

RYAN SULLIVAN AT ICA MIAMI PROVIDES A RESPITE FROM THE CLAMOR OF THE DESIGN DISTRICT

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TUESDAY, MAY 19, 2015 | 10 HOURS AGO



Sullivan produces his works in a manner similar to Jackson Pollock's.

Courtesy of the artist and Maccarone, New York

Outside the Institute of Contemporary Art is noise – a lot of noise. Construction workers yell and drills pound into concrete, laying the foundation for the Design District's latest luxury retailer. And just a block away, where the Design District ends and Buena Vista East begins, browning domestic lawns are covered in red-and-white signs that loudly announce the homeowners' disdain for the quickly growing Design District. The signs are aimed particularly at the ICA,

whose planned expansion would further trespass into the residential neighborhood.

ICA is seeking approval from the Miami City Commission to build a 37,500-square-foot museum. The plan calls for parts of Buena Vista to be rezoned for "major institutional, public facilities," as well as the demolition of three existing homes. Homeowners are upset by the incursion into their quiet lives.

But inside the ICA's newest exhibition, "**Ryan Sullivan**," all of the noise is silenced by Sullivan's large-scale, contemplative paintings. The exhibit is small – only two rooms – and features only a handful of paintings that the artist has produced over the past two years. But the work is stunning and almost meditative.

The 32-year-old New York-based painter has a distinct approach to painting. He eschews brushes and easels, and lays his canvases flat on the ground. He begins each piece by pouring paint and gradually adding layers. Sullivan doesn't limit himself to traditional oils, but rather mixes water with oil-based, spray, and commercial paints. He then tilts the canvases, letting gravity pull the layers across the surface. Next the canvases are left to dry, each emulsion at its own unpredictable rate. As they dry, the mixtures form strata that ooze, crack, and bubble. The result is a textured, three-dimensional surface that's almost sculptural.

Something about Sullivan's work seems to render explanation, to render words, pointless.

Sullivan touts his canvases as "nongestural," a reference to the abstract expressionist work of midcentury American master Jackson Pollock. Laying his canvases flat is almost a direct nod to Pollock, who produced his large-scale paintings in a similar manner. And the untraditional materials – the spray paint and latex – also seem like a reference to Pollock, who often used house paints to build the drippy layers of his now-iconic works.

But if the canvas on the ground and the mélange of paint reference a particular practice of Pollock's, Sullivan's refusal to use a paintbrush is a direct challenge to an essential element of abstract expressionism. Pollock and his counterparts wielded the brush forcefully to create canvases vibrant with action. In some respect, that action, which critics dubbed "heroic," defined early abstraction. By contrast, Sullivan's canvases are devoid of action, the movement replaced with a slow process rooted in patience and contemplation.

And indeed, Sullivan's labor is present in his work, but his process produces a quietude that's rare in contemporary painting. There's something meditative in all of his paintings, which are hung in two stark-white rooms where the works almost reach the nine-foot ceiling. It's as if the exhibition space has been transformed into a site of worship.

The ICA's presentation reinforces this near-religious quality. The museum's approach is minimalist; the paintings do not have individual labels, and little information is in the printed guide. Though plenty of guides mill about the exhibition to answer questions, it feels wrong to break the silence. The decision not to label the individual paintings was smart. Something about Sullivan's work seems to render explanation, to render words, pointless.

His paintings, all simply dubbed "Untitled," are made of earthy colors – repeated tones of deep reds, yellows, oranges, and browns – defined by their thick, encaustic-looking layers. They evoke

the natural world yet never attempt to replicate it. They are both impossibly dimensional and flat. Step away from them and the heavily textured surface is lost. The paintings almost transform into photographs of a crater or satellite-produced imagery of the moon's surface or the Earth's oceans. Up close, however, that impression is rendered meaningless by the molten-like layers of the surfaces.

There's a sense that Sullivan wants these works to be seen as if they were created by a random process, but they're too refined to appear that way. The curatorial insistence that the paintings are "nongestural" or defined by an "absence of gesture" are too coy. Sullivan's paintings, indeed, lack the gestures of abstract expressionism, but his labor is easily (and perhaps purposefully) detected.

In one of the canvases, a little dab of neon green peeks through the earthy finished product, an insistent reminder of Sullivan's process. In another painting, perhaps the strongest in the collection, pinks, yellows, and rich blues blend seamlessly, evoking the Earth's surface. Yet in the middle of the work, where the paint concoction has clearly bubbled and popped, a bright circle of purple appears practically in the middle of the canvas. These tiny pops of almost-garish color disrupt the spiritual quality of Sullivan's paintings, an accidental gesture that reminds the viewer of the artist's labor.

There are other times too when Sullivan's process wants to take center stage in the finished works. Looking at the side edges of the paintings, the spectator can see the heavy buildup, the multiple kinds of paint, and the surprising colors the artist uses to achieve the final product. It's yet another reminder that Sullivan is part of his work.

Perhaps the ICA was prescient when it chose to mount this exhibition, but likely it was simply a stroke of good luck. To all of the noise outside the museum – the drilling, the unhappy homeowners – Sullivan's striking canvases are a silent rejoinder. Their contemplative quality and simple beauty provide a respite from the hubbub. And though the exhibition is small, it's worth navigating the clamor of the Design District to seek solitude in this work.

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