

HYPERALLERGIC

Altoon Sultan's Powerful Challenge

Sultan's works implicitly reject the corporate scale of the Minimalists in favor of a domestic and intimate space

For those who have followed Altoon Sultan's work, this story — which is now familiar — bears repeating. In 2010, while viewing an exhibition of 15th-century illuminated manuscripts at the Morgan Library, she was inspired to begin painting in egg tempera on parchment stretched over wood, always in a format no larger than 12 inches in height and width.

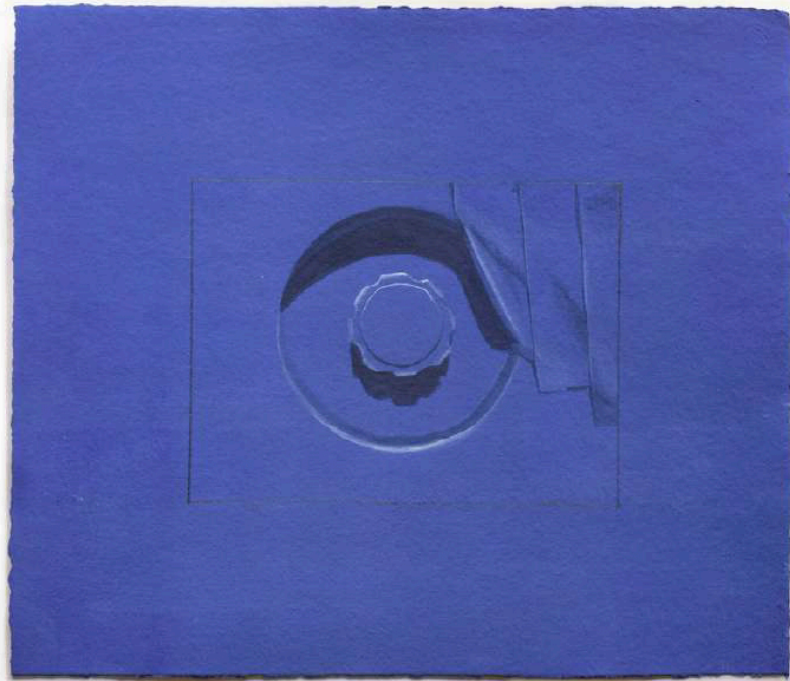
On another occasion, a drawing by Albrecht Dürer, in which the ink soaked into the paper, roused Sultan to begin working on hand-toned paper using only black ink and white gouache.

Likewise, Lorenzo Ghiberti's bronze doors of the Florence Baptistery prompted her to make monochrome bas-reliefs out of porcelain.

In each of these undertakings, Sultan had to learn a new process and become familiar with the materials needed to work in her particular way. In this sense, she always seems to be a student committed to expanding her possibilities. She is a DIY artist, whose multivalent practice bears no resemblance to anyone else's.

Her most recent exhibition, *Altoon Sultan* at McKenzie Fine Art (January 6–February 14, 2021), includes her egg tempera paintings and ink and gouache drawings on toned paper as well as “two types of fiber-based works: hooked wool textiles and hooked wool drawings,” as the gallery press release describes them.

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Altoon Sultan, "Center Round" (2020), gouache and ink on hand-toned paper, 11 5/8 x 13 1/2 inches

What unites these very different bodies of work within her sprawling oeuvre is her passionate curiosity about the bond between color and materiality. From the smooth, glowing surfaces of the parchment to the graphic palpability of her hooked wool textiles, each union of color and materiality results in a different aesthetic experience, which is further inflected by Sultan's ardent engagement with her subject matter, the permeable border between abstraction and representation, the history of abstraction, and the possibilities of domestic craft.

At the heart of the unique space these distinct bodies of work occupy is Sultan's radical conversation with art history and craft tradition from the Renaissance to the present, which looks to varied theories about color as defined by figures as diverse as Josef Albers and Clement Greenberg. I say "radical" because, in her

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devotion to craft and her attention to the bonding of material, color, and light, Sultan initiates a high-minded conversation about art and aesthetics, and their relationship to everyday life and materials, similar to that of Robert Ryman. Ryman explored industrial materials, such as MDF and Tyvek panels, while Sultan makes and uses hand-dyed wool.

Another person Sultan shares something with is Wendell Berry, a novelist, poet, farmer, and environmental activist, who believes one's work should be grounded in, as well as draw sustenance from, the rural environment in which they have elected to live (Vermont and Kentucky, respectively).

I have composed this lengthy introduction to Sultan to properly contextualize the career and different bodies of work of an artist who challenges the categories and boundaries used to distinguish art from craft, abstraction from representation, and the modern from the classical and even antique. The place her work vigorously defines as well as comfortably occupies is singular and formidable.



Altoon Sultan, "Transparent" (2020), hand-dyed wool on linen, 16 1/4 x 14 3/4 inches

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The exhibition features six works made with hand-dyed wool on linen. All are either rectangles or are irregularly shaped, often with the format determined by the shapes making up the composition.

“Transparent” (hand-dyed wool on linen, 16 1/4 × 14 3/4 inches, 2020) is a magnificent visual conundrum composed of two parallelograms overlapping a rectangle. Imagine Frank Stella’s shaped paintings meeting Josef Albers’s color studies in a hooked rug, where each tubular, macaroni-like stitch of color is visible, like an elongated bead of paint, and you’ll get some idea of the perceptual paradoxes that Sultan achieves in these works.

Where the three planes overlap, Sultan stitches (or “paints”) four different-sized monochromatic planes, each marked by its own hue. The colors convey the imaginative reality that we are seeing three transparent monochromatic planes that overlap to produce a hybrid hue.

From the play between the flatness of the rectangles to the spatiality suggested by parallelograms, and from the solidity of stitched planes to the transparent planes evoked by the color, the many interlocking contradictions of “Transparent” delight the mind and tickle the eyes. It also reminds us that everyday life is paradoxical and that it is useful to resist the temptation to make it fit into one box.

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At the same time, the scale of Sultan's works implicitly rejects the large corporate space favored by the generation of Minimalists that ascended in the 1960s in favor of a domestic and intimate space. This seems to me a trenchant cultural critique that never calls attention to itself but is — as the cliché goes — plain as day.

This is the powerful beauty of Sultan's work. She celebrates craft out of her desire to be involved with the making of the materials she uses, not because she is interested in making a commentary on the relationship between art and craft. What we encounter in "Transparent" is a multilayered totality of materials and genres, from weaving and hand-dyed wool to geometric abstraction, shaped paintings, and color studies. What elevates this and her other fiber-based works is that she does not repeat herself. In each one of the six pieces in the exhibition she investigates a different possibility.

In "Sphere" (hand-dyed wool on linen, 16 × 11 inches, 2020), Sultan arranges the hand-dyed woolen tubes into distinctly colored sections, turning the work into a pictorial composition, rather than a patterned one. By hooking each section in a particular direction, she defines the sphere according to a circular alignment, which goes from dark mauve along the bottom edge to light mauve at the top and center. This suggests an aerial view of a sphere lying on a pale umber ground, while, at the same time, the orange band beneath it evokes the possibility that it is resting on a shelf.

In this group of works, Sultan's meticulous mastery is always at the service of a perceptual outcome that differs in each piece.

In the group of four linen works, on which she applies tempera and adds lines and forms with sections of hand-dyed wool, she is in conversation with the expressive power of variously colored abstract shapes, inspired in part by the symbolic abstract shapes in [Indian Tantric art](#), which the poet and curator Franck André Jamme first brought to New York at the beginning of this century.

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Altoon Sultan, "Red Bars" (2020), egg tempera on calfskin parchment stretched over wood, 13 × 9 3/4 inches

The egg tempera paintings are based on photographs Sultan takes of agricultural machinery. She edits the images until she arrives at a geometric composition based on the machines. The luminous palette of pinks, blues, and yellows, accented by different intensities of gray, combined with the close-up views, makes the source nearly impossible to guess. Sultan wants to transport the viewer to a place where the thing itself falls away, and the elemental pleasure of gazing intently at the interplay of surface, form, space, color, shadow, and light takes over.

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Although the largest egg tempera painting in the exhibition is only 9 by 12 inches, the forms within them feel monumental. A further contradiction is elicited in her use of soft, glowing colors to convey dense metal surfaces. Sultan is most successful when the close-up view eliminates all signs of the sky, as well as makes it futile to determine how close you are to what you are looking at. It is at this point that the ordinary becomes mysterious.

In her works on toned paper, Sultan defines a rectangle within the rectangle. Within the smaller rectangle, which functions as an illusionistic inset, she depicts a highly cropped view of a wheel-like form or a cylinder.

If I were to enumerate all the conventions Sultan challenges, I would begin the list with her rejection of post-easel scale; her engagement with historical practices that have fallen into disuse; her refusal to recognize the differences between domestic crafts, such as rug making, and fine art, such as tempera painting; her collapsing of the distinctions separating domestic practices (weaving), farming (raising sheep), cottage industry (hand-dyeing), and art making. A fiercely independent artist, she has produced a diverse body of art that is worthy of a long-overdue museum survey.

Altoon Sultan continues at McKenzie Fine Art (55 Orchard Street, Manhattan) through February 14.