

CONVERSATION

Laura Owens and Ryan Sullivan



Laura Owens: One of the things I'm struck by when I see a photograph of one of your works shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, is how much I'm alerted to the fact that it is a reproduction of a painting. I don't know if it's because of the way you use color and spray paint—such that it alludes to a kind of light that occurs in photography—but it seems that you consider photography central to your concept of abstraction. What do you think about reproductions of your art? Do you think a lot about a painting's move into photography? Do you do a lot of color correction? It looks like a lot of color was digitally dropped in.

Ryan Sullivan: Before any painting leaves my studio, we make a match print. I struggle almost as much in depicting the paintings as in making them. I've had a lot of conversations with other painters about their approaches to, and theories on, reproducing their work. One camp wants the depictions to be works in and of themselves, and faithfulness to reality is not important. Another wants to make their reproductions as faithful as possible, which involves isolating light sources and going back into the digital images to correct color relationships. Within that process, there are also judgments to be made: whether to allow reflection, whether to show the tactility of the surface, whether to provide a sense of scale by including the room in which the painting was photographed. The latter makes more sense to me—to neutralize the documentation of my work as much as possible and to not introduce a lot of other cues.

The fact that you have perceived images of my work as hyperreal is either a failure in my attempt to eliminate artificialities—or it means the photograph is successfully reproducing the effect of the work.

LO: Which, in terms of accuracy, is usually the role of color correction.

RS: Yes, but not through “dropping in” color.

LO: If I took pictures of your paintings, they would not look like the photographs that leave your studio.

RS: That's true. A lot of work goes into making the photographs. As you know, digital cameras are very confused by paintings. They weren't made to photograph paintings; they were made to photograph people. They're much more attuned to the gradations of skin tone than to a yellow pushed up next to a red.

LO: I know—there's a whole spectrum of blue-green that just goes missing in the photographic process.

RS: So we do a lot of work to bring those colors back. But we're trying to do it accurately—not trying to make the most beautiful image possible.

LO: Photographs of your installations almost look like they were made in Google SketchUp, though.

RS: A lot of people who went to my show at ICA Miami said that they felt like they were inside a CAD [computer-aided design] model. I think it is in part because we blocked out all the windows and covered everything with very matte paint.

LO: So creating a “digital space” was an intentional, if unstated, goal of the installation.

RS: I blocked out the windows because, first, I think it made for a better environment in which to look at the paintings but also because—and maybe this relates to what you’re asking about photography—the lighting of the show was important to me. These paintings don’t operate well when they’re not properly lit. I think it has to do with the kind of paint that I’m using; I’m not using a lot of intense pigment-based paints, which have a different kind of luminosity. I also didn’t want the viewer to experience the show by traveling through an artificially lit room to one lit with bright Florida daylight, nor did I want the paintings to have the reflection of natural light. Moving from one color temperature to another can be jarring. The paintings already had difference within them, and I needed to pare down external difference.

LO: In a way, what I am describing about your paintings seems analogous to what you’re saying about your exhibition. You’re saying you don’t want any raking daylight coming in, and I’m saying that you use spray paint in your paintings almost like a light source; you spray color onto one side of a fold or one side of a wrinkle to enact the idea of light. So you achieve a kind of hyperrealization of a photographic surface through the actual, physical conditions of paint and through simply using color like a light source. I’m wondering about how you’ve made the paintings look so flat in the images. From a photo, your work somehow looks as if it were made on the computer. It doesn’t look like painting. It looks like either a photograph or a Photoshop painting.

RS: That’s funny, because the paintings have sort of the opposite origins. That sense of space, of flattened-out computer space and color, is at the root of how those paintings came about, which was taking something that had physical topography and dimension and hyperaccentuating it, using materials that would mostly flatten out as they dried. So the paintings are like proposals for a kind of space. This is an alternative to the kind of “painterly space” that signifies three-dimensional space depicted within a flat surface, because actual space is accentuated and, like a form of realism, flattened out into painterly space. Some of my paintings are completely flat.

LO: Because you really pressed them down and remounted them?

RS: No, because the first layer of paint that I use on the surface is a water-based latex paint that I build a skin on top of. Once the water evaporates from that paint, most of its topography is leveled out.

LO: So you’re capturing the topography before the water dries.

RS: Exactly. I don’t work on dry paintings, really. I’m capturing the topography that’s there during the making of the painting and as it dries. That surface is gone, but its accentuation remains.

LO: You once said to me that you go through maybe three hundred cans of spray paint, puncturing them while you work.

RS: That started while I was working on a 2013 show for Sadie Coles HQ.

LO: So just to give me an idea, what does that sound like, what does it smell like? Does that happen in an hour or over six days?

RS: It's very fumey. I wear a helmet and safety suit that pumps air in from outside the room that I work in. I work next to exhaust fans. Actually, it's very loud—my studio is filled with machine noise.

LO: So you're not jamming out, listening to tunes?

RS: I'm usually playing really loud music, which has to compete with the sound of the huge exhaust fans. Puncturing the spray-paint cans is not loud. The reason I started puncturing the cans was because the paint, whose effects you are comparing to raking light, will almost immediately cover a work's surface—that is, within thirty seconds I can cast a shadow over the entire surface of a large painting. I found that the maximum dimension I can work with is about eight by seven feet; the stream of paint from a can will go from top to bottom of that height and width—at least in terms of how quickly I can move to make that happen. I'll do it once or twice, and the can will be done. I began to pop cans much faster while I was working on the paintings for the series that was shown in Miami, so the spray paint wasn't just a finishing touch. Much more spray paint accumulated on the surface and liquefied. There might even have been two different kinds, and one would bleed through the other. I was cracking open all these cans, with the painting propped up with a big bucket at an angle so the paint from one can dripped down. The perceptual effect that you're talking about—that something looks like an image or has the crispness of a photograph—comes from the fact that there isn't a typical positive and negative going on. It isn't a pour of one type of paint on top of another. Paints bleed through one another where solvent has not yet fully evaporated, and the line that results is incredibly graphic and crisp.

LO: Can you count how many cans might get popped in an hour, or how long at a time you work on a painting?

RS: I know I often fill an entire trash can with cans, so that's probably, like, fifty in the course of two hours? There are days when I can use all the cans from my cabinet.

LO: What you're describing is not typical easel painting. This is much more akin to performance, or to painters of the 1960s and 1970s, for whom process was so important. Someone who's coming to mind is Jack Whitten—he develops different types of brushes just to make one stroke go across the canvas. It's all about raking up a system, a situation, and letting the paint literally be the paint, letting the painting show the process—the *literalization*—of the paint. Do you feel more of a kinship to some of those painters, and their ideas about abstraction, than to, say, someone like Gerhard Richter, who is thinking more in terms of the photograph? I guess Richter uses the squeegee in a kind of process-based way, but I still think of him as an easel painter, someone who's ultimately thinking mostly of the image, reflecting on the image.

RS: When I think about the 1960s and 1970s, I don't necessarily think about painters, although I do think about filmmakers.

LO: So you don't think about Jules Olitski, Larry Poons, Jack Whitten, or anyone like that?

RS: No. I've admired Olitski since I was in high school, but I've always intuitively felt that he was working along a different trajectory. I'm much more intrigued by someone like Paul Sharits, for example, and his "shutter films," where something incredibly physical happens—almost violently physical—in the act of creation, but the result is graphic and starkly optical. It's a flattened-out result that doesn't leave any trace of its making. I think of Morris Louis as doing the opposite of what I'm doing. When I think about the sixties and performance, I'm much more interested in dance and the immediacy of action—of the body creating something more beautiful than a pour painting, of giving up your own agency, essentially, and that's the concept behind the work. And Richter is so deeply rooted in Pop and irony. I'm more interested in the lack of possibilities in painting than the irony of making a painting.

LO: The "lack of possibilities"?

RS: So many of the technical approaches to the act of painting are weighed down by history. I started moving in this direction by thinking that I could play off of the materials themselves in order to make an image as opposed to willing an image to life by rendering.

LO: But don't you think that's what Olitski was trying to do?

RS: Are you talking about his spray paintings or the pours?

LO: I guess I'm talking about both—when the paint is literally the paint and he's seeing what happens when he applies some process to it.

RS: I'm not interested in simply "seeing what happens." I don't think that the works I showed in Miami were experiments, but I do think of the working process as experimental.

LO: But it seems like you set up situations within strict limits, as if in a laboratory. When you see these works in person, you get a sense of their material uniqueness. It doesn't feel like a rendering.

RS: Right, because it isn't a rendering. I've never gone back in to fix a painting. Usually a big part of the traditional painting process is coming back into the studio and adding something or changing something, but I've completely removed that option from this body of work. It either happened in the moment or it didn't. If I had gone back to change something, it would have disturbed the perceived realism, the plausibility, of it—that is, what you're saying doesn't come through in the photograph. When you're standing in front of the painting, the material is the paint and the image quality is in the material; there doesn't seem to be any rendering. That part of the perceptual experience, and sense of realism, is lost in the photography.

LO: So I guess the literalism I'm referring to, that I've experienced with the paintings . . . What I'm trying to get to is that there is a paradox at play. In your paintings, images often refer to a category of space—not just topography but a familiar idea of landscape

rendered from a certain perspective, as well as a kind of photographic space that we've seen in early abstract photography. And you manipulate lighting conditions as in photography. Yet in terms of your studio practice, the exact opposite is happening.

RS: Because I'm not creating an image of something else—only an image of itself.

LO: Or of the process that formed it.

RS: Right.

LO: I don't know why, but I keep thinking there's a macho, in-the-studio physicality to the way Olitski and Whitten took control of their medium—that they were kind of competing with the sculptors of their time and saying painting can do this thing, too. You need some real muscle, you got to get on top of this thing, there's shit going down. I'm wondering if that physicality of engagement doesn't illuminate anything more than process. In your case, you're wearing a helmet and stalking around the painting—I'm sure it's all got to happen really fast, and you can't slow down to think about what's going to happen . . .

RS: For me, it's an antimacho, maybe even queer, way of working that comes out of a problematizing of the self and of artistic agency rather than out of an assertion of the self. This is not about giving up control and letting the materials do whatever they want; it is about saying, maybe I can create this unstable situation that needs to be responded to, not just in an intellectual or visual way but in a physical way, an entire-body way. This forces me to suspend judgment and some critical faculties. I don't want to be too literal here, but there is a sense of danger because it's happening fast and the paintings are heavy—they sometimes weigh two hundred pounds or more. I'm trying to prop one up on whatever is around my studio—buckets and things fall, and there's a lot of frustration and disaster. There may be some legacy of Abstract Expressionism underneath it all, but in the studio it's the opposite of the painter as master of his domain.

LO: I'd love to talk about some of your peers in New York, some of whom you went to school with. These people are depicting and rendering, and they've chosen totally different paths from one of physicality.

RS: That's true. Their paintings show the influence of computer rendering, of hybridizing image technologies with traditional painting techniques. A lot of their concerns seem to be about translating an artificial or virtual space from one medium to another, while my work addresses the opposite by trying to record a once-physical reality. When we talk about reproduction, we're actually having a conversation that comes closer to my peers' interests, because in that vein I am trying to replicate the space of one medium into another. In this regard, I am always going to fail because you can't really experience them in reproduction. Oddly, for me and for the artists you're referring to, that failure accentuates the concerns that we're exploring. Maybe this ties us together. How do images get made, and what kind of pictorial space are we talking about when we talk about the "image"?

While making these paintings, I was figuring out how unstable and precarious I could make the materials, as opposed to how I could control them. Thinking, is it possible to generate that pictorial space through physical, violent action? I don't

think of my studio practice as violent in the sense of angst, it's just that the materials, comparatively in terms of the world of painting, are treated in a violent way. And because gravity is involved, they're often just sliding off the surface to become no longer part of the painting. So there's also a durational element. I guess that was what was so seductive about using the spray technique with these paintings. It allowed me to create a sense of light and dark and a sense of space, while paints that shouldn't have accumulated and mixed with one another did.

LO: Does anyone come to mind who you feel is working with this much physicality, who is making paintings now that you're interested in?

RS: I tend to like work by people who are doing the opposite of what I'm doing—taking abstractions and treating them as though they're concrete.

LO: Jacqueline Humphries is the only painter I can think of who engages with split-second reactions and who responds as quickly as you might—not for her most recent body of work, but for those paintings in which she used a couple colors of paint in a very gestural way. Some of your peers are interested in physicality, but it's all in absentia. For someone like Sam Falls, who might do something and then allow something else—say, sun exposure—to happen. It's not a split-second physical response. It's not like dance, in the sense you mention. A lot of performance artists use scripts or notes or props but don't know what's really going to happen. . . . I'm thinking of Uri Aran.

RS: I'm thinking of how an object might be right in front of an audience, with no rendering and no manipulation. And like a performer, through repetition, context, and small interventions it can engage the idea of the image or of the space of art. It's an in-between space where there's fluidity of what is right in front of the audience and the categories and discursive meanings that exist in the background. In every body of work, the artist cultivates all sorts of things that repeat themselves, that create a process or even a boundary.

LO: Do you think in the future that this kind of bodily engagement is going to continue to be important to you? Or do you think you might let that go?

RS: Right now, I don't know where things are going. At the moment, I'm more interested in proposing a space, how that is a jump-off point for making a painting. I'm particularly interested in transparency and in physical space occupied by color.

LO: What I find unique about the way you work is the dichotomy you set up between the literalness of the paint, the physicality of the process, and then the end result, which is a concoction of a type of space that relies heavily on our knowledge of the photographic. Like you said, you're constructing an exhibition that reminds us of a space created through software like CAD.

RS: I'm just interested in eliminating as many variables within the sight lines of my work as possible—to create a focused and intentional space around my work. It was important that all the works in the Miami show were the same size, and I wanted there to be a lot of space between them. I wanted to encourage pure focus on moving from one image to another to force contemplation, because the work is not easy

to take in visually. The strategy was to intersperse visual breaks between moments of fixed attention on the paintings.

LO: Think of someone like Urs Fischer, who mashes the physical with the photographic. His process has none of the spontaneity of one person, one physical body, hovering over a painting. There's a remove.

RS: Yes. Interestingly for me, I find that you can't help but see his work as Paintings with a capital *p*—history and all. But when people look at my paintings they want to see them as the results of the processes I set in motion, or as serendipitous depictions of lunar landscapes and weather patterns, or as pure commentaries on what it means to paint. They want to see them as anything other than Paintings with a capital *p*. There's something about the work that I created for the Miami show that I haven't been able to pinpoint, but perhaps it's this lack of a remove that makes viewers want to treat the paintings analogically, or as representation. This is particularly striking to me because of the fact that these works are nothing but paint, as compared to Urs's silk screens, which are actually photographic images of paint.

LO: What I relate to in what you're saying is the sense of scale shift. With Urs's images, I'm looking at paint that I normally see as four by five inches in an area blown up to eight feet. The same thing is happening in your work, but in multiple directions. This could be someone's palette, or this could be a picture of Mars.

RS: Which is why documentation is tricky. If you show a painting without the floor, for example, it's impossible to tell whether it's the size of a postage stamp or fifty-six square feet. I was in an exhibition in Italy in 2013, which was photographed a lot by non-arts-related press. Those pictures showed not just the art but all the people walking through the exhibition and around my paintings—people have remarked that these are the best reproductions of my work because you could see the size and scale of the paintings in relation to the viewer.

LO: You're trying to do two things: you're trying to create an image of something and maintain the literalness of the material.

RS: I think the biggest frustration I ran into with this body of work, though, was that this idea of the topographic map was the first thing that people grabbed on to. I felt I was failing if people looked at the painting and the first thing they thought was, "This looks like a picture from an aerial photograph." Because, of course, I'm trying to put something literally right in front of you.

LO: But I bet you would say it was a failing if people were only thinking about your process.

RS: That's true!

LO: You want it both ways. This is unique to your generation of artists—you want the paint and you want the image. You want the physicality of the process, the feeling of your own tactility and the connection to the painting process, and you want to reference something that is recognizable in the world.

RS: But here's where I would disagree, because there's no "image making" that is relatable to the world here. That relation is yours and has nothing to do with my intention. Now people are saying my work looks like topographies, but before they were saying that it looked like marble. That's just personal visual association. The very fact that you're trying to see something within the painting says more about the viewer's relationship to the work than about the work itself. It used to bother me, but this is how I've come to find that one of my works is successful. When someone likens my work to something else, what they're really saying is, "This exists . . . This makes sense as a thing in this world." When someone says it looks like a topographic map, they're telling me that it makes sense to them in the most literal way, that there's a familiar logic to it. And that's striking because when I made it there wasn't. I wouldn't be compelled to put a piece of wood on the wall and then to say it looks like wood. We never talk about an artistic gesture like that by just repeating what it is. Someone who skillfully renders a painting might feel very limited if people only talked about skill level.

LO: Those are not diametrically opposed things . . . I mean, no one really talks about the graphic, photographic quality of a Pollock, but I feel like that's why the paintings are so successful, because they unify into a homogenous surface while at the same time—because of the light and dark, and the way he's rendering a type of space by modulating drips and color—you get a kind of depth of field, shadow, and crispness that is, yes, all over, but it's like a picture. It snaps to field.

RS: And there's no rendering.

LO: No paintbrush rendering.

RS: But the drips create a sense of pictorial space.

LO: It's not just the fact that he's being physical. It's also the specificity of what he's making an image of, and the way the field should act. It doesn't flatten out to a dead space; he created a very active, vibrant graphic space.

RS: This may be out of context, but since we're talking about my paintings in terms of artists championed by Clement Greenberg, about making a painting in the mid-twentieth century, and about the possibilities involved in making paintings now—the reliance on new modes and new kinds of signature formalisms—I'm curious about something: I heard that you once said that you do not believe people can make paintings anymore.

LO: I think I said I didn't feel like we *were* making paintings. What do you mean by signature formalisms?

RS: Well, does a Kenneth Noland painting look like a Kenneth Noland painting? Does a Morris Louis look like a Morris Louis? You know, that was almost a part of the Greenbergian thing—that he championed artists who had a distinct style.

LO: But who also let the paint be paint. Who let it sit with itself or on the surface in a specific way.

RS: Part of my motivation is to say that it is still possible to make a painting. That the process of willing this thing into existence is still possible even if I have to rely

on an artificial sense of instability or whatever. I was trying to make something that wasn't ironic about the possibility of painting, to really believe it's possible to make something that reads as one. Or something that refers to things visually, or that comes out of things that send out signals that people have to contend with. That, to me, is what painting once was, and I don't know if that's what it is anymore. So in that sense, I think these are kind of historical paintings, which underscores the way that you and others try to tease out these ways of talking about them. When you say that we're not making paintings anymore—maybe the problem is that we don't know how to talk about them anymore. So a painting by Urs Fischer that screams out "I'm an idea about painting" is more easily digested than one like mine that doesn't clearly say one thing and doesn't make any particular claim about what it means to be a painting.

LO: What I was trying to say was that I don't know if it's possible to make painting without acknowledging certain premises . . . A canvas stretched over a wood frame now signifies capital in an almost hyperextended way, by signifying art. We're working in this post-Conceptual, post-institutional critique moment in which when you stretch a canvas and make a painting you might have all kinds of intentions about what you want to add to the history of painting, but there will always be some irony in taking up that aim . . . It's what's seen as an anachronistic situation. Like, if I get the typewriter out, I could write a novel on it—but it will be a gesture, and that in itself will mean something as a form. So I don't know that you get to choose whether or not there is irony. I don't have a problem with irony: it is important because it lends itself to more meaning. What otherwise is seen as a kind of transparency toward meaning is, I think, always a bit false. People might sense that there is an object that means *this*, but that's never the case because time and context are always changing. Irony is important because it makes you realize something can be more than one thing at the same time.

RS: I feel like your typewriter analogy is geared toward proving a point that I'm not sure is completely appropriate to painting . . . I understand painting to be more like handwriting than like typewriting. I guess I just think about painting as kind of putting something complicated in front of someone as something they have to contend with. Or choose to contend with.

LO: How is that different from art? You wake up every day and think about why you gravitate toward making something two-dimensional that hangs on the wall, as opposed to "Today I'm going to write my next video" or "I'm going to make a sculpture."

RS: Well, it's a very conscious choice. It's useful to me to have the clear boundaries that painting provides—especially for this body of work. I could do lots of things that are not painterly but still rely on the structure and familiarity of painting to tie them together, to provide a venue that accentuates why those things are important. Whereas if I were making sculpture, I don't know if those things would be so interesting to look at. They're part of an isolated, material-based performance. I'm isolating it more by putting it into a painting than by leaving it in a three-dimensional form. And the idea of playing off painterly space is a convenient and legible way to convey that information. I like to play off constraint, because it allows me to move forward. I don't necessarily think of that as an ironic position.

LO: That idea of where the art is—the art is within the frame—is a constraint that’s inherent to painting. But a painting is also a repository of capital, a fluid place for capital to travel and circulate. That’s much more identifiable in painting than in other mediums. The curator Sohrab Mohebbi keeps saying to me that contemporary art is a genre. He is trying to distinguish contemporary painting from contemporary art: take the example of going to a biennial or art fair these days, where the mode of reception, of looking, involves the interplay of drawing, video, performance, and sculpture, which together become a kind of genre in and of itself. Painting, because of its historical baggage, still retains the vestiges of a studio practice to some degree.

RS: I like stripping away some of that baggage. For example, I don’t like to see evidence of the hand in my painting. In my paintings, I find that it refers too much back to me. A story I have found to be influential was one of Ellsworth Kelly’s, when he talked about being in Paris after his time in the military: he went to the Louvre, and the Ming vases struck him so much more than the Rembrandts. Despite the fact that the Ming vases are handmade with detailed brushwork, they have a convincing objecthood; the Rembrandts, however, always refer back to the maker.

LO: To biography. Or to a narrator who made it.

RS: Exactly. I guess I’m not interested in depicting my own struggle. I think setting up this precarious situation was a way of trying to fool myself out of my own agency, or of isolating my own agency to a specific and narrow set of options that has to do with responding to physical conditions and to making an object that is somehow transcendent of the act of rendering, which I find incredibly dull for the most part. This seems dead to me. Perhaps I’m thinking about trying to make something that has its own objecthood, an objecthood that somehow goes beyond the conversation of Minimalist painting. These works, the good ones, at least, do have a sense of alloverness, of . . . convincingness. This is hard to reconcile when people know they’re paintings.

LO: It’s a physical engagement with paint that is distinct from Abstract Expressionism. It’s a constructed idea of how to get into what the paint does in a more analytic way.

RS: It could be my lack of access to historical context, but when I see a lot of work that screams “no hands,” I’m not so interested because it seems like an ironic position that is overly reliant on the painting support to declare the thing as art.

LO: So it’s just not doing enough for you.

RS: It’s not doing enough for me. Some of the effects that are achieved are really incredible. I think of Otto Muehl, who used abstraction as an anchor and weight against his figurative work, which problematized both bodies of work. But it doesn’t relate to what I feel like I’m doing.

LO: Can you imagine that a lot of people we both know—or even going back a hundred years—are painting with a sense of doubt, where doubt and hesitation are over-riding a kind of convincingness?

RS: Like Michael Krebber?

LO: Krebber . . . or Cézanne. Who else? I look at a lot of the Surrealists that way. Does that interest you at all? Or do you feel like it's a priority that the end result be this kind of convincing sort of image?

RS: I am interested in making something that goes beyond convincing, because in a way I think trying to be convincing can be too limiting. This body of work of mine can't go on forever because it's dependent on in-the-moment decisions. At some point, the camera has to pull back, and you have to see whether or not that same sort of decision-making can translate into moving around bigger blocks than just what's on the canvas. That's probably what the end point of this project is: trying to figure out just what is so compelling about these works. And then, can it translate into a different way of working and a different kind of studio practice that doesn't rely on moving around a paintbrush.