to me and makes geometric/minimalist/reductive painting such an inspiration."

There is a distinctly American texture or atmosphere to Sultan's works. The artist herself sees a relationship to 20th century American Precisionist artists such as Charles Sheeler, Elsie Driggs, Ralston Crawford and Charles Demuth. She shares their interest in industrial structures, flatness, linear spaces and the industrial landscape. Sultan is more critical of the spaces and context she depicts, yet there is a fascination with the object and form that echoes this history. Older historic influences have also fed into her work including early-Renaissance painting and the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves* manuscript at the Morgan Library. "I love the idea of using an ancient medium to picture very modern machinery. It's quirky, and it's unexpected; it creates interest, and surprise."



Altoon Sultan, *Dark Shapes*, 2021, egg tempera on calfskin parchment mounted on board, 8 1/4 x 11 inches, courtesy of the artist and Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles



Altoon Sultan, *Dark Corner*, 2021, egg tempera on calfskin parchment mounted on board, 8 1/4 x 11 inches, courtesy of the artist and Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles

Sultan's techniques are also rooted in history. Notably she uses egg tempera— even writing a technique book on the subject entitled *The Luminous Brush*. "For many years I had been enamored of Quattrocento Italian painting, which led me to learn egg tempera painting in the mid 90s. I found that this technique was perfectly suited to my precise way of painting, so much so that I eventually stopped painting with oils." At first she worked on gessoed panels with a cross-hatching technique, but now makes very small paintings on calfskin parchment, stretched over plywood panel. "I began to use the beaten white of an egg - called glair - as a binder, which was used for medieval manuscript painting. Because egg tempera is translucent, and dries immediately, it allows for layering of color using techniques such as glazing and scumbling, to make final colors that are especially vivid.

Her take on color is central. Her works play with tone. There is no chromophobia here. She's not afraid to work with aquamarine or vibrant peach. Sultan works with a large number of pigments – up to 45 cadmiums, cobalts and earth colors. She grinds her pigments with distilled water, storing them in small jars, ready for mixing with her egg binder. "I am constantly aware of each color's attributes - its hue, value, and intensity - as I mix it. My color choices not only depend on the subject, but also on the light playing over it, the turning of the form, its position in space; all these characteristics must be working in order to create a convincing image."

Sultan also works with sculpture, textile and drawing – the latter being the foundation for her all her work. What all these media share is her unique take on color and form, layering and composition. The brilliant results take elements of modernism into fresh directions, balancing this heritage with emotion and critique.