

Sherman Sam

RUBICON GALLERY

Sherman Sam's paintings are small—none of the eight exhibited in his most recent exhibition, "Let's stay together," reach sixteen inches in either direction—but you can easily get lost in them. They are labyrinths in hyperspace, taking unexpected twists and turns that make it difficult to see one's way out. Hyperspace is, in its most venerable definition, a space of more than three dimensions, and in this case the fourth dimension is color. This is not to say that Sam, a painter born in Singapore and based in London, is what one would normally call a colorist. In the perennial *differend* between line and color, his interest seems to be more focused on the former—but he has a canny way of using color to make more room for the movements line embodies.

The nine drawings in the show can only make more room by effacing themselves, as can be seen in some of the most recent examples, in which the lines seem to be doing their best to evanesce, becoming at times little more than nebulous rumors about what might once have been their definite locations. More often, though, the intricate concatenations of spidery, sometimes crisscrossing strokes stretch out across single planes in warped grids, albeit ones that butt up against one another at oblique angles.

In either medium, what the work evokes is not so much any specifically visual experience as that of thinking, of the strangely sideways movements and sudden changes of level (associations rising from the unconscious, say) that the mind goes through in mulling over a problem, sometimes using step-by-step

Sherman Sam, *It goes like this*, 2008, oil on panel, 15 7/8 x 12 3/4".



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logic, sometimes leaping ahead by means of metaphor or falling into a digression, occasionally rebelling against itself and trying to wipe the slate clean with an irrational burst of energy—but never quite forgetting where it's been, since past states are never completely covered over but always leave their traces. The drawings, spatially (and therefore cognitively) simpler, always retain an elegant yet refreshingly eccentric balance between passages tight and loose, worked up and spare. The paintings, denser and more problematic, run the risk of getting clogged or just grubby, but they usually manage to avoid this, seemingly at the last minute, thanks to Sam's canny management of his paint's translucency. In the end, the paintings shine like dusty jewels under a spotlight, the muck and grime adding patina to their surfaces.

There's an understandable tendency to see small paintings as intimate and vulnerable. Sam's neither play to this tendency nor go out of their way to contradict it. Resolutely nonrepresentational, they certainly don't promise any personal revelations, but there is an understated sense of danger in the way the complicated little structures they present seem so jury-rigged. Each set of marks or gestures somehow simultaneously fits with and contradicts its situation, evoking a feeling of suspense: Will everything collapse? Or will the construct somehow sustain itself? Does thought thinking itself have any basis? Stuart Morgan, writing about Sam's first exhibition back in 1996, saw "the tension between irony and honesty" as the work's essence. Perhaps that's still the case. Such a tension just might be enough to keep thought moving forward before it collapses into the void.

—Barry Schwabsky

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