

RYAN SULLIVAN
"Ryan Sullivan"
By Klaus Kertess
Kaleidoscope, Winter 2012/13



HIGHLIGHTS

Experiments in discovering
paint's potential for
image-making, the paintings
of NY-based artist

RYAN
SULLIVAN

mesmerize *Klaus Kertess*
with a beauty both violent
and ecstatic, inviting us to
explore the polarized planes
of the artist's imagination.



HIGHLIGHTS

Biography

RYAN SULLIVAN (b. 1983, New York) lives and works in New York. He had his first solo exhibition at Maccarone, New York, in February 2012. He recently took part in several group shows, including those at West Street Gallery, New York; Bugada & Cargnel, Paris; Luxembourg & Dayan, London; Nicole Klagsburn, New York; and VeneKlassen/Werner, Berlin.

Current & Forthcoming

RYAN SULLIVAN's work is currently on view at the Rubell Family Collection, Miami, until August 2013. He will also participate in a group exhibition next January at Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, and at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, next spring. Sullivan will also be a 2013 artist-in-residence at both Chinati Foundation, Marfa, and Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Captiva Island.

Author

KLAUS KERTESS is a writer and curator. He co-founded and directed the Bykert Gallery, New York, from 1966 to 1975, and he has contributed to *Artforum*, *Parkett*, *Art in America* and numerous other publications. He is currently working on a retrospective of Matthew Barney's work for the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, which will travel to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. In 2014, his exhibition of Albert Oehlen's work will open at the New Museum in New York.

It is perhaps fitting that I write about Ryan Sullivan's paintings on the second or third day of a hurricane called Sandy that spreads wider and wider across Manhattan, Long Beach, New Hampshire and more. No electricity feeds my computer; the streets are empty of almost all traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian. The first image atop my small pile of photographs is entitled *October 14, 2011–October 26, 2011* (2011). The actual date is now October 30. In Sullivan's October, there is no hurricane but rather the crumbling of what looks like an ancient and slow-motion process of decay. Here wrinkled, there cracked, variously strained and erupting, the painting offers a natural process perhaps momentarily halted, in which Sullivan seemingly needed to slow his brush and consider the needs for this process' continuation.

Several years ago, on my first visit to the New York-based artist's studio, my impression was one of being in a planetarium of an unknown galaxy, the planets of which were in various stages of upheaval. However, it quickly became clear that this was not science fiction. Sullivan relishes putting paint through its paces, as it slowly accumulates an organic life. Staying in October, I continue studying the image of *October 6, 2011–October 20, 2011*. The painting looks like a vast rectangle of sky or ocean blue, the surface of which is gently aggravated by wind-born red wrinkles. And those wrinkles are real; they have a physicality separate from the physicality of the blue.

The next image in the pile, *December 5, 2011–January 15, 2012* (2012), takes us into a new year with a cape of red floating atop a sea of white wrinkles and cracks. Sullivan has spent several recent summers on the North Shore of Long Island, and the movement of liquid has become a noticeable part of his painting repertoire, although this movement is often as slow and contemplative as the sea of white foam on which Sullivan's red cape floats. An untitled painting created in 2012 presents a gorgeous eruption of cerulean blue rumbling with wrinkles, almost flat at the top, then billowing into more and more volume as they tumble to the bottom of the blue. And what seems to be something seaweed-like floats on top, seaweed that manifested in a kind of golden-orange hue that acts and hovers as a complement to the larger scene.

Conversely, in an untitled work on paper created in 2012, it seems as if Sullivan has set the brushed-on paint aflame. Lurid trails of red, yellow and blue wind up and down the vertical rectangle of paper. The paint settles into no beginning or end but continuously keeps winding in and out, up and down in flaming Technicolor. Almost every painting Sullivan creates seems like a new experiment in discovering paint's potential for image-making. Another untitled work on paper from 2012 proffers a depiction of desert sand that looks like it has been raked to reveal red soil underneath. But *June 3, 2012–June 22, 2012* (2012) presents the most agitated painting in my collection here. The stormy stretch of white that inhabits most of the picture plane resembles a continuously breaking wave, such as those often seen during a hurricane or lesser storm. Sullivan offers the view from above, allowing his spectators to look down at the depths below and a ragged area possibly scraped by rocks and variegated debris pulled along by the strength of the wave. Only a seasoned surfer might dare the ride this stormy white wave offers.

The final painting, *June 20, 2012–July 7, 2012* (2012), at the bottom of my little pile of pictures has been painted more slowly, or so it seems. Its many layers of paint intermingle; its wrinkles—now literal, now more purely imagined—are pulled

October 11, 2011 – November 1, 2011, 2011



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through a torrid, orange, desert-like expanse, and seem to imply the wind as their generator. This painting verges on menace then draws back into passionate beauty, appearing as if engaged in the revelation of marks left by the dance of some tribal ritual seeking to placate the sudden arousal of nature's ire.

Sullivan's paintings seem to be the result of multiple layers of purpose, as he activates each plane his brush negotiates with. Despite my aforementioned descriptions, his works are not representations of particular landscapes, but representations of the landscape's alternating charms and tirades, which seem to dance before our eyes. The artist offers a beauty now violent, now ecstatic, and always visually engaging.

Sullivan works in a large studio in Long Island City, where he has ample space to move paintings around. This freedom allows him to feed his surface more wrinkles, if he deems it necessary, and to let a painting face the wall for a day or two, as it grows into its final coat. Initially, the paintings seem climatologically accurate to a weird degree, as though Sullivan were documenting geological events. However, with further observation, the artist's fabricated climates allow each painting to conjure its own atmospheric events in the eyes of the spectator. As a group, the paintings move from subdued lyricism to more agitated threats of upheaval and destruction, but always remain open to the observer's curious eyes.

If, at times, a Sullivan painting seems to look back at J. M. W. Turner's more documentary though lyrical storminess, the artist's works shy away from depictive accuracy in favor of a naturalness that slowly resonates with artifice. Sullivan edges toward a recognizable event, then withdraws and lets his wet surfaces interact with whatever climate hovers in his studio and his head. Whatever that climate may approximate in the world outside the studio, it invites the viewer to participate in it. Though the atmospherics lean toward the baroque, they never do so theatrically or too insistently. Sullivan has created a body of work rich with allusion and illusion, free of pretense, as he encourages us with his painting to expand our horizons and open up our imagination, so we might explore the planes of his.

December 5, 2011 – January 15, 2012, 2011–12

