

Nº3/09

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Sherman Sam

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ON SECOND THOUGHT

The urgency of Sherman Sam's work is readable in its tentativeness. His drawings and paintings are constantly qualifying their own claims, revising them, making them over again in a minor key. Sam's work often signals that it is most pressingly in dialogue with the paintings of older or deceased artists—Robert Motherwell, Cy Twombly, and Raoul de Keyser, among others. All the same, his faith in abstraction is striking, and it makes for surprisingly fresh and affecting work at a time when most abstract painting is firmly committed to a more ironic and academic engagement with twentieth-century precedents. Sam's pieces are not clever art historical disquisitions, but essays that put their idiom under stress in order to make a case for its continued relevance.

The marks and shapes in Sam's work are sociable ones. Occasionally, they agglomerate like creatures packed together in an enclosed space. In *They Do Things* (2007), for instance, yellow circles congregate in the top left, while rectangular forms are stacked in a tight, diagonal formation below, hinting at, but not quite holding to, a more systematic and hard-edged abstraction. In the bottom right, crimson shapes that look vaguely like pills or safety-pins gather in a disordered pile. These shapes form groupings that apparently abide by differing compositional rules and jostle with one another, the zones between them becoming charged as each grouping works to





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maintain its distinctness. The border areas in this and other paintings by Sam carry signs of uncertainty; it is in these areas that his process of constant revision is most clearly discernible, as patches of colour threaten to spread beyond the lines that appear to contain them, or fall short of those lines to reveal other designs that belong to earlier states of the painting.

And the forms all press against the borders of the composition. Space, in Sam's paintings, is at a premium—that is, possibly, what makes them seem like such pointedly urban works. The play of confinement and adaptation is crucial to the artist's work, as he implies himself when he says, "I tend to paint myself into a corner and then try to paint myself out of it."

Plainly, the forms that emerge in a painting like *They Do Things* have something akin to a social existence; they band together, stand apart from other forms, occupy specific territories. They also hint at a temporal evolution; some of them are new-comers, others are in the process of changing—a line into a contour, a circle into an ellipse, a polygon into a polyhedron, and so on. The sense of impermanence, of precarious and shifting arrangements, is underlined by Sam's taste for diagonal formations, which create a fundamental unsteadiness, the various forms in a composition often appearing to settle into a provisional pattern only under pressure from the edges of the composition. Another form of change that is sketched in *They Do Things* is dissolution. The large shape in the top right was presumably once crimson, like the forms below it, and even then it must have looked like a blot, a stain that hid an earlier design or motif. But the purple form is half-erased; in a witty, impatient gesture, it has itself been blotted out by a wash of muddy yellow, this last layer looking thin and

runny but corrosive as it sits on the surface, drawing attention to the form it has partially supplanted.

Here as elsewhere, the motif or "mistake" is visible through the revision. Sam's work never strictly settles on one compositional option when several are available; it leaves them to stand side by side, preferring the more expansive logic of "both/and" to the dreary rigour of "either/or."

Sam's drawings, like his paintings, show a preoccupation with principles of generation and entropy. In *SS—RG—002* (2008), a drawing on a torn sheet of blue-grey paper, the tear becomes a founding incident, triggering various graphic events as some lines follow its contours while others shoot out across the paper from it. In other drawings, interlocking polygons form complex designs that look vaguely like isomorphic drawings or the patterns of crystalline growth. Elsewhere, shapes fuse and separate like unicellular organisms. The artist says of his pieces, "I grow them," and so it would appear. Throughout Sam's work, molecular division and corrosion present themselves as metaphors for a practice that advances through a continual process of incremental adjustment, of constant deletions and insertions.

Sam's work shows a canny appreciation of earlier artists. There are passages in both his paintings and his drawings that recall Twombly's restless cursive energy. Other passages carry distant echoes of Lee Krasner in their attention to interstitial areas. In the work of many of Sam's contemporaries, of Fiona Rae, Bernard Frize or Cecily Brown, the principles of mid-twentieth-century abstraction harden, becoming brittle, even occasionally delusional, as the later artists underline the phallic bravado of a Jackson Pollock

or the crimped manoeuvres and utopian baggage of a Josef Albers. Sam's work is both closer in spirit to modernist abstraction and less dependent on it. Where others ironise the ambitions of the modernists, he reformulates them in a more hesitant key, but his vacillations, revisions, and patched-up solutions are so rich and absorbing that, on longer acquaintance, the hesitation seems to tip over into a keen and confident engagement.

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DESIGN PONY



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Marcus Verhagen has a B.A. from Cambridge and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. He worked for a time on nineteenth-century French painting but now writes principally on contemporary art, regularly publishing articles in magazines such as *Art Monthly* and *Art Review*, while teaching at Sotheby's Institute of Art and the Chelsea College of Art and Design. He has had pieces published in anthologies and academic journals such as *Representations* and *New Left Review*.

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