

143. Sherman Sam

[Peter Vidani](#)



Sherman Sam, Do The Same Again, 2016. Oil paint on ply; 31.4 x 29.1 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Annka Kultys.

Following his first UK solo-show at Annka Kultys, London, *Traction* talked with abstractionist painter, Sherman Sam, about his process and approach to painting. Focusing on the transience and movement of colour, surface, light and intuition; whilst his painterly style can be aligned with the East-Coast Abstractionists, his work opposes typically Western notions of narrative structure altogether. With a career that has spanned the last

three decades and across three continents, Sam is a vastly knowledgeable, engaged and enquiring mind in the field of Contemporary Art. A pre-eminent art writer, Sam contributes regularly to Artforum International.

Could you discuss how you approach each painting? Do you have any rituals or particular processes which determine how the work begins and then evolves?

I wish I could say that it's like being a sportsman where you have your lucky boots, or cross yourself then kiss the field before you play... but it's not quite like that. Not even lucky brushes or painting slippers... dammit!

At any one time there are some 15-20 works in progress. Some of these have just been sitting in the studio for some years. I would say that half of them are getting more attention than the rest. I move them round, glance at them. A touch of paint here and a touch there, that's the main action, and not always every day. BUT it is the looking and trying to stumble on to a solution or way forward that takes the time. Well, sometimes it's not a stumble, but the accidental path is always the most satisfying because it's so much less predictable. So even those seemingly forlorn pieces sitting around collecting dust, are really still being thought over somewhere in the back of my mind.

How does a painting come together? First I cut and assemble the panels. So when I begin to paint, they already have some sort of determined rectilinear shape. Then I make some marks on the primed panel, maybe a splatter or two, or in earlier pieces a light wash. These actions determine some of the under structures of what becomes the painting. Likewise my drawings follow a similar process. They come about in a process of, let's call it, searching, working through, erasure and then finally equipoise. They too are cut from larger sheets of paper. Both drawings and paintings are the result of some kind of spontaneity and predetermination.



Sherman Sam, Installation view 'Together We're Heavy', Annka Kultys Gallery, London, 17 November- 17 December 2016. Image courtesy the artist and Annka Kultys.

How has your formal language evolved with time?

Let's call them the things I paint and draw.... "Formal language" begs for "conceptual ideas" and I don't believe the two are separate. I think the two are so integral to each other in the best work that one cannot speak of one without the other. When I began to conceive this work in the mid-90s, I think the forms in the paintings were very organic and biological on the one hand, and architectonic on the other. You could say that American East Coast abstractionists emerging in the 80s like Tom Nozkowski, Jake Berthot, Gary Stephan, Jonathan Lasker, offered a point of departure. The forms then were usually painted on a rough field or background. The paint itself was quite thick. I think over the years, form and ground have become more intermixed while the paint has become thinner though still layered. The nature of the forms themselves, more and more, are now more constructed through gestures. So dabs of paint come together to define or outline form.

But it is not just the visual language that has evolved; there is also the thing language. The paintings (as opposed to pictures) began as more precisely made things, nicely into having a slightly more wonky (just a bit) handmade nature. Why? Paintings are things in the world, like, well, other things in the world. However they might just sit there and be a bit more thoughtful. Their imprecise nature is a reflection of their internal logic but also the rickety world around us.

Looking at the work in your show at Annka Kultys, I found myself finding references to pattern and western language. How do you feel when these figurative readings are transposed onto the work? How would you choose to describe these forms?

When asked I describe myself as an abstractionist. But if I were a pedant, I would say they really are non-representational. Basically there is no referent, no narrative; sometimes I don't even think there is any theory. But I like that viewers see things, and find things in them. Isn't that your job as a viewer? To see and think. Interpret. To make meaning. So I am pleased that you see what you see.

I do like patterns, you should have visited my knitwear collection instead, but in the art it is more about repetition rather than a contentious creation of design. If you see patterning, it is really more the movement of the hand or arm, again and again. Don't they say that as human beings we look for patterns? As for language, do you mean western language? As opposed to Eastern language?



*Sherman Sam, Just a Perfect Day, 2014. Oil paint on ply; 54.4 x 40.1 cm.
Image courtesy the artist and Annka Kultys.*

Yes, I found myself seeing references to the Latin or Germanic alphabet, which I know is based in my anglicised reading of certain forms.

I think in the drawings there are more graphic elements that could be

construed as being derived from architectural diagrams and also graphics but less so in the paintings. But I think the element that most resembles what you are talking about can be found in *do the same again*, 2016, where there are four green curving marks suggesting “C C C C” the first being the largest and descending in size to the four, that is if you look from left to right. I think of it as marks emanating from right to left, like a force growing or in today’s terms, that little Wi-Fi strength signal on your phone or computer. And no, it is not derived from computer graphics, more like, in my mind at least, movement lines that you find in comic books. American comics when I was a kid inspired me to draw, you can blame them for my art. It is really mark making and repetition. Well, as I said what you see is what you see, or is that what you think you see is what you think?

You have lived in diverse geographical regions, hailing from Singapore you moved to Paris, the US and then London. What impact have these migrations had upon your practice?

Lots! Though I think unquantifiable. First you are exposed to different approaches to art making, not to mention different scenes, people, times, thinking and cultures. Now we have better, more instant information, so in a way we are better informed. Back then you just had to go somewhere; otherwise magazines and word of mouth were the only other sources. If you grow up in a small country like Singapore, where there was hardly any visual art when I was young, you really had to travel. Then there wasn’t even a museum dedicated to art. Today I still think you still have to physically see and experience art. Sure its images are transported and transposed, but the experience of a work is still key. On the other hand this does explain why so much art is made of images and about image.



Sherman Sam, Installation view 'Together We're Heavy', Annka Kultys Gallery, London, 17 November- 17 December 2016. Image courtesy the artist and Annka Kultys.

As an artist I like to think I have a bit of Paris, Los Angeles and San Francisco in me, not to mention a whole lot that is Singaporean. However it is French and New York painting that are probably the most influential to the aesthetic journey I have taken. I would the scale is more European but the language and ideas begin on the East Coast. As for the Asian and Chinese bits, well I think its somewhere in there too, submerged but present.

Interview by Charlotte Barnard.

Sherman Sam's exhibition, 'Together We're Heavy', was on view at Annka Kultys Gallery, London 17 November – 17 December 2016. Read more [here](#).

Sherman Sam is nominated for the [2017 Sovereign Asian Art Prize](#) in Hong Kong – Asia's most esteemed contemporary art prize.

He is soon to have a solo exhibition opening in Paris, to keep up with this, and other news regarding his work, please follow his artist page [here](#).