

Art: Preview

Sam Francis

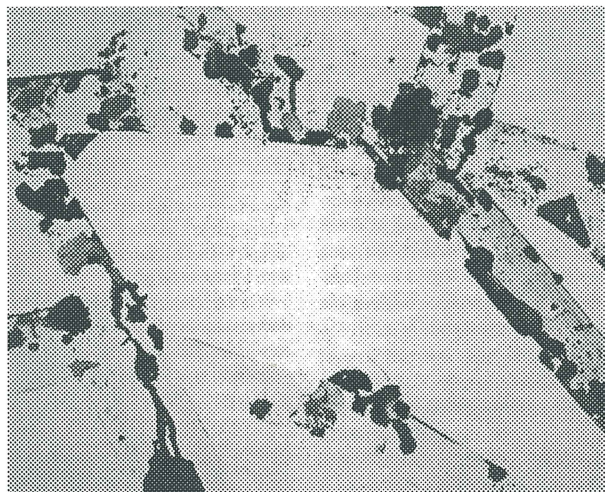
GAGOSIAN

Sam Francis, at the time of his death in 1994, had not only become one of America's major artists, he stood as a kind of metaphorical icon for the American West: It's expansiveness, it's openness, indeed the very possibility of a more pristine America. The works in this exhibition are a rare group of large paintings on canvas that remained in Francis' own possession until his death—many have never, until now, been seen on public display. Drawn mainly from the *Fresh Air* and *Grid* series, they reflect his interest in and mastery of scale, color, composition, and emotional intensity.

There is a sophisticated tension between bravado expression and a tender, though not timid, restraint. Indeed, as the works in the show progress chronologically—from the mid-sixties to the early 1980s—they appear to grow in intensity. The point is implied that maturity—*spiritual* maturity—demands an augmented capacity to juggle and reconcile increasing degrees of complexity, a matter that is, at least in part, a by-product of time.

In a 1968 canvas (all here are Untitled) Francis' characteristically iridescent hues of streaked, stained and dripping paint trace the outer edges of their rectangular paper armature. The literal center of this work stands as an ironic absent yet bold rectangular vacuum that acts as a window which opens into a space that knows no bounds, while is itself a bafflingly fertile void.

Likewise, a 1971 painting presents a



Sam Francis, *Untitled*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 96 x 120", 1973.

similarly patterned image of striated paint, only this time the quadratic integrity of the image—its "squareness"—has been transformed into an oblong ring that is reminiscent of the ring of dancers in Matisse's mythologically charged *Joie de Vivre*. If the previously noted paintings hugs and covers the canvas' edges, this one begins to concentrate and encroach toward its middle, containing the center and giving just a hint of closure. If the prior work draws a clear distinction between world and art, between seer and seen, this one begins to free the periphery, permitting it to

wander off into an eternity that both the viewer and the world outside of the work share.

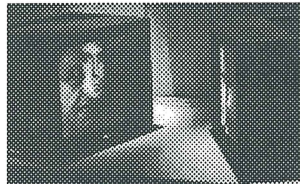
In a 1978 work a bold, deep blue patterning of brush strokes clearly divides the canvas into a fence-like grid. While this is a far more self-referential work than the others that have been discussed in that the rhythm of its imagery fully resolves itself of its own accord into a satisfying sense of wholeness and completion, one cannot help but peek through the paint into the emptiness of the white surface beyond. And wonder...and wonder. *Andy Brummer*

Pat Scull

FREDRICH PETZEL

There's something important going on in sound/installation/performance right now, and Pat Scull is right in the middle of it. A number of younger artists (Andrea Bulloch, Liz Larner, Alex Bag) are pushing their media beyond beyond ironic historicity on the one hand, and romantic self-absorption on the other. In effect, they're bridging the gap between Beck's made-up presonae (so conscious of the art world's rhetorical flushes), and Joseph Kosuth's hard-won investigations of spatial and conceptual resonance. They combine fact and fiction, proof and history with a style which could be named the conceptual snapshot: an erudite mixture of knowledge which incorporates an almost lethal dosage of libidinally intoxicated pure style.

Like Beck and Kosuth, Scull 'directs' his discourse through the passages of philosophy and mannerism, an unusual combination but one which has seduced many visitors to SoHo's Friedrich Petzel Gallery this week. Scull is a veritable control freak, he directs his audio/visual nerve to disarm specific association. Although much of his work is made in Sunny California (he is a graduate of the University of California, Irvine, and lives presently near Downtown LA), his works



appear to have been conceived on an aeroplane somewhere between Paris and New York; their dark, brooding qualities do not correspond to the bright simplicity of much Southern Californian art. Scull's wrap-around installations seem familiar also; they give off the same sense of teeth-gritting, real-time thought as do early Naumans; they have the same hyperbolic sense of pleasure as do the most catchy pop tunes.

In the best work here, a young man looks pensively at the floor of an anonymous Hotel room—the kind an assassin might stay in just before shooting the president. An unused bed is reflected in a window, while an American flag billows outside in the breeze. The interior and exterior of each installation seems as oddly cut off from each other as the piece's protagonist seems no longer himself. In another work, an Asian man (Awakawa? Nam June Paik? John Woo?), wearing an apron and a backward baseball cap, pours chilli pepper into a shaker. Is he at home? In an academic library?

Is this a parody of the serious, pedagogical claims for conceptual art's legacy recently postulated by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in the brief pamphlet accompanying the over-hyped 'The Kids are NOT all White' show which premiered the new generation of Whitney Program graduates (Scull seems to be the *most* talked about graduate)? If so, Scull is demonstrating an extreme mastery over the power structures which he is supposed to kneel before. If so, he is creating complicated, allegorical fables based on his own talent for self-promotion and self-diminution as well—one hundred steps in front of last year's now-sorry and drug-addicted art-star, Sean Landers. That many critics and artists are divided on these questions is what makes Scull's 'Sounding Off/Critical Kunst' a highly unusual but encouraging New York debut. Its extremely entertaining to boot. That's practically unique in para-conceptual work, one would have to admit.

Of course a lot of people will look at these rigorous and complicated investigations and wonder, What's the big deal? But Scull seems prepared to lose that part of his audience. Content to deliver quietly powerful work which is highly ambiguous in content, Scull provides a new form of artistic thinking for those who of us remain in the gallery, and retain our belief in the gallery. *Jerry Saltz*

Martin Creed & Sam Samore

THOMAS NORDANSTAD

The sound of slowly dripping water fills the empty front space—suddenly it is interrupted by a whooshing sound—then that gargling robot noise you get when you phone a fax number by mistake. Then its back to plink, plink, plink. No wonder the gallerist hides in an office as far away as possible from this water torture. Martin Creed has milked-up the gallery's leaking water closet, the photocopier (the whooshing bit) and the fax: relaying the ambient, everyday sounds of backroom gallery life into the space itself. If I hang around long enough maybe I'll catch a collector taking a dump—gersplosion—solid gold hits the pan. Creed is an odd artist; he once sent to me through the post a scrunched up sheet of A4, and recently had a subway token silver-plated.

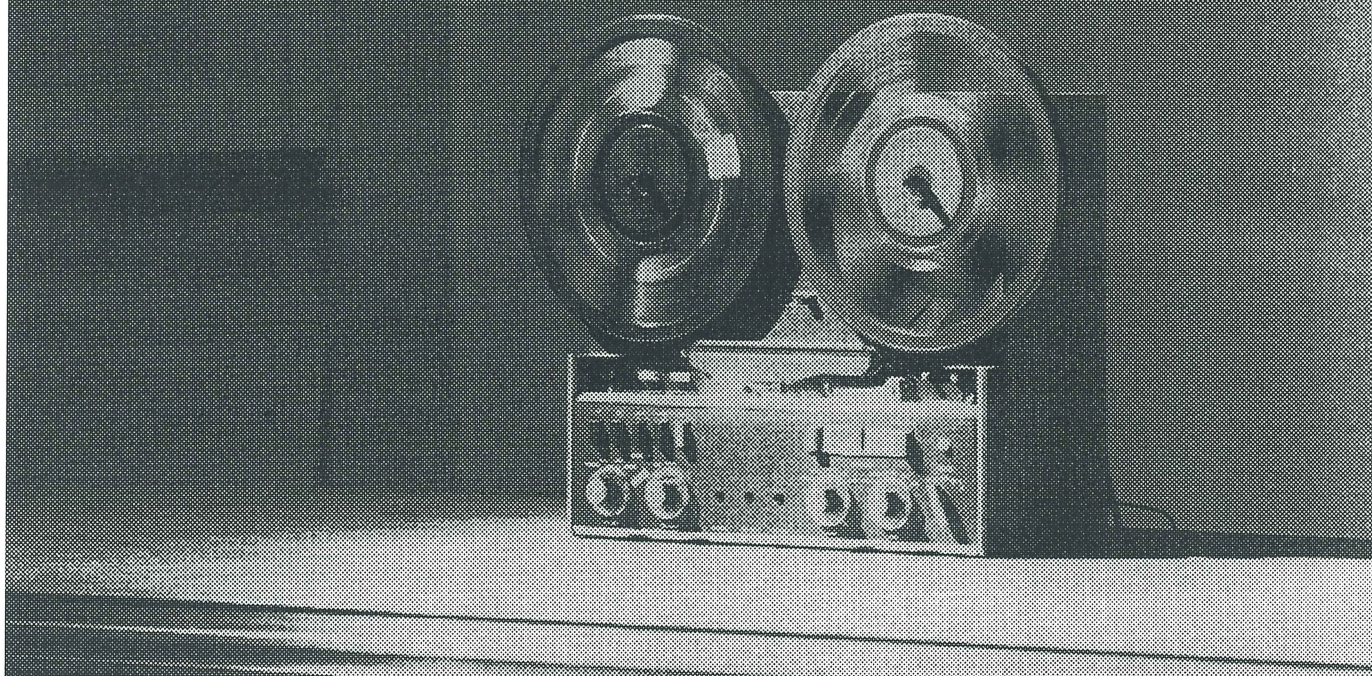
The back room is quiet, and hung with five blown-up photos. Sam Samore goes around photographing complete strangers—two men walking, a woman holding a cigarette, three people together. They're simply going about their lives, but in Samore's grainy, cropped snaps they become anonymous actors in a story that we can only guess at. Looking at these rather beautiful photographs makes you feel okay about eavesdropping and staring at strangers. We do it to each other all the time; though not many of us would hide a microphone in someone's bathroom. *Adrian Searle*



Critics' Choice

1. Jasper Johns
MoMA
2. Nan Goldin
Whitney
3. Sam Francis
Gagosian
4. Sue Williams
303
5. Yasumasa Morimura
Luhning Augustine

Pat Scull



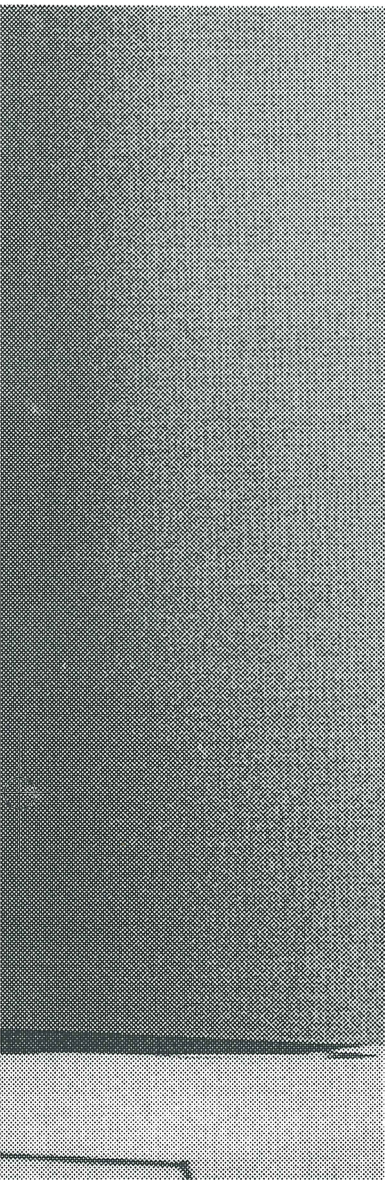
***For people who are
so smart they don't
even watch T.V.***

by Lane Relyer

Growing up in Disneyland, California (well, Anaheim), Pat Scull — a young John Lennon fan and inveterate Yoko Ono groupie long before Ono's ascension to art-rock diva status — came to art by studying pop music. While still an undergraduate fine art major at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, Scull began designing sets for rock concerts and making videos for

profiles

C30, C60, C90, Go (detail)



local bands; eventually he joined an all-male group called "The Next Queens."

Scull's video and sound work takes us on a curious journey, via pop (he also composes and writes his own songs), into the furtherest regions of the male artistic psyche. One of his projects, *Numeric Quitodian* (1996), is part-homage to John Lennon and part-homage to Carl Andre, and part manic self-parody. It takes its title from the opening line of Lennon's 'Happiness is a Warm Gun', with a slight modification from first to third person. In this video, a recording of Scull is repeatedly singing this lyric is sped up, mimicking the quality of his own blurry, distorted image, as, bare-chested, he dances frenetically around the room. Then the music slows and Scull slides down the wall — almost disappearing from the frame — as if momentarily overcome by self-doubt before regaining control as sound and image

return to their former, unnaturally accelerated level. Scull's humorous take on male angst sets the tone for his later work and allies him with singers such as P.J. Harvey and artists from Lawrence Weiner to T. Kelley Mason who have, over the past 20 years, gained recognition for their combinations of conceptual scrutiny and popular wit.

When I look at Scull's installations closely, I am reminded of what the Argentine novelist Ernesto Sabato has called "those places where the skin of the self is extremely thin and delicately and abnormally sensitive." I am forced to admit that the critic who made a connection between

Scull and P.J. Harvey was not as off the mark as I had originally thought. There's a view of flayed skin to which they're both drawn. Scull uses the video camera as confessor but his confessions feed into the otherwise impersonal genres of post-post (!) conceptualism. His dazzling inarticulateness is philosophy, or as Andy Warhol said about art, "You don't know *what* it is."

At a conference on video, television and art in the mid 70's, John Baldessari asserted that "TV is like a pencil." For Scull, video and sound are sketch books, pencils, not to mention eyebrow pencils and softball bats. Scull co-opts television's ability to program him by using video to set different programs for contemporary art's future paths. His productions remain far from monotonous artiness, because Scull retains popular culture's awkwardness, banality, static, and endearing ineptitudes, its jaw-clenching my-spinal-cord-is-a-chalkboard-and-fingernails-are-running-down-it-uncaniness — necessary impurities until now only seen on the unslick channels of cable-access talk shows, certain ads, and bits of MTV. Scull questions what anyone means by art as opposed to something previously recorded — from life, TV, or a radio station of their own creation, WLEX, Sonic Youth, The Slits, X, etcetera — is the soundtrack to his thinking, blaring from a speaker in a white, shag-carpeted corner of the gallery. Understanding that aesthetics have as much to do with perfume of jeans commercials as with painting, Scull moves on, knowing it is impossible to breath much less imagine in the absence of now.

What does it mean to copy things onto cassette, on video, to loop conceptualism in order to mainline it? The artist Scull imitates says, "What is the point of making work for people who are so smart but don't even watch TV? Its just useless and depressing." In the Bow Ow Ow song C30, C60, C90, Go, which partly gave Scull's most recent show its title, Anabelle Lwin sings, "My cassette's like a bazooka." Scull transmits detonation, shattering art (and tired notions of what constitutes it), his cassettes and videotapes already recording something to replace it. ■

Lane Releyer is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.

REVIEW

For Virginia Woolf, a moment was best understood by dissecting the particular elements that made it up, so that the truth of it, the whole of it might be composed. Just as Woolf sought out the small details of a scene — a lamp being lit or the hoot of an owl — to convey the singularity of an instant so, too, Pat Scull dwells on the minutiae of the particular settings his figures inhabit. In one of the three sound/video environments presented in his first New York solo show at Fredrich Petzel, figures blend into an ecology of aural and visual (technological) meshings. The work confuses us with its richness.

DAVID PAGEL

On the one hand, Scull seems to be a straight out revivalist Marxist, an artist who seeks to impregnate a wider audience with the spores of his or her own socially redemptive art production. On the other, he's an arch-conceptualist who presents his dense practice to a minute audience who appreciate the product so much that they refuse to let it out of their sight. In short, the reason that Scull's desire to be some kind of Popular conceptualist seems contradictory probably has something to do with our own envy that this category is even attainable by virtue of a utopian projection. This uneasy vertigo and political ambition is what might be dubbed the Scull-effect.

The Scull-effect is laid out over an installation of interior scenes. Standing in the gallery, hands on hips, Scull's confident environments cross the border between micro- and macro-spatiality. We return the work's empty gaze, our eyes finally lost in layer upon layer of cool dark reflecting surfaces and the glare of numerous video projectors. In another installation, a man with a baseball cap stands at a shiny white counter filling a container with an unknown liquid. His watch reads Sunday, 3.52 pm. Though Scull tempts us by presenting works whose poses presuppose a formidable

knowledge of post-conceptual art, the structures defy our very attempts to know them, deflecting our gaze and our partial knowledges into a maze of shimmering surfaces, each delivering another fragment of a history — which and what history remains ambiguous — that brings us closer to the whole. Ultimately, we never learn how to put together all the visual information piled into these installations.

Two installations present sublime landscapes: in one, Scull replaces actual dirt and grass with an aural (digital) symphony anticipating the break of day; in the other, he naturalizes media to the point where it becomes reminiscent of natural phenomenon. It is as if Scull was turning and spinning the technological clock — or preempting technology to return, via the wilful machining of paradox, to an organic, grass-roots consciousness. In each case, Scull's images are never quite still. Whether the swirl of the video screen or the ocean of banal details endlessly repeated from the audio speakers, he delivers the viewer into a contemplative space which is anything but restful.

Scull's installations, like Vermeer's paintings or Woolf's novels, render the moment as something ineffable, and always in motion. He uses each detail to pull us to another place in the tableaux. His moments are so open-ended that they trouble the line between still photography's frozen image and cinema's moving pictures. While Scull may present us with a aural image, it is one which moves in and out of dimensions, perpetually resisting the viewer's desire for narrative closure. Narrative infinity: this is not merely a critical pose or a rhetorical device, instead it creates an alternative way of seeing — one that privileges the purely visual pleasure of looking and discovering as defining traits of experience.

Blum & Poe
2042 Broadway
Santa Monica.

NEW YORK
LETTER BOMB
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Manhattan File magazine frantically called yours truly, looking for Matthew's matte, but after politely declining a sitting with Ray Newton at the Gramercy Park Hotel and having Gary Leonard settle for a shot of Marks' Chateau Marmont suite (after darting out of the room) last December, an image of Marks has yet to turn up in the heretofore bottomless *Coagula* photo morgue.

Our research department has found that so far only two shots of MM have made it to print: *Newsweek's* *Hot 100 boomers* piece last summer and Jonathan Napack's recent Chelsea Vs. Soho piece in *New York Magazine*.

Think that anyone might check the old Bennington College yearbooks?

Natterin' Jonathan Napack is super pissed at one of his major sources, Larry Gagosian's court jester Ealan Wingate.

When Napa Napa requested an interview with Gaga's risky star, Dirty Damien Hirst, Wispy Wingate suddenly got frosty, "I'll have to get back to you," he reportedly told Nape, who then called your scribe to say that he had heard that Wingate did jail time awhile back, reportedly as a noble jester gesture--taking the rap for a family business' alleged toxic dumping.

Now that he's buckin' the Cogan family bronco, *Art & Auction* magazine Editor Bruce Wolmer is fessin' up to alot.

Loose Bruce admitted to working for Lyndon Johnson at the 1964 Democratic National convention in Atlantic City, before turning hippie. "I just ran into Jim Carroll," Wolm the Wolf allegedly told a thin friend, "we used to score together constantly..."

— Janet Preston

Pat Scull