



Donald Sultan weighs in with a major league monograph

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The quality that admiring critics continually seize upon in the works of artist Donald Sultan is their powerful, provocative beauty, the way they get under the skin of the viewer. An artist of major stature, Mr. Sultan has a mile-long list of solo exhibitions in this country and abroad to his credit, and the number of fans who have felt the sensual pull of his paintings in person is legion.

For those who have not, a large-format, eye-popping new monograph devoted to the artist, just out from The Vendome Press (\$75), is the next best thing—and then some.

“Donald Sultan: The Theater of the Object” is one big book, and one that bears some intellectual heft as well. There is an essay on the artist by leading art critic Carter Ratcliff, an appreciation of Mr. Sultan’s “romance with black” by writer/curator John B. Ravenal and, for each of the book’s three major sections, the artist has written his own introduction.

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“They wanted a personal kind of contribution,” said Mr. Sultan during a conversation last week about the new book and the path that has brought him to this important milestone in an artist’s career—The Monograph.

“I had been wanting one for some time,” he acknowledged. A dealer recommended a publisher. The publisher, which had ceased handling monographs, recommended Jane Lahr’s LTD Editions, “and she put together a package and went to Vendome,” said Mr. Sultan.

It was an “enormous job,” according to the artist, who noted that it involved sifting through “millions and millions of images—almost 40 years’ worth.” It took about a year before the 265-page tome with more than 200 color reproductions finally came off the press, weighing in at more than some newborns.

“Richard Serra’s is bigger,” laughed Mr. Sultan, taking mild exception to the suggestion that his book might have shattered the record.

Mr. Sultan said that it was his idea to bring in Carter Ratcliff, who had been among the first to write about his work, and Mr. Ravenal, who happens to own one of the artist’s famous lemon paintings. Mr. Sultan also came up with the book’s three-section structure, which reflects his abiding preoccupations with the industrial, the natural and the artificial worlds.

The artist opens the industrial section with this recollection of what it was like to arrive in Chicago from North Carolina as a

young man: “Industrial images struck me the moment I arrived to study at the Art Institute of Chicago from a life spent in the mostly rural setting of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina.”

In Asheville, where he was raised with his three siblings (one of whom is the Parrish Art Museum’s current director, Terrie Sultan), his father’s tire shop had, in fact, already exposed



him to the seductive physicality of industrial materials. He also had an opportunity to watch the artistic experiments of his father, who “always wanted to be a painter.”

As he worked toward his master’s degree in fine arts, he was further influenced by Chicago’s “gritty urban landscape, with its rail yards and skyscrapers...” and began developing his very personal approach to making art with tools and materials more typically associated with industry—tar, linoleum, knives and blowtorches. As Mr. Ratcliff writes, “Sultan does not apply pigments to canvas with a brush or any other implement, for he never employs canvas.”

In his early paintings, the themes are industrial as well, and the images, at once abstract and figurative, have been described as “both familiar and disquieting.”

“The point of those,” said Mr. Sultan of his dark paintings, in which the iconic structures of the industrialized world most often exist in ominous shadow or collapse in the glow of engulfing flames, “is that things that seem to be permanent—architecture, bridges, cities, the great industrial towers—are all decaying.”

Paintings in which the dark silhouettes of firemen face the recognizable remnants of urban buildings in flames “seemed prescient when 9/11 happened,” said Mr. Sultan, though they were painted years earlier.

They are dark and deep, and the rough beauty of the medium, as Mr. Ravenal writes, “helps define their singular character. Black is not simply added to the surface by Sultan . . . he builds it into the work’s structure in layers of roofing tar. The rich darkness of this industrial substance reinforces his art’s unmistakable boldness. Its velvety sheen accentuates his bright colors and lends gravitas to even his simplest still lifes.”

That boldness, aesthetically impressive, also serves an important practical purpose. Mr. Sultan cited evidence that museum visitors spend an average of no more than five seconds looking at each painting in an exhibition.



“It has to speak to you very quickly,” he said. “To make pictures that have some lasting impression is not easy.”

In the section titled “Natural,” bright fruits and flowers abound but black remains, as always, “the connective tissue,” in Mr. Ravenal’s words, and Mr. Sultan, in his introductory remarks, confirms his continued belief in the poetic powers of that rich darkness. Calling black tar “my preferred medium,” he writes that it recalls “the 17th- and 18th-century florals with deep bitumen-black backgrounds,” and asserts his intention to “re-introduce images like these that had been thrown out of the language of painting by Abstract Expressionism and Abstraction, and infuse those images with artistic precedents.”

In the “Artificial” section are the hard-edged dominos and buttons that seem to fit the category most literally and contrast most sharply with the natural paintings. But things are never that simple with Mr. Sultan, who claims to have consistently balanced both types of images: sharp-edged smokestacks and fire rendered “smoky and diffused” in the industrial paintings; hard-edged cigarettes set against sooty, soft smoke; Japanese lanterns representing night-lights, “different from the industrial street lamp, but serving a similar purpose.”

Interestingly, this latter series was conceived after Mr. Sultan bought some Chinese lanterns in Soho for his small garden in Sag Harbor, where he says he tries to spend most weekends. With a New York City studio and an apartment in Paris as alternatives, it might seem a strange choice as winter sets in.

“I used to go to Paris quite a bit,” he explained, “but now I only go when I have shows in Europe and I use it as my base.” For eight years Mr. Sultan did his painting in St. Tropez where he occupied the painter Paul Signac’s house and enjoyed what most artists only dream of—a big studio in the south of France, fields of flowers and an atmosphere thick with art history.

“It was lovely,” he sighed. But then, so is Sag Harbor, though it is not where he chooses to work.



“I didn’t keep a studio in Sag Harbor,” he said. “I decided that that would be a place where I could do other things.”

Mr. Sultan will be signing copies of “Donald Sultan: The Theater of the Object” at BookHampton at 41 Main Street in East Hampton on Saturday, December 13, at 7 p.m.