

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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Donald Sultan

THE NATURE OF THINGS

September 8 – October 22, 2022

Opening reception: Thursday, September 8, 6:00-8:00 pm

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce Donald Sultan: *THE NATURE OF THINGS*, an exhibition of new works by the acclaimed artist. The eight paintings and four drawings included in this exhibition are a continuation of Sultan's ongoing investigation of abstraction using the aesthetic structure of the mimosa plant. The *Mimosa* series debuted at RYAN LEE in 2019. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Thomas Loughman.

Inspired by the mimosas found in the French Riviera, the *Mimosa* paintings at the heart of Sultan's fifth exhibition at the gallery make innovative use of new materials and formats. Known for his manipulation of industrial materials in his pursuit of the beautiful and delicate, Sultan introduces cement for the first time to capture the botanical in these works. "It has a very delicate look, but if you come up to it, it has a big, monumental, hard look to it," Sultan explains. "Each painting tells me what to do next. It'll go in whatever direction the painting tells me."

In works such as *Yellow Mimosa and Blackberries May 2, 2022*, Sultan signals his longstanding abstract and non-objective approach to his subject. In this composition, he detaches the mimosa blossoms from their foliage: rather than reinforce the visual logic of naturalism, he situates his blooms on a stark white ground, untethered from any green or traces of tendrils. Liberated and much larger than in Sultan's previous *Mimosa* compositions, these urgently yellow blooms pop out at the viewer and pile up in the bottom left corner of the painting while still maintaining their impossibly consistent round shape. The leaves are made of smoothly applied cement devoid of shading or articulation and approach the effect of collage. The overall composition spans two stacked horizontal panels, snapping the viewer out of the illusion of naturalism upon close inspection and returning their attention to the work's materiality.

"There's a flow, a more or less free-flowing use of the flower image itself, of the bud" Sultan explains of his new work. "The leaves themselves are more gestural and painted. The latest *Mimosas* that I've done are not accurately drawn as mimosas, but it's like if you jumped into a big bush of them, and that's what you saw." Stacking two 36" x 96" panels, Sultan creates pleasing 6' x 8' horizontal rectangles which lend the new work a cinematic feel. By stretching wider and out to the periphery of vision when seen at gallery distance, these works more assertively envelop the viewer.

"In terse visual shorthand and limited palette, each work echoes the experience of a dense forest of mimosas," Thomas Loughman writes in his essay. "Color and materials distinguish each work as an additive step in Sultan's exploration. The result—achieved through a sensitive process—is both playful and analytically rooted."

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Donald Sultan (b. 1951 Asheville, NC) is an artist who rose to prominence in the late 1970s as part of the “New Image” movement. Sultan has challenged the boundaries between painting and sculpture throughout his career. Using industrial materials such as roofing tar, aluminum, linoleum, and enamel, Sultan layers, gouges, sands, and constructs his paintings—sumptuous, richly textured compositions often made of the same materials as the rooms in which they are displayed. Intrigued by contrasts, he explores dichotomies of beauty and roughness, nature and artificiality, and realism and abstraction. Weighty and structured, Sultan’s works are simultaneously abstract and representational: his imagery is immediately recognizable—flowers, daily objects, idle factories—but ultimately reduced to simple geometric and organic shapes. As Sultan says, “I try to pare down the images to their essence, and capture the fleeting aspect of reality by pitting the gesture against the geometric—the gesture being the fluidity of the human against the geometry of the object.”

Interested in the artifice of nature as it is sold and packaged within a consumerist society, a major theme within Sultan’s work is studying the representation of an object or idea—how a flower, a factory, or a fruit is consumed in the Zeitgeist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In recent years, Sultan has pursued his interest in disrupting the established gaze cast upon everyday objects. His recent depictions of tulips, poppies, mimosas and camellias continue to interrogate how these flowers have been manipulated in art history—and this interrogation is aimed to destabilize a wider culture of visual status quo.

Sultan studied at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and later received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He lives and works in New York, NY.

His first solo exhibition was mounted in 1977 at Artists Space in New York. He has since exhibited worldwide in solo and group exhibitions, including at the Cameron Art Museum (2022), Huntington Museum of Art (2021), Parrish Art Museum (2020), British Museum (2017), Royal Academy of Arts (2017), Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2009), Delaware Art Museum (2008), Corcoran Gallery of Art (2000), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1987), Memphis Brooks Museum (2000), Museum of Modern Art (1988), Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1993), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1988), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1979).

His work is included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; British Museum, London; Cincinnati Art Museum, OH; Cleveland Art Museum, OH; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, TX; Detroit Institute of Arts, MI; Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, MA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Ludwig Museum, Budapest; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Museum of Modern Art, NY; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Neuberger Museum at SUNY Purchase, NY; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Singapore Museum of Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NY; Tate Gallery, London; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN.