

Machine Aesthetics

The Vermont-based painter Altoon Sultan makes small tempera paintings of farm equipment that hover between realism and abstraction.



Altoon Sultan: *Inside a Curve*, 2025

The thirteen paintings in Altoon Sultan's exhibition at Hoffman Donahue take up little of the gallery's wall space. Hung low, with varying distances between them, the works never exceed fourteen inches on a given side. But what they show is big. Big in a literal sense—Sultan paints cropped fragments of large agricultural machines that she has digitally photographed near her home in Vermont—and in a symbolic one. Craft and mechanization, the collective and the individual, country and city: farm technology exemplifies the far from frictionless process by which each of those terms gives way to the other, by which the old world becomes the new.

These transformations have preoccupied painters for well over a century. In a series of essays from the 1920s Fernand Léger wondered if "the mechanical element," often seen as an existential threat to artists, could in fact offer an opportunity. Machines can be beautiful—Léger muses about farm equipment "decked out like a butterfly or a bird"—but their beauty serves commercial functions. Art, by contrast, Léger argues, is harder to instrumentalize; it relies upon "a controlled subjectivity built on objective raw material." To achieve what he called his "machine aesthetic," then, he disassembled the machine's shapes and colors to create paintings at once suggestive and abstract. Recognizable forms—a human figure, a bowl of fruit, a tube of paint—take on the shining and fragmented constitution of industrial output and infrastructure.

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The titles of Sultan's works, like *Inside a Curve* (2025) and *Offbeat Cylinders* (2026), echo Léger's formalism, but her style more readily recalls a cohort of Léger's US contemporaries, who were known as the precisionists.¹ These artists—such as Elsie Driggs, Louis Lozowick, and Charles Sheeler—captured the country's transforming environment with a clarity and rigidity that seemed to stand for the age of engineering. Few of their paintings include people at work, which at the time prompted some critics to accuse the artists of romantic affirmation of industrial development. Sheeler's *American Landscape* (1930) shows the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge factory just as Henry Ford might want it: functioning almost entirely without wage earners. But a more sympathetic view could be that Sheeler evokes the eerie ambiguity of the factory's impact on the social and the natural landscape. He naturalizes its smoke as clouds; the scene's overall stasis embalms the technological advancements it otherwise heralds.

Sultan, writing about Sheeler's art in *Art Journal*, in the late 1990s, saw a "tension between realism and abstraction" that allowed a "political subtext" to hide beneath the picture's surface. She has aimed for a similar tension in her own work, especially since the mid-1990s, when she relocated full-time from New York to Vermont and switched her primary medium from oil to egg tempera, a technique that dates to antiquity and notably features in Tuscan paintings of the early Renaissance.

Inside a Curve, for example, shows a cogwheel in a drive chain that extends a few inches before disappearing behind a panel of the machine. Sultan paints the wheel and chain brownish gray and the rest of the device—which fills all but a sliver of the panel—a radiant blue that makes one think of the robe worn by Duccio's Gabriel. Shadows darken some of the blue and conjure a set of doubles behind their referents: an additional wheel and chain, now in monochrome and lacking the details of their originals. Another shadow at top right has no referent. These silhouettes suggest the distribution of light at a particular moment of the day—in this case the hard light of the afternoon—but Sultan simultaneously isolates her subject from time. Even more than Sheeler's factory, her objects look like they have not been used (she erases signs of wear and tear) and cannot be used (they are without workers, immobile, fragmentary). They are at once new and obsolete.

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Sultan was born in Brooklyn, in 1948, and studied art at Brooklyn College, where her instructors included Lois Dodd and Philip Pearlstein. Both shared a tendency among New York painters of the 1960s to turn away from abstract expressionism, the dominant idiom of the previous decade, which now struck many artists as rote and commonplace. Some of them, in turn, took up minimalism or pop; others used conventional painting genres and techniques to showcase new kinds of people, places, or things. In the ensuing decade, galleries and museums mounted numerous exhibitions dedicated to the latter approach, a broad sensibility variously termed new realism, photorealism, and superrealism, among other names.

The critic Barbara Rose called much of it “treacle and trash.” This sort of painting, she argued, was at once a market phenomenon—paintings like Richard Estes’s looked “very hard to do, and hard work has always been appreciated in America”—and a capitulation to an image economy that esteemed technological precision to the detriment of fine art. Estes’s empty cityscapes, despite their frenetic detail, appeared to Rose “incredibly dead,” a passive expression of capitalist modernity’s dehumanizing effects.²

Her criticism reflected a then-common position: that abstract painting had forever delegitimized realism. But even Rose allowed some of the new realism to stand, specifically painting that “engages in a dialogue with abstract art.” She cited artists with modernist commitments, like Alfred Leslie and Pearlstein, who painted human figures fastidiously but uncomfortably, their bodies posed in contorted positions or unreal spaces, often cropped by the edges of the canvas.

The unconventional cropping recalled photography, which many of Pearlstein’s peers viewed as a tool for moving beyond art’s historical relationship to illusion. Robert Bechtle felt that the “only way to get away from style and ‘Art’ was to paint things as they really looked,” after the fashion of the photographic snapshot. To Pearlstein, the human figure had neither a social nor an interior life; it was, he said, “a found object.” Here realism becomes a critical elaboration of modernist art, not a rejection of it. Pearlstein conceived of himself as a “post-abstract” painter.

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Sultan began her career in the early 1970s within this setting and with interests that spanned photorealism, minimalism, and earlier kinds of abstract painting, from that of the former Brooklyn College professor Ad Reinhardt back to the Russian and Soviet Suprematism of the 1910s and 1920s.³ Her early paintings, shown at the downtown co-op First Street and then at Marlborough Gallery, featured people, land, and architecture, often painted from life around the Northeast and demonstrating a facility with photorealism's balance of informal mise-en-scène and all-over detail.

Sultan earned praise from critics as disparate as Hilton Kramer and a young Douglas Crimp, who in 1973 wrote that her paintings went “far beyond snapshot realism to explore classic pictorial relationships.” And she had some commercial success: a 1978 article in *New York* magazine by the critic Carter Ratcliff singles her out for selling well despite institutional biases against young artists. But before long Sultan defected from the city. In the 1980s she bought a house in Vermont; by the mid-1990s, she had settled there. Her art-making—which, in addition to painting, grew to include geometric reliefs and rug hooking—now shared time with small-scale, self-sustaining agricultural work.

It sounds like a nice existence, but Sultan recognizes its anachronism. “While living a pastoral idyll,” she writes in the *Art Journal* essay, “I paint images that confront the industrial present of agriculture.” That industrial present, for Sultan as it was for Léger, is a source of ambivalence. She recognizes the cost that mechanized agriculture exacts on “our health, soil, and water.” Still, for an artist, she acknowledges, the “monumentality” of the machines remains “exciting.”

That excitement comes through in her paintings of the 1980s and 1990s, where she resists the temptation, common to seventeenth-century Dutch and nineteenth-century US art, to naturalize the machine's presence in the landscape. The textures of the metals and plastics she depicts clash with those of their natural surroundings; at the same time, the artificial materials cohere within the compositions. In *Hills, Barnet, VT* (1994), a John Deere picks up its yellow from a haystack and green from the grass; a pile of tires and hay bales, the latter covered in white material, settles into the landscape even as it obstructs the view of the mountains beyond.

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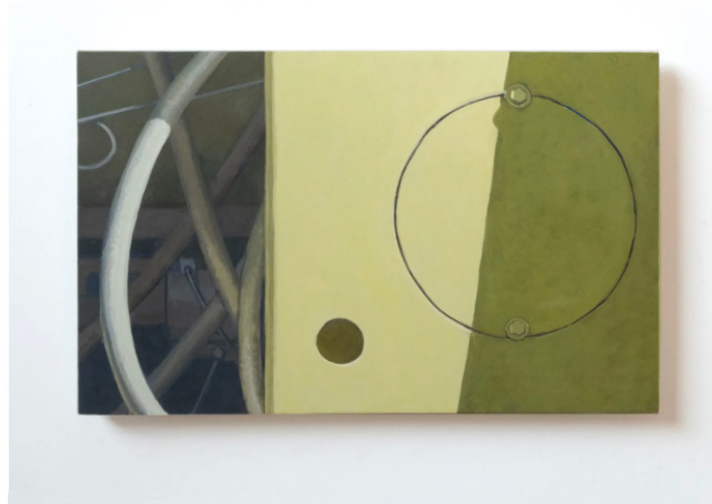
Altoon Sultan: *Accordion Folds*, 2026

For the past twenty years, Sultan has left the landscape aside to focus on the machine itself, or parts of it. Several of the paintings at Hoffman Donahue make partiality their subject. They present cords, pipes, and tubing that extend as if beyond the edges of the panels, displacing the viewer's attention, if momentarily, from the painting to the worlds behind it, both literal (Manhattan gallery) and figurative (Vermont farm).

But Sultan often disrupts the path from point A to point B. In *Tall Handle* (2025) a tractor fragment sits in front of what looks less like barn siding than like abstract painting: flat, red, striped. *Through an Opening* (2026), likewise flat and red, displays warning labels from which Sultan has removed the text. *Tall Handle* and *Through an Opening* are both vertical, an orientation more common to portraiture than landscape.⁴ *Through an Opening's* opening—a metal aperture through which tubes run—might look to some viewers like a face.

Ascribing life, even humanity, to the machines risks affirming the worker's expendability, as detractors said of Sheeler. But if the US landscape has accommodated the machine, Sultan's paintings suggest, the machine does not accommodate the human: *Tall Handle* is the only object in the show that includes a mechanism with which to operate it. The most visible labor in the paintings is Sultan's own. Her brushstrokes, which appear in irregular patterns on the surfaces and sides of her panels, put time and human effort into a visual field that in some ways carefully excludes it.

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Altoon Sultan: *Bolted Circle*, 2025

Yet Sultan finally declines to fetishize the old as much as she refuses to naturalize the new. *Tall Handle* has foreground and background, but most of the other works at Hoffman Donahue employ nonhierarchical compositions, a strategy that her photorealist predecessors like Bechtle valued for its ability to decenter the artist's intervention and disperse the viewer's attention across the entire composition. In *Bolted Circle* (2025), Sultan takes advantage of parchment's gauziness to add indeterminate depth to a collection of curved figures. The bolted circle, formed by dark outline against a yellow-green surface, looks incised, or maybe not; a smaller circle to its left, turned olive by shadow, looks recessed, but only slightly.

Moving left, the surface falls away as the subtle plays of depth become pronounced, with tubes bending up and down, fore and aft. These discrete, seemingly incommensurable sections, embedded in the same plane, call to mind abstraction, not only the sort that underlies much painting, realist and otherwise, but also the kind that defines much modern labor, as workers have less and less direct, sustained interaction with the tools on which their production depends. This sort of abstraction, Sultan indicates, remains a material—almost an organic—fact of the landscape in its own right, a dynamic onto which her work opens in its own small ways. ●