

RYAN SULLIVAN

Ryan Sullivan, Sadie Coles HQ - Exhibition Review

By Ben Luke

London Evening Standard, September 2013

London
**Evening
Standard**

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Ryan Sullivan's first London show is one of the most exciting in recent years, says Ben Luke



Sky's the limit: Sullivan's works look like images taken from outer space (Picture: Ryan Sullivan)

It's increasingly rare to find painting that takes you by surprise but new works by Ryan Sullivan — abstract canvases, zinging with colour, encrusted with slicks of latex, acrylic, enamel and lacquer — are among the most exciting paintings I've seen in recent years.

The young New Yorker's first London show inaugurates Sadie Coles's new gallery, a dream space for painting of this kind — vast, steel-columned, bathed in natural light. It reminds me of Charles Saatchi's first gallery off Abbey Road, and that was the best space in London in its time.

The 12 large paintings are seductive and slow-burning. From a distance they can look like photorealist renderings of strange geological events or telescopic images from outer space, filtered through UV light. Their swirling strangeness draws you in, and then, up close, you witness in detail Sullivan's novel technique.

Working on the floor, he first pours the latex and paint onto the surface, creating thick pools that he manipulates by tilting the canvas, allowing material to form loops, crevices and congealed clusters, to which he adds spray paint. He then punctures another spray can and creates a controlled explosion, creating a fine spatter across the canvas that in some works almost looks like Seurat's pointillist dots, especially when he repeats the action in several colours.

The effect is, at times, beautiful; Sullivan compares the spray paint hitting the surface to a photographic flash creating raking light. It highlights the coagulated and cracked surface to create the illusion of molten landscapes shot from above and softens, even caresses the surface beneath. Sullivan's techniques are simple but they lead to captivating paintings.