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“Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings” Opens May 26 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Nationally Touring Exhibition Is the First To Focus on This Important Series

In the early 1980s, painter, sculptor and printmaker Donald Sultan (born 1951) began working on industrial landscapes and explored the subject for nearly a decade. “Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings” is the first exhibition to focus on the series, and it is the first time a significant number of these paintings are being exhibited together. Although created in the 1980s, the social and cultural anxieties about the fragility of systems and structures that Sultan’s “Disaster Paintings” convey address issues that are still relevant, making this a timely moment to reexamine this body of work.

“The Smithsonian American Art Museum is pleased to present this important exhibition of paintings by Donald Sultan, an artist whose work both speaks to a particular moment in the history of American modernism and transcends the moment to confront issues that resonate with audiences today,” said Stephanie Stebich, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

This exhibition, on view from May 26 through Sept. 4, includes 12 large-scale paintings from 1984 to 1990, including “Plant, May 29, 1985” from the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, which will be on view only at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

“Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings” is organized by Alison Hearst, assistant curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Sarah Newman, the James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, is coordinating the exhibition in Washington, D.C. The museum is the third stop on a [five-city national tour](#).

The series depicts imposing, man-made structures—such as industrial plants and train cars—as fragile constructs that can be undone by catastrophic events. Throughout his 40-year career, Sultan has explored paradoxes in his work—between the abstract and the everyday, industrial subjects and the natural world. The “Disaster Paintings” present a merging of apparent opposites, bringing together the

materials of Minimalism with representational painting, stylistically combining figuration and abstraction, and making references to high and low culture, ranging from images of actual events drawn from the daily newspaper to 19th-century art-historical iconography.

Sultan combines industrial subject matter with industrial materials, such as tar and Masonite tiles, to create large-scale works that have such a physical presence they can be considered as much relief sculptures as paintings. He was one of the first artists of his generation to employ a wide range of industrial tools and materials in lieu of traditional brushes and paints. Sultan's choice of materials serves as a visual metaphor for the subject matter of the "Disaster Paintings."

"These paintings have a physicality that can only be experienced in person," Newman said. "Their power comes from Sultan's deft layering of Masonite, linoleum, tar and plaster that is used to represent the smoky depths of the subject matter that he conjures."

"The series speaks to the impermanence of all things," Sultan said. "The largest cities, the biggest structures, the most powerful empires—everything dies. Man is inherently self-destructive, and whatever is built will eventually be destroyed....That's what the works talk about: life and death."

Public Program—A Conversation With Donald Sultan

Thursday, June 1, at 6 p.m., Sultan discusses his work, his approach to painting and the current relevance of his "Disaster Paintings" series with Newman. This program will be webcast live on the museum's website, americanart.si.edu/multimedia/webcasts.

Book

The exhibition catalog features essays by Charles Wylie, curator of photography and new media at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and poet Max Blagg; it includes an interview with Sultan by Hearst. The book is available for purchase in the museum store (Prestel, \$49.95).

Credit

"Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings" is organized by the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum is generously supported by Elizabeth Broun, the Gene Davis Memorial Fund and the James F. Dicke Family Endowment.

National Tour

The exhibition opened at the Lowe Art Museum in Miami (Sept. 29, 2016–Dec. 23, 2016) and then traveled to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (Feb. 19–April 23). Following its presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the exhibition will be on view at the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, N.C. (Sept. 23–Dec. 31) and the Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln, Neb. (Jan. 24, 2018–May 13, 2018).

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with artworks in all media spanning more than four centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily (closed Dec. 25). Admission is free. Follow the museum on [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), [Tumblr](#), [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Pinterest](#), iTunes U and [ArtBabble](#). Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000. Website: americanart.si.edu.

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