

Artists Pick Artists: Sherman Sam

[Rob Colvin](#) [February 9, 2015](#)



Sherman Sam's pink geraniums

Editor's Note: This is the 10th in a [series of interviews with artists](#) that will continue indefinitely, without direction, and outside any one person's control. The artists are asked seven questions about their art and their ideas about art. The questions are blunt, but open-ended enough to be answered in any way the artist chooses. The final question is a request for the artist to select the next artist to be interviewed — anyone they wish, well-known or unknown, working in any medium, anywhere — any artist whose work they think highly of, an artist deserving the same public

interrogation.

It is a rite of passage, almost an obligation, for artists to sleep on couches or spare beds when moving, or in my case moving back, to New York. My “transition period” was actually three months of last year and one couple, an artist and her art critic husband, let me crash at their apartment for nearly three weeks. So I had plenty of time to check out their art collection and play guessing games with the works on their walls, inventing plausible histories for each piece and how it got there. One small painting, closest to the couch, was the outlier. I could not determine if the work was made by an artist whose name I should already know, or perhaps some family friend, or maybe even a child who really likes pushing paint around.

That painting was made by [Sherman Sam](#), who was chosen for this interview series by [John Wilkins](#). Turns out I didn’t need to embarrass myself by asking my hosts, “What’s going on with this one?”, because now I — or *we* — get to learn about the artist straight from the source, which is what this series is for. It also turns out I was right on all three guesses: Sherman Sam is a name I should have already known, a friend of the family, and a child (well, a man who never let go of childhood) who really likes pushing paint around.

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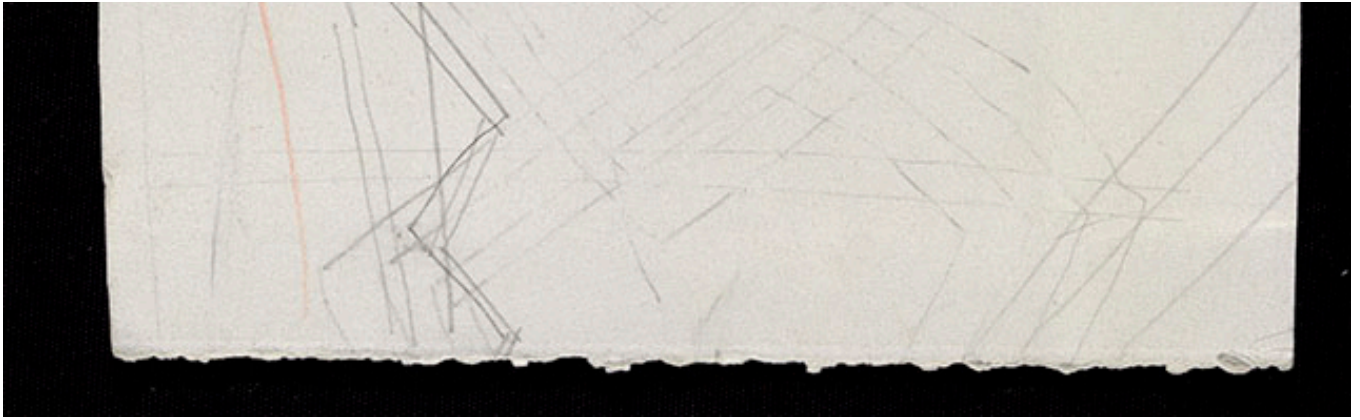
Sherman Sam, "Oh! Sweet Nuthin" (2013), oil on canvas, 36.3 x 24.9 cm

Rob Colvin: *Why did you become an artist?*

Sherman Sam: Because it was, and still is, the most fun I could have! And it is probably the thing I am best at not to mention that it is a rather fulfilling and purposeful activity. I went to a highly enlightened high school and the art room gave focus to all the things I was interested in. The career bit is a tad infuriating, but the rest is quite good fun. Why else would anyone put themselves through this grinder? Where else can you behave

like a 7-year-old all day long? It has over the years given me a principle with which to organize my life.



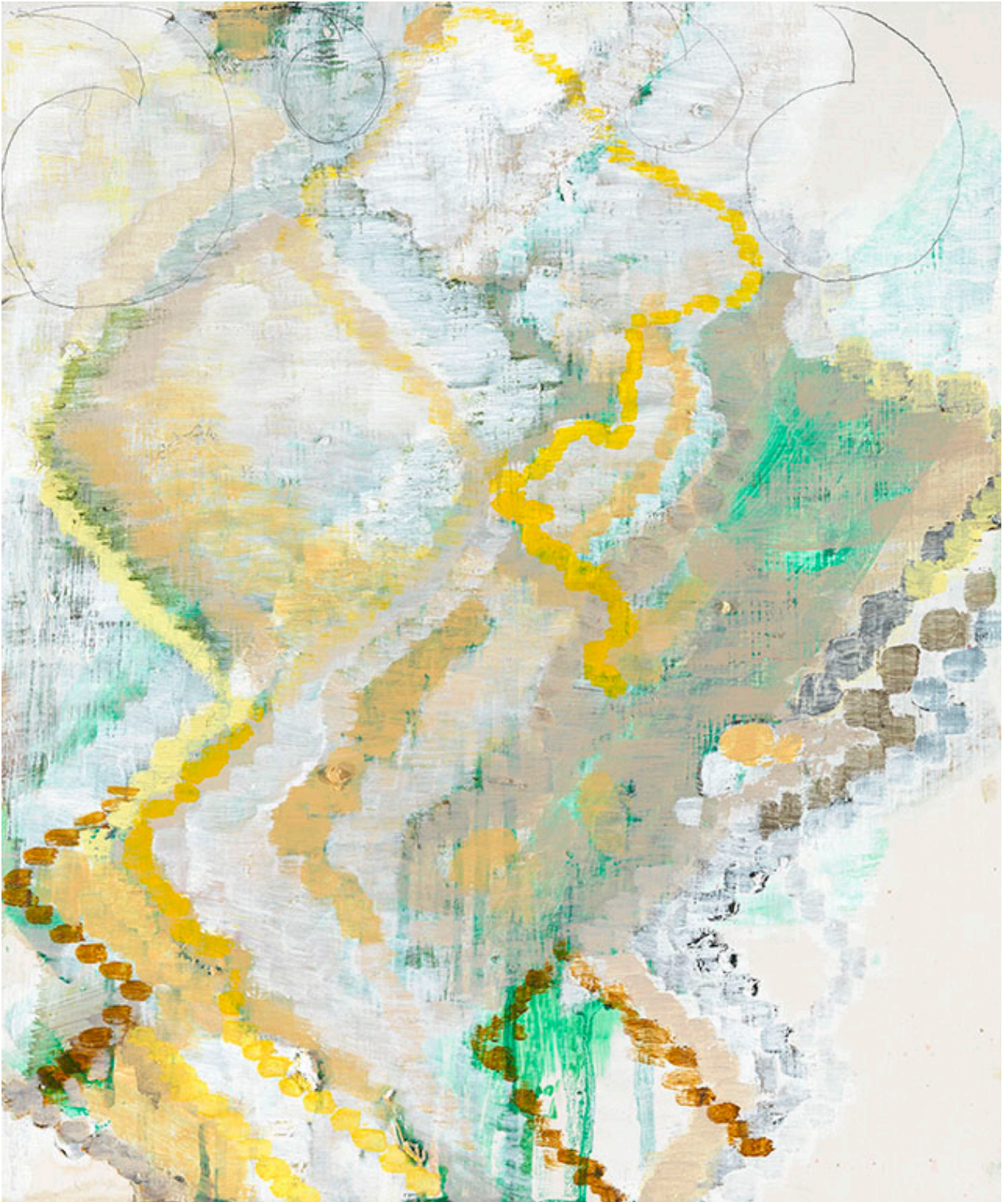


Sherman Sam, "HF_009" (2013), graphite, ink, colored pencil, and gouache on paper, 38.5 x 23 cm

RC: *How would you describe your development and what you're doing now?*

SS: I went to art school through the Parsons-Otis system (when the Otis College of Art and Design was part of the Parsons School of Design system). Back then it had branches in New York, Los Angeles, and Paris. As a result of living on the West Coast and in Europe, I would say my work has developed as much from living and seeing art in these different places as it has from being with the friends, teachers, and artists I've met along the way.

My works started out as paintings and drawings about/of abstraction, and that then morphed back into the question of making painting, drawing, and abstraction today. Now I realize that maybe I'm more concerned with that space where things in the world meet that mental project we call "art." And somewhere in there time is a concern.

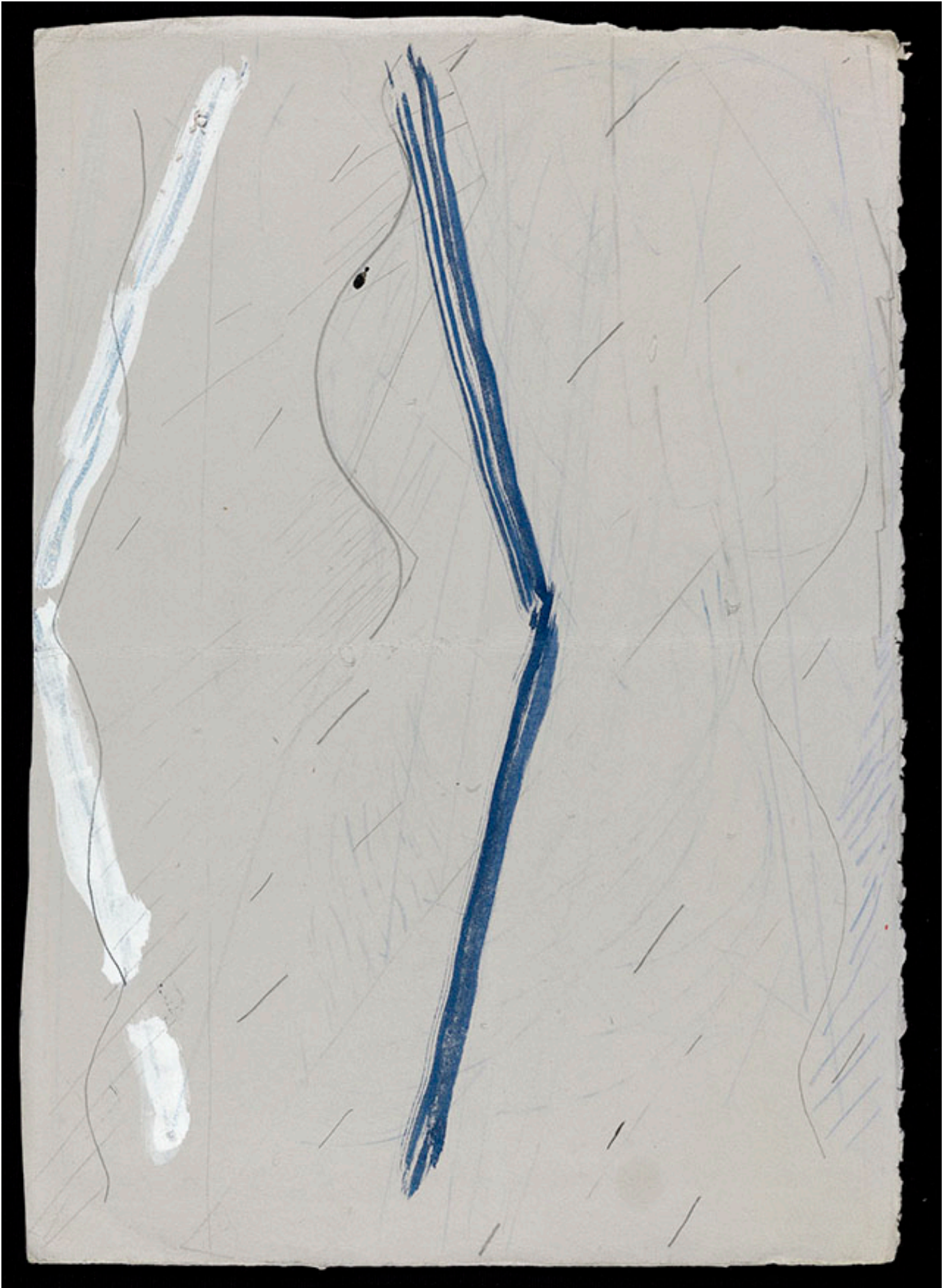


Sherman Sam, "Problems all left alone" (2014), oil on canvas, 41.8 x 35.4 cm

RC: *Have you been influenced by anyone or anything in particular?*

SS: Ian Patterson, Michael Wingo, Roy Dowell, Colin Gardner (all from Otis and Parsons) were influential when I was a student in unfixing my

mind. Later, there was Malcolm Bull and Stuart Morgan. They opened my mind to art and French critical theory, the new art history, TJ Clark, and Yves Alain Bois. When I was a student I read *Art Issues*, *Artforum*, and, especially, *Arts Magazine*. I blame them for my taste! Oh, and my mom. She's tough. As for artists, probably Thomas Nozkowski, David Rhodes, and Clive Hodgson, who are also good friends whom I talk to a lot. Oh, I do a lot of yoga ... somehow this all connects up to what I do.



Sherman Sam, "HF_010" (2012), graphite, ink, colored pencil, and gouache on paper, 39.5 x 27.7 cm

RC: *What challenges are unique to your process?*

SS: A cold winter and life's distractions. Also in England: the lack of sunlight.

I decided to make abstraction paintings because they were the hardest, and, to me, most interesting thing to do. The joy of painting is that it's a medium with history, so every gesture carries with it a forward-facing and backward-facing quality. That's another level that the object carries automatically: the history of painting. The difficulty is how to make something that is of our time and for our time ... that seems to keep coming into my mind.

The work is not based upon anything in the world, there are no specific systems as such, except that it's oil or graphite on panel or canvas, and there are just certain rhythms in life to follow. This makes the work difficult to explain in words, but I'm also trying to get people to see and sense, rather than to hear and understand.

RC: *If you could own any work of art, what would it be?*

SS: A 1940s Henri Matisse still life, a late Pierre Bonnard garden, Willem de Kooning's "Pirate (Untitled II)" (1981) in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), a Cubist era Picasso drawing/collage, a late 80s Robert Ryman — now this is what I call fun virtual shopping. In the end I think I would take a late Bonnard, one of the psychedelic paintings of his garden at Le Cannet, like "Le Jardin de L'artiste au Cannet" (1945). They're such strange paintings. It's as if he were trying to suture different things together in the same place, almost different times in the same place.







Sherman Sam, "You can't depend on depending" (2014), 46.1 x 22.4 cm

RC: *So what is art anyway?*

SS: Andy Warhol supposedly said that "Art is a man's name." I think that's quite good! I would add that if Art (the man) were to make something, say a cake, and he said he was an artist, then the resulting object/space/time/words/performance/air/meal would be art too. Art made by Art, now that would be grand!

RC: *Who should be interviewed next?*

SS: The next artist for the Colvin Report should be [Clive Hodgson](#). He makes tough, critical paintings. He spends a lot of time doubting things, hence why he is one of my favorite people to spend time seeing and talking art with.