

RYAN SULLIVAN

"Ryan Sullivan Scales Up"

By Julie Baumgardner

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ON VIEW

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"Untitled," 2014, is among the works on display in Ryan Sullivan's self-titled solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, which opens today. *Courtesy of the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London*

The young painter [Ryan Sullivan](#) makes the type of ethereal drip abstractions one might expect to require a three-page pamphlet for explanation; but in fact, most of his descriptions are simple. That's not an insult — quite the contrary. Sullivan speaks of his practice with sharp, fine-tuned language. "I'm trying to deal with these parameters that I've set in front of me and the event of making this thing," says the 32-year-old Rhode Island School of Design graduate. "There's something closely linked between the image that you see, the process of making it and the material. There's nothing else. There's no

subject matter tacked on top of that, it's much more about how closely those things can be bound together." This week, Sullivan opens his first solo and American institutional exhibition at Miami's [Institute of Contemporary Art](#) — the institution founded by former employees of the [Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami](#), that's lately been closely watched in the art world after its recent move to the Design District (on the second floor of the charming 1912 Moore building) and appointment of a not-yet-30-year-old deputy director and chief curator (Alex Gartenfeld, a former Art in America editor).

Sullivan, who was formerly an assistant to the painters Ross Bleckner and Laura Owens, these days boasts a pert, narrowly combed resume — he is neatly represented by the equally slick-but-serious galleries Sadie Coles HQ in London and Maccarone in New York, and his work is in the collections of MoMA PS1 and Rome's Palazzo delle Esposizioni. These new canvases are "the largest paintings I've made," he says. "There's interplay between materials and letting the materials have some sort of agency on their own. You can't scale the material qualities. You can't scale up a drip or a wrinkle." Drips rendered in oil, enamel, lacquer, latex and synthetic polymer paint, splashed across eight feet of canvas, in mineral tones — rusts, metals, moss — look as commanding as they sound. In fact, they fill nearly the whole ICA space ("The ceiling height is 9 feet, 6 inches!," he exclaims). In a 2012 review, the Times critic Roberta Smith [summed up](#) Sullivan's works as "excessively refined and skillful, and more mannered than they should be." But a dash of conservatism can be a relief in our current messy moment of institutional showings. "I'm not trying to quote from art history," he explains. "I'm interested in the associations that might come up, but also interested in not making any those associations so available that you can stop dealing with the painting right there. In such an image-rich world, that's one thing that painting has to offer. You can make images that aren't easily digestible."

Sullivan's studio is something of a creative's science lab; he works on his paintings parallel to the floor. "I use a lot of spray paint — I started poking pins into the cans so the whole can was released at once, so if I have one propped up, in a way, all of the sudden I can capture the movement really quickly," Sullivan says of his materials, the seams of a practice-oriented pedigree showing. He first showed at Gartenfeld's fabled downtown apartment gallery in New York, West Street, in 2011. "Alex is an interesting curator," Sullivan allows. West Street Gallery, which Gartenfeld operated while simultaneously acting as editor of Brant Publications' digital wing, quickly established itself as a sure-fire

talent maker; likewise, ICA is loading up young contemporary artists' work, and Sullivan is a fitting choice. "My goal is to let the materials do something, and that's something I respond to and try to make into something that we all see and read as a painting," he says. He pauses to ensure his meaning is clear, then jokes: "It all makes sense to me, because I make them!"

*"Ryan Sullivan" is on view through Aug. 9 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, 4040 NE 2nd Avenue, Miami, [icamiami.org](http://icamiami.org).*