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HUSEYIN SAMI

A DISCUSSION OF SUBSTANCE

After two decades of practice, Huseyin Sami should be feeling comfortable. He has a freshly renovated studio space, a steady rhythm to his practice and a deep, hard-won understanding of his material. But even now, as he tells Jane O'Sullivan, paint can throw out the odd surprise. New paths keep opening, and he's far from reaching the limits of what it can do.

FEATURE *by* JANE O'SULLIVAN

"There's a lot of chance," says Huseyin Sami about the process of draping paint skins onto the canvas. "I have an idea of how I want to approach it, but I won't know the actual end work until it's done. I like that, that I have to think quickly. I don't have time to deliberate too much."

The skins have folds, ripples and sometimes the odd air bubble. They're a moment in time. "It's quite dynamic," he says. "It captures that activity and stores that energy in the surface after the fact." That's partly why Sami describes himself as a middleman. Not in a channelling-the-muse way. More in the sense that he

controls the process but not the results, or not entirely.

"I become more of a mediator between the material and the surface," he suggests. "The paint, the medium itself, makes the work." His latest solo exhibition was even called *Chromatic Carpentry*, as though he's just working construction and laying down beams. But then, Sami has always been a bit sly about the grand myths of painting. Over his 20-year practice, he's made painting machines by drilling holes into buckets and pouring paint through pegboards. He's also bound his upper body and painted with his feet, and performed with a ludicrously



HUSEYIN SAMI
Untitled (SBW), 2024
polymer paint on polyester
183 x 183cm
Photo: Matt Tabone
Courtesy Sophie Gannon
Gallery, Melbourne



Above
HUSEYIN SAMI
Untitled (Bucket Painting), 2021
 polymer paint on polyester
 153 x 123 cm
 Photo: Ashley Barber
 Courtesy the artist

Opposite
HUSEYIN SAMI
Untitled (Silver on Silver), 2021
 polymer paint on polyester
 153 x 123 cm
 Photo: Ashley Barber
 Courtesy the artist

difficult nine-metre brush, distancing himself from the canvas and its aura. He's always been pushing the limits of what painting is and what it can be.

His practice continues to span sculpture and performance, but there's a lot of crossover between the different strands and they're all connected by his use of regular household paint. "I decided early on that I hated working with oils," he says. "I was quite proficient with it. I surprised myself, but it was kind of like learning what I didn't want to do." Art students often have to be bargain hunters when it comes to materials, but household paint also opened something up for him. He began to pour it and test it in different ways. His practice has been one long study of potential ever since.

Early paintings saw him cutting dried paint skins and collaging them like paper. That developed into the colour studies and untitled works that he's best known for, with the skins of dried paint draped directly onto the canvas. The material qualities are suggestive. Some works look like rumpled bedsheets and have a haphazard but calm kind of chaos, like *Untitled (PP)* (2021). Others are heavy and lush, while works such as *Untitled (Black on Black)* (2020) are more like industrial vinyl. Paint is a plastic medium in more ways than one.

Sami has also cut sweeping arches into his paintings, creating sculptural

pieces that reveal not just the reverse of the canvas but also the timber supports behind it. Sometimes his incisions follow the natural arm span, but on the bigger canvases, like *Cut Painting (PB)* (2023), they're much more architectural in scale.

His approach to painting, moreover, goes well beyond what happens on the canvas. "I have a really nice relationship with everything that I use within the studio, and I utilise a lot of the residue," Sami says. He's used offcuts to wrap wire sculptures and even peeled the dried paint from his buckets. The slight curves in works like *Untitled (Bucket Painting)* (2018) almost resemble brushstrokes or the first hints of letters. That close attention to paint at every point in the studio keeps opening up paths in his practice. "I still feel like I'm at art school, almost. I'm still in experimental mode," he says. "I'm still looking. I'm still searching."

The Sydney artist is in a good place right now. He's just finished renovating his studio and finally has decent lighting and some room to spread out. There are sculptures he's working on and, at the heart of the studio, are the same melamine boards he's been using for years to make his paint skins. He pours the paint to make the thicker skins, which can get quite heavy, and brushes them in layers to create the thinner ones. Weather can make a difference, but he's been working with household paint for so long now that he understands how it behaves. Even then, it can still throw out the odd challenge. He admits the work he made for his 2021 solo exhibition *Silvering* took some time. "The silver skins were a lot trickier to develop," he says. "They would crack, which would be really problematic in terms of drying." Figuring out those quirks took him "back to the very beginning" of working with the material itself. The finished works were surprising, almost like tonal studies. The metallic had a certain grandness, but it was also a little like humble duct tape.

For *Chromatic Carpentry*, Sami took these silver works even further, layering them with colour. The square canvases are roughly divided into halves. The simple geometric compositions here suggest hard-edge abstraction. The works feel a little like Josef Albers' colour tests, but the silver is destabilising. It shifts with the light. Moving around a canvas can throw all the relationships up in the air.

Sami is known for working with a fairly set palette, often with a gentle tonal range of pinks. In these new works, he paired pastel pink and blue with soft lemon and lilac, but there were also much stronger combinations and even high contrast black and white. They're not always easy. "I was hesitant," he says about the decision to add colour to the silver. "But for me, that's a good point of departure."

He thumbs through the stack of paint swatches he uses to plan his work. "Going from a small collage to a two-by-two-metre painting is quite a frightening



"TO BE COMFORTABLE IS PROBABLY NOT SOMETHING I'M COMFORTABLE WITH. I DON'T WANT IT TO BE REALLY EASY."





prospect because you don't really know if it's going to be successful or not. It's that fear, but I've grown to embrace it a bit," he says. "To be comfortable is probably not something I'm comfortable with. I don't want it to be really easy."

That seems pretty typical for Sami. His conversation is peppered with references to art history and the artists who've influenced him. He talks about paint as though it has put him in the middle of something. "I think you're always having that conversation," he says. "It connects to that history. You really feel like you're contributing something to that discussion of substance."

He's driven by the desire to contribute, but it's also telling how many artists he mentions have really physical approaches to their practice. Katharina Grosse "deals with material in a very specific way, but also architecture and space," he says.

Gerhard Richter, with his squeegee tools, is "always destroying and creating in the same process. It's a bodily interaction, a bodily relationship to the surface." And Jackson Pollock, of course, brought "that key idea about process creating form."

Immediate connection is important to Sami. The recent works are big, but not to the point where he can't manage the skins by himself. The works are still that frozen moment. He is well aware of how audiences bring their own associations and emotional responses to the works, but his focus is on the physical experience. "It's a material realism," he suggests. "This surface, which is actually quite visceral, is real. It projects out into that space of the viewer. You become more aware of yourself." **V**

Huseyin Sami is represented by Sophie Gannon Gallery. sophiegannongallery.com.au

Above
HUSEYIN SAMI
Untitled (Colour Study), 2021
polymer paint on polyester
183 x 183 cm
Photo: Ashley Barber
Courtesy the artist

Opposite
HUSEYIN SAMI
Cut Painting (PB), 2024
polymer paint on polyester
300 x 229 cm
Photo: Ashley Barber
Courtesy the artist

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HUSEYIN SAMI
Silvering-performance,
Installation view, Sarah Cottier
Gallery, Sydney, 2021
Photo: Ashley Barber
Courtesy the artist

