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Waking up to Sherman Sam
18 February – 22 April 2007



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The artist would like to thank Andrew,
Jill & Peter of Oak Park, Jonathan at Rocket,
Michelle and Brad at The Suburban, and his mum.
Designed by Fraser Muggeridge studio



Dizzy n fall (2006) 25.5 × 18.7 cm, oil paint on wood panel

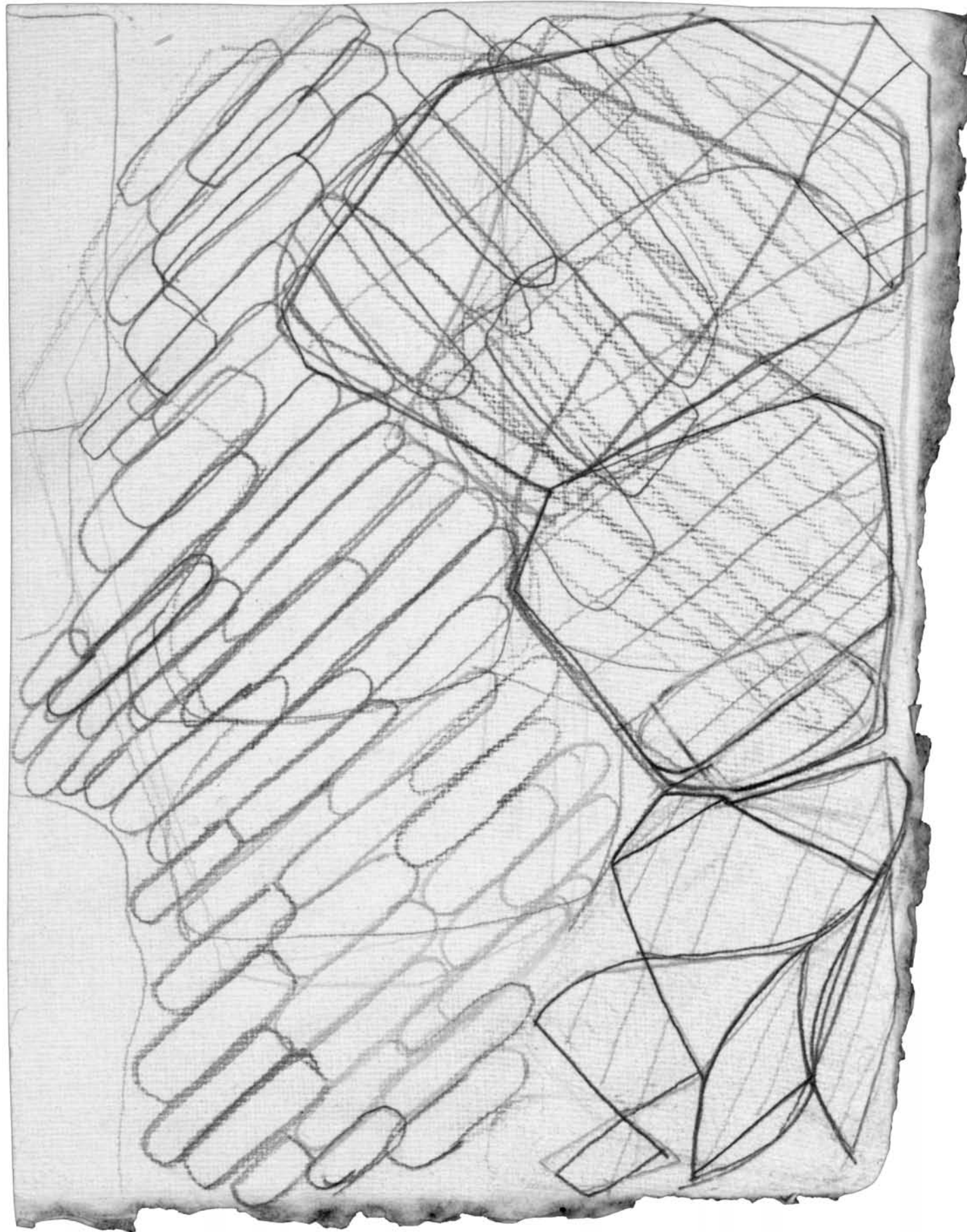


Walk on by (2006) 25.4 × 21.8 cm, oil paint on wood panel



The little ordinary things (2006) 18 × 14.1 cm, oil paint on wood panel

Waking up to Sherman Sam



Untitled, SS-2006-sub1 (2006) 23.9×19 cm, gouache & pencil on paper

Waking Up to Sherman Sam.

I have a painting by Sherman Sam that hangs above the table at home. Most mornings, when I wake up, I sit and drink tea, while slowly refocusing on the world, and Sherman’s painting discretely joins me in this process. I have been looking at this painting for six years or so and in that time I could describe its moods and angles in many different ways without ever being able to tell you precisely what it contains. What intrigues me about his painting is the way it has of refusing to tell you exactly what it is doing or who (artistically speaking) it might be connected to, whilst at the same time clearly demonstrating its knowledge of painting, painters and the possibilities of the medium. It is a resolute and uncompromising form of abstraction, which at the same time manages to be discrete, witty, and even, at times, self-effacing.

Abstraction, of course, always seems resistant to what the world expects of it. Even at those moments in history when it seemed to be the dominant force of the avant-garde, it has still met with as much strong mistrust from within, as well as from outside, what we call the art-world. So when painting such as this is refusing to function in ways that allow writers to be articulate, curators to deploy their elegant and concise thematic out-workings, or public spaces to programme with the righteous thought of winning vast new audiences, what is it doing? Apart, that is, from performing a self-congratulatory circle around the old camp fires of the 50s, 60s and 70s?

Throwback. Throw forward.

The fact that no one seems able to pin down precisely what era this kind of work is a throwback to becomes part of what I describe as its conceptual resistance to categorisation. The general anxiety about where we place abstract painting now always wants to push it back in to the context of one bygone era or another, one when abstraction seemed to dominate. The unclassifiable nature of the work an artist like Sherman Sam, once the obvious categories of ‘painting’ and ‘abstract’ have been gone through, requires more thinking from the viewer. Materials and the histories and ideas that inform them in abstract art of this kind are obviously driven by thoughts and concepts. Operating outside the bounds of language the materials themselves become a visual lexicon, with equivalents of syntax, grammar and reference to key ‘texts’ intact. This work becomes conceptual because meaning, once regular linguistic systems of identification and classification have been denied, always has to reside in the artefact itself. Therefore questions about the order in which parts of the painting have been done, the nature of surfaces, the references to other painting, rebound in more complex ways as the work is subjected to longer consideration. Bringing back the focus of attention to the object is not only primary to work such as Sam’s, but is also very different to previous claims to abstract supremacy found in Stella’s ‘what you see is what you see’ or Judd’s ‘specific objects’. These are not hybrid paintings, but paintings because what Sam needs to do refuses to be done any other way. Thus they do not erase or supplant the past, nor do they deny the future, rather they chisel away quietly at the expectations of today in a way that is both gracious and stubborn.

The failure of a painted surface.

The surface of a Sherman Sam painting is apparently ugly. By this I mean that no concessions are made to oil paint’s capacity to stroke out lovely curlicues, blend shapes and forms with extreme and sensuous dexterity or flatter the connoisseur of painting with neat references to other painters ways with Old Holland, Damar and fine hog hair. More than this, in Sam’s painting there is often a resistance, a sort of disconnection, between the surface texture and the movement of form and line that is the image. Paint is calculatedly miss-cued to the point of consisting of gobs, blobs and unspecific accretions, yet once one is familiar with the curmudgeonly nature of this surface another kind of poise and balance becomes evident. Sam’s use of ugliness is because he is possessed with a concern for beauty, and the beauty he seeks to bring to life requires serious tactics, as well as a wicked sense of humour.¹ No specific optical space is alluded

to, nothing holds any figural significance, and the colours are ‘off’ without every seeming to be self-consciously so. Or should I say too self-consciously... Sam refutes any kind of mystification, but the balancing act, the knowledge of past and contemporary moves in painting that informs his work, mean that nothing in this work is done innocently or out of any naïve ‘*esprit de peinture abstraite*’. Rather there is very clearly a mischievous mind at work here, one with a vast knowledge of the range of abstraction over the last one hundred years, one that appreciates that the only real newness available is through an absence of gimmicks. Instead, by measuring out the disparity between cleverness and what has to be hand-made; by a sort of enlargement of ‘the mistake’ in to an act of contemplation, Sam has found a way to make us pay attention anew to the old ingredients of painting. Evidently painting has been shifting between virtuosity of technique and raw materiality for centuries, but for abstract painting, just about one hundred years old now, the process is relatively new and largely unwritten about. The discourse we currently rely on, through people such as Yves Alain Bois and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, for example, has been built on the ‘end-game’ of painters such as Robert Ryman (Bois) and the wrestle for a new voice in abstraction in the era that made the reputations of Kaneda, Lasker and Reed (Gilbert-Rolfe). The irony of the relative shortage of language surrounding his chosen territory is not lost on Sam, who also works as a critic. His writings on the New York Painter Thomas Nozkowski tells you much about his thinking in this area while at the same time clearly linking his thought with an artist whose work has done much to open up the discourse in this area of contemporary abstraction.²

Possible poetry

Once while presenting his work to a London art dealer, the idea of a gimmick – a trade mark means of production, (in abstraction in England think Ian Davenport’s poured paint, Jason Martin’s squeegee, Calum Innes turpentine erasures, DJ Simpson’s router etc...) – had been suggested as the missing ingredient in a body of work that was obviously intelligent and well informed, but nonetheless lacking the vital ingredient that would get the public’s attention. Needless to say he was less than impressed with this advice. What it reveals is the lack of real development in much contemporary abstraction here in Britain. Collectors usually want to know what they are getting from a work rather than desiring to *still* be puzzled by it in six, twelve or thirty-six years. To Sam’s mind this demonstrates a lack of ambition, rather than the lack of an ability to cut to the chase or hit upon the optimal gimmick on his own part. It would be foolish to hark back to previous apparently golden eras, it is not wrong in Sam’s world, however, to ask more of his audience.

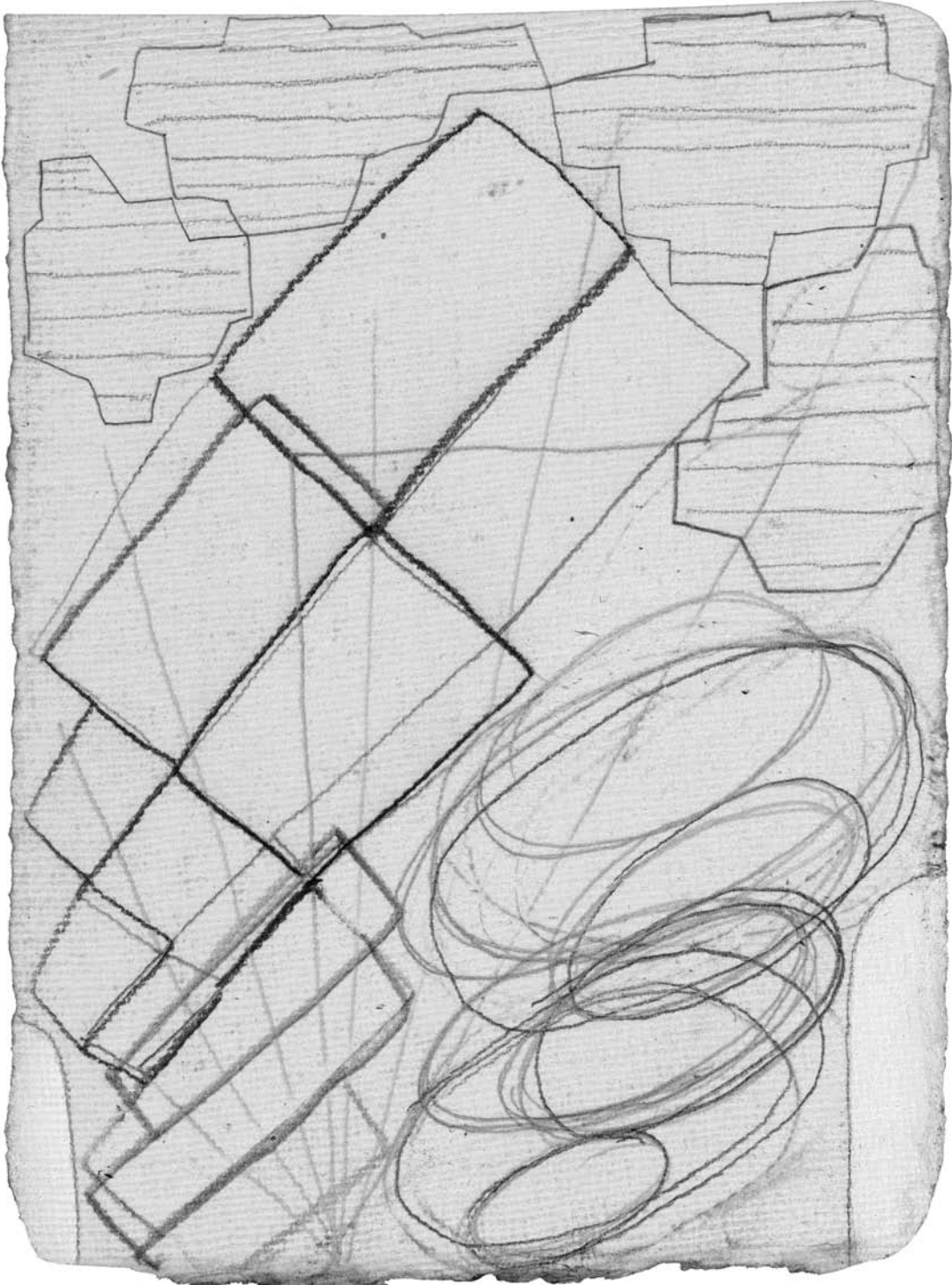
Time is the demanding element of adjustment in this painting. Revision and possible poetry, hesitation and re-working, are the medium as much as wood panels and oil paint. Time is also the medium that continues to be active after the artist has apparently completed the work. What is referred to in Raoul de Keyser’s painting as ‘a notion of the palimpsest’³, is, in Sam’s work, a calculated incompleteness that demands the audience relate to the work over extended moments. The viewer is expected to think about putting into the painting what is not there, or taking out of the painting what perhaps should not be there, and in his work, this form of active suspension between art and audience is perhaps as near as Sam will ever get to a gimmick.

Andrew Bick, London, January 2007

1. ‘In my opinion this is a sign of beauty’s great strength. Its constant diminishment demonstrates that it places a limit on critique, and I think therefore it is best to think of beauty as frivolous.’ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *X-Tra*, Volume II, No. 3. (Spring 1999).
2. See www.Kultureflash.com (No. 67), Artworker of the week #20; www.Artcritical.com, November 2003. Also see Sherman Sam, ‘26 Feet South: A short history of abstraction’ in Thomas Nozkowski, *The Summer of 2006*, (ex. cat., Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland; 2006).
3. De Keyser re-works his old paintings, sometimes ten years or more after making them and even long after they have been catalogued and exhibited See Raoul De Keyser, *Raoul De Keyser: Paintings 1980–1999*, in particular Steven Jacobs’ detailed essay.

Sherman Mern Tat Sam	
1966	Born Singapore Lives and works in London and Singapore
<i>Education</i>	
1987	Foundation, Parsons-in-Paris, Paris, France
1988–90	Otis Art Institute of the Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, USA
1991	BFA, San Francisco Art Institute, USA
1993–97	Master of Letters in History of Art, University of Oxford, UK
<i>Solo exhibitions</i>	
2007	<i>Waking up to Sherman Sam</i> , The Suburban, Chicago, USA
2001	Centro de Arte San Joao da Madeira, San Joao da Madeira, Portugal
2000	Lugar do Desenho – Fundação Julio Resende, Porto, Portugal
1999	<i>Even Educated Fleas</i> , Soho House, London, UK
1996	<i>The Right Place</i> , Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford, UK
<i>Group exhibitions</i>	
2006	Group Show, Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2005	<i>To and From</i> , Metropole Galleries, Folkestone, UK; (curator, Anthony Heywood and Peter Fillingham) <i>Plan D</i> , Palacete Viscondes de Balsemao, Porto, Portugal; Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland; Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland; (curator, Sherman Sam) <i>Drawing 200</i> , The Drawing Room, London, UK <i>Over the Sofa</i> , Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2004	<i>25 Artists, 25 Drawings</i> , The Drawing Gallery, London, UK
2003	<i>Flix</i> , Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland <i>Photopsis</i> , Bilkin Gallery, Bilbao, Spain <i>A version of Sight Mapping</i> , The Gallery at APT, London, UK <i>Drawn 2B Alive</i> , Hales Gallery, London, UK
2002	<i>Heaven on Earth</i> , Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland
2002–3	<i>Sight Mapping</i> , Kunsthallen-Bohuslans Museum, Uddevalla, Sweden; GoMA, Glasgow, UK; Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, Spain; (curator, Andrew Bick)
1998	<i>Painting Now</i> , Earl Lu Gallery, Lasalle-SIA School of Art, Singapore
1987	<i>Australian Art Awards</i> , National Museum of Art, Singapore
1986	<i>Painting of the Year Award</i> , National Museum of Art, Singapore

Publications/Reviews	
2007	Andrew Bick, ‘Waking up to Sherman Sam’, (ex. cat., Chicago, USA)
2005	Sherman Sam, <i>Plan D</i> (ex. cat., Porto, Portugal) Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, <i>Plan D</i> review, <i>Contemporary</i> (forthcoming) Susan Conley, <i>Plan D</i> review, <i>Irish Independent</i> (April 8) ‘Back to Basics’, <i>Plan D</i> review, <i>The Irish Times</i> (April 2) Aidan Dunne, ‘Facing up to familiar scenes’, <i>The Irish Times</i> (April)
2002–3	Andrew Bick, Mark Gisbourne and Sherman Sam, <i>Sight Mapping</i> (ex. cat., Bilbao, Spain) Lisbeth Bonde, <i>Sight Mapping</i> review, <i>Modern Painters</i> (Winter 2002) Graham Domke, <i>Sight Mapping</i> review, <i>Contemporary</i> (No. 50, 2003)
2001	Sally O’Reilly, <i>Sherman Sam</i> (ex. cat., Porto, Portugal)
2000	Martin Herbert, <i>In the pink</i> (ex. cat., Porto, Portugal)
1999	<i>Voiddeck</i> , Spring 1999
1998	<i>Voiddeck</i> , Winter 1998
1996	Stuart Morgan, <i>The Right Place</i> (ex. cat., Oxford, UK)



Untitled, SS-2006-cdm1 (2006) 19×14 cm, gouache & pencil on paper