

RYAN SULLIVAN

Trample Paths

May 14 – June 20, 2026

Trample Paths (trampelpfad) — a shortcut, a convenient route — marking the wayward traffic of impulse. Narrow, crooked, curved. A well-trodden path etched into the landscape through the frequent traversing of the same route. Were one to stray from the path, it would gradually vanish, piece by piece.

Ryan Sullivan's new work traces a wayward desire line, the result of a continuous process of reassembly that strikes a balance only in sudden flashes. Evading intentionality, one thing gets stuck to another through a haphazard sense of gravity. The works are the accrual of false starts — never overridden by the conceit of a *finish*. Each work is beside itself. Drawings are cut-ups of other drawings, a scrap from one rubbed over another, and scraps float from the sculptures to the paintings, stuck in the resin surface. Crumpled paper on a Styrofoam plinth becomes an involuted heart totem. Resin, sprayfoam, and sawdust flesh out a deformed guitar. Scraps of crayon drawings are jaggedly clipped on to wires. A copper mesh is propped up by the silver legs of a long-necked crane.

A new resin painting seems to have a glittery smooth surface of purple marble. Up close there are little perforations and peeling crusts — debris from the studio exhaust pipes in his studio have landed, and become embedded in the plasticky resin, which has been speckled with granite. Across the show, the "material" composition is confounding, opaque, sticky. Sullivan's proprietary substance is some kind of hybrid terrazzo: flotsam mixed with resin, seashells, and concrete.

Since moving to New York in 2005, Ryan Sullivan has searched for ways to evade intentional mark-making — striking a path between the hyper-reflexivity of conceptualism and the self-exposure of queer figuration. He began making *Spray Paintings* in 2010, which was his first way *around* gestural brush strokes. Flows and pours emerged from tilting house paint across a striated canvas, producing alien topologies that emerged from a warped alchemy — as if meeting John Baldessari's challenge to "nail Jell-O to the wall." Viscous motion was stopped midflow and sealed with a spray coating, highlighting the shadows and creases.

In 2015, Sullivan's *Resin Paintings* eliminated the canvas altogether by casting the support as a resin mold — a transparent plastic molding, inherently sculptural, is then painted with *more* resin and hardened into a marbled surface that appears eerily wet. Sullivan's work has always been flat sculpture, simulacral molds *of* paintings.

Maybe his new sculptures, with their involuted verticality, are paintings in the drag of sculpture.

Jacqueline Humphries has called Sullivan's aesthetic a "radical acceptance of ugliness, wrongness and mistake." As I watched him working in the studio, spare pieces of a drawing would end up crumpled, cut-up, and rubbed onto another work. We talked about Robert Gober, how he constructs his external context from the inside – using readymade pieces of the studio as material to replicate familiar forms. In turn, Sullivan has torn his practice up into ephemeral bits that he recomposes as an assemblage that only hints at the outside.

The most exciting works in *Trample Paths* are the simplest: styrofoam glossed and animated by the slightest resin patina. Frisson. Wood glued on top, just barely painted – as a whole, if it is a whole, the styrofoam seems at once speckled and marbled, and also raw and untouched. Or touched, just barely. My favorite sculpture, a clipped paper drawing on wire – sitting on a piano behind the reception desk – looks like a zany Trompe l'Oeil paintings come to life. It brings to mind the American prankster John Haberle's *Torn in Transit* (c. 1890s): a painting of a landscape painting wrapped in brown paper with labels and strings. The *idea* of a painting wrapped and unwrapped, discarded, and dispersed across the space.

-Felix Bernstein