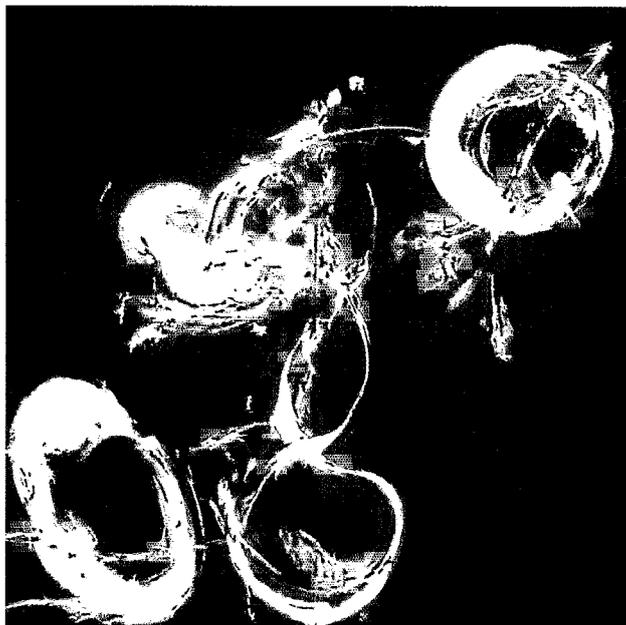


# MICHIGAN

## DONALD SULTAN

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN MUSEUM OF ART, 525 S. STATE ST., ANN ARBOR, 48109 734/764-0395



THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN IRONIC RELATIONSHIP between the surfaces of Donald Sultan's large, industrial paintings and his ephemeral subject matter. Through an aesthetic that embodies both Pop and Neo-Expressionism, Sultan has explored a variety of mundane objects including lemons, flowers, and now smoke rings. A large photograph that hung at the entrance to this show expands that aesthetic. Titled *Smoke Rings, February 7, 2001*, the photograph captures the elusive quality of smoke rings slowly morphing in still air, acting as an archive of movement within the blackness that surrounds the rings. A smaller series of similar black-and-white photographs functions as source material for Sultan's grandly scaled tar-and-spackle paintings.

Moving from the photographs to the paintings, the viewer was particularly struck by Sultan's eradication of the sentiment and sense of time that the photographs capture. Starkly black and white, on grids of one-foot-square tiles, these paintings explore the shape of smoke as opposed to its feel. *Smoke Ring, June 26, 2001*, an eight-foot-square mass of spackle, tar, and oil on tile mounted on wood, is at once forceful and painterly. The forms of the smoke rings are carved out of the vinyl tile, then filled with plaster that is painted or stained to retain the texture and density of spackle. This process turns the fleeting smoke rings into hovering ovoids. Composed of heavy impasto marks, the shapes float like galaxies as their edges splatter into the abyss that surrounds them. The grid, a more active component of Sultan's earlier work, is almost consumed by the tar in these paintings; it is visible at the works' edges as a reminder of Minimalist order and stability, but pushed below the surface. The impact is one of boundless space and aggressive vigor. More dynamic and less illusionistic than the photos, the paintings eliminate dimensional space through the textural qualities of black tar against stark white spackle, evoking the flattened picture planes of Andy

Warhol and the patiently crafted surfaces of Agnes Martin.

The genre of still-life painting, to which Sultan's work belongs, has never ceased to attract contemporary artists who have reconfigured or redefined the milieu. However, like the Modernist he is, Sultan uses the still life less as an examination of everyday life, and more as a vehicle to explore the formal elements of painting. Sultan came of age as an artist in the 1970s when Conceptualism, Minimalism, and performance art were the prevailing schools. His embrace of the still-life tradition—with its basis in drawing and observation—was unlikely, but the genre liberated Sultan to pursue his own interests regardless of art-world trends. In keeping with the genre's history, decomposition and change have emerged as the inevitable themes of Sultan's still lives composed of flowers, fruit, or smoke, which the artist has carefully selected for their distinct shapes. It is in the conjunction of his ephemeral subject matter and the industrial materials with which Sultan paints that irony creeps in. Logically, there should be a conceptual relationship between the tar Sultan uses as paint and the smoke rings he renders, but the connection is not made.

While many artists were rejecting the self-reflexive position of the Expressionists, Sultan used their formal tools—scale, surface, gesture—and hung them on a still-life substructure, reaching for a semblance of content. But Sultan remains a formalist, and his paintings communicate through monumentality and tactility. Unlike his earlier work, it is not the figure/ground ambiguity of these compositions but their sheer muscle that gives them an authoritative voice. They are larger than life, sweeping us into the enormity and passion of their surface qualities, yet leaving us wanting in a day when grandeur is no longer enough. At the same time, what is so appealing about this work is its refusal to be about anything other than painting. This is not fashionable these days, but it sure feels good.

*Julia Morrisroe is an artist teaching at Illinois State University, Normal.*

## DONALD SULTAN

*Smoke Rings, June 14, 2001, 2001. Spackle, tar, oil on tile and wood, 96" x 96".*

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a yellow-to-white gradient with a small red diamond at the top.

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