

Schulz, Sultan present grand reminders of art for art's sake

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3 of 3 < PREV NEXT >



"Black and Colors Sept 2 2006" (2006), flock, enamel, tar and spackle on tile over Masonite, is by contemporary painter Donald Sultan, who is known for almost building his works since he uses wood armatures that have the presence of furniture. Photo: Unknown, Serge Sorokko Gallery, S.f.



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The conceptual, activist and mercenary impulses that drive so much contemporary art tend to make us forget that pleasure justifies our attention to artworks as nothing else can. The recent work of Bay Area painter [Cornelia Schulz](#) at Sweetow offers thrilling reminders.

Schulz has taken her work to a level of confectionary intensity that will expose submerged puritan reflexes that any viewer happens to bring to them. What permits us to revel, without irony or other excuse, in the aesthetic detail of a painting such as "Strings Attached" (2014)? Those who feel the need of an answer can look to the context of modern and contemporary painting.

German artist [Gerhard Richter](#), one of the pioneers of New European Painting, has shown again and again that "pure" painting - oil colors unstintingly activated by gesture or merely by tools - can coax from our nervous systems embedded memories of other painters' mute triumphs at the levels of small detail or large expanse.

What may seem to be instinct in the medium itself, when painters such as Richter and Schulz deploy it, really lives in us - a thought akin to American composer [Milton Babbitt's](#) remark that the structure of music is in the memory of the listener.

Hence the impression Schulz's paintings produce that she has shared in the sense of discovery we experience when studying them.

For many years, Schulz has treated the shapes of her canvases and the thickness of their stretchers as active ingredients in her work. The eccentricity of their polygonal profiles is less pronounced in recent paintings than in older ones, but the asymmetries still frequently seem to reinforce the trajectories of Schulz's knife strokes.

Finally, as the quarried look of canvases such as "Strings Attached" and PK3" (2013) affirms, Schulz's recent pieces realize the dream of early 20th century abstraction. As disconnected from mundane existence as meteorites, they suggest fallen bits chipped off a more embracing, ordinarily unavailable reality.

Sultan's Endgames: To see how different are the paths contemporary painting may take, turn from Schulz's show to the selection of [New Yorker Donald Sultan's](#) work at Sorokko.

Sultan has for many years built his paintings - if that is the word for them - on wood armatures that have the presence of rough furniture.

The armatures support surfaces on which he can layer compounds of spackle, tar, enamel and sometimes flock to produce a picture such as "Black and Colors Sept 2 2006" (2006).

Traces of the hand get suppressed in Sultan's working process, yet viewers will not mistake his work for anyone else's. His blatantly simplified forms usually pertain to, even if they do not easily read as, images.

He has painted buttons, playing cards, dominoes, curlicues of cigar smoke, fruits and vegetables.

One signature symbol in particular, recurrent in the current selection, has an unplotted timeliness: the artificial red "remembrance poppies" used in Europe - especially Britain - and Canada to symbolize mourning for soldiers killed in World War I.

Sultan began using the artificial poppy profiles, varying their colors, many years ago. But the centennial of World War I's inception this month has given them a discomfiting new currency.

Sultan's art looks simple at first, but a long view of it, which this exhibition unfortunately cannot offer, shows a serious thinker about representation whose work has never ceased to acknowledge the fear, current at the outset of his career, that painting as an art had - and might yet - finally hit an unbreachable wall.

Cornelia Schulz: Paintings. Through Aug. 9. Patricia Sweetow Gallery, 77 Geary St., S.F. (415) 788-5126. www.patriciasweetowgallery.com.

Donald Sultan: Paintings and drawings. Through July 31. Serge Sorokko Gallery, 55 Geary St., S.F. (415) 421-7770. www.sorokko.com.

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