

RYAN SULLIVAN

"Ryan Sullivan at Maccarone"

By Roberta Smith

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ART IN REVIEW

Ryan Sullivan at Maccarone

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

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There is more than one way for paintings to be too exquisite. The abstractions in Ryan Sullivan's [solo gallery debut](#) in New York bend over backward to avoid the conventional, supposedly old-school ploys like adroit brushwork, but they still end up looking excessively refined and skillful, and more mannered than they should be.

Working in a mode of hands-off abstract painting initiated by Jackson Pollock, overly cultivated by Gerhard Richter and all but rendered moot by

Rudolf Stingel, Mr. Sullivan develops his canvases by letting several forms of chance have their way, with the help of forces like gravity and chemical reaction as well as cloudy veils of spray paint. His festering mixtures of oil paint, acrylic, enamel and latex create lavalike bumps and bubbles or thin skins that split and shrink or crack, evoking glaze craquelure, algae on a stagnant pond or scaly reptilian patterns.

In other works, these skins sag and ripple like sheets or hides, giving evidence of having been tipped upright while still wet — or very wet, in those cases when the colors plummet in deep arcs toward one edge or another. Topographical maps and aerial photographs of empty landscapes are evoked, along with Photo Realism and even trompe l'oeil.

There are other precedents. Robert Smithson and his glue-pours and asphalt-rundown earthworks are a clear inspiration. (You almost know before reading it that the word entropic will figure in the news release.) Also relevant are Jules Olitski's "Elephant Hide" paintings and, more generally, the post-Pollock researches of Lyrical Abstraction, a brief offshoot of Color Field painting. (These are, coincidentally, exemplified by the abstract paintings that [Cleve Grey](#) threw together in the late 1960s, on view through Saturday at the Loretta Howard Gallery in Chelsea.)

Mr. Sullivan makes seductive, promising paintings, especially in terms of their rich, dusty, understated palette and their inordinately varied textures. But at the moment they are too calculated and fastidious. Despite the ostentatious emphasis on randomness, chance and grit, they don't have any loose ends.