



SAM FRIEDMAN



American artist Sam Friedman has been producing art in Brooklyn, New York, for the last decade. Tending to reflect the natural world, his work is simultaneously loose and precise. Friedman moves between representational and abstract depictions with seeming ease and spontaneity. His earliest “beach paintings”, completed in 2007, originated from his experience of walking towards the sunset during an oncoming storm. This personal encounter of induced visual clarity prompted in the artist’s mind the precise image for a fully formed painting that incorporated the language he had been developing in his earlier abstract work. This focus has occupied the most of his explorations then, resulting in a body of work that continuously breakdown and rebuild a natural landscape.

Born in 1984 in Oneonta, New York, Friedman spent his childhood by-passing the real world and resorting to daydreaming and drawing. At eighteen, upon graduating from high school, he moved to Brooklyn to study commercial art at The Pratt Art Institute. Following four years of illustration and typography studies, he earned his livelihood by realizing commercial artwork for companies and publications such as Nike and The New York Times. Nevertheless, during that period, his personal practice focused on painting. Eventually, he decided to move on from commercial affairs and engage in activities with other artists, which would ultimately contribute to his art. Taking advantage of his applied art beginnings, Friedman has embraced techniques, traditions, tools and materials of commercial art trades. While negotiating their incorporation in proper artworks, Friedman uses these skills as an initial basis to freely compose visually striking works. He finds inspiration in other great artists with similar approach such as de Kooning, Leger, Lichtenstein, Lewitt, and Westermann.

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### Territories Unexplored

Essay by Mónica Ramírez-Montagut





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**Friedman's** paintings are portals to other-worldly landscapes, like the impression of that one landscape he remembers seeing for the first time:

“When I was little, one of the earliest drawings I remember was from the husband of my elementary school librarian. He drew ink drawings from nature. He did one with these super thick dark trees that framed the view off to the distance in a way that you thought you were on a mountain looking out from a little vista spot. That image stuck with me for years”<sup>1</sup>.

One could argue that Friedman explores the thick tree framing strategy that impressed him as a youngster by taking the exercise to its utmost consequence: his is an extreme framing. Comprised of a series of layers or planes that function like those trees embracing a view, Friedman develops a method based on a multiplicity of layers that become close and closer to the viewer, and they frame a far off vista with more frames or layers that place the viewer far and farther. For Friedman, these frames develop in multiple series that are all related:

“They are all in good distance, within a family of colors that work well together, similar in intensity and light/dark contrast, with slight variations”.

And then, he explains, there is the frame or element that breaks the rule of these relationships in the composition with “some gesture that just throws you off, a straight/wiggly/or curvy line in an absolutely non-related color, proportion, or rhythm to the frames”.

The objective of this counter-gesture is to emphasize that the painting is not aiming to be a representation of reality, just of a nice vista over the landscape. The frames/layers that keep mounting, one on top the other, to the degree of possibly obstructing the view that they were “framing”, ultimately render the whole composition abstract. Friedman fancies “pushing things front and back, and by so, creating a landscape, but not really, because it is abstract.”

Regarding abstraction and the contention of an established system (like that of Friedman’s series of frames), curator Yasmil Raymond explains that “for Foucault and others, the question of ethics rests in maintaining a level of discomfort with one’s own belief system –never to consent to being completely comfortable with one’s own presuppositions-”<sup>2</sup>. With his abstractions and through a counter-gesture that is antagonistic to the system of frames he has created for himself, Friedman practices his own ethics. By exercising criticality, he gives place to works that are somewhat confrontational and contradictory; works that leave territories unexplored, open to possibilities of interpretation.

Yet Friedman’s paintings do hint to some interpretation consensus. The viewer is presented with elements from nature such as water, sand, sky, clouds, sun, rain, that he submits to an



abstraction process and then renders them as thin curving series of blue and green lines, brown circular spots, horizontal bluish gradations, wiggly thick sinuous shapes, red circles, or series of diagonal or vertical stacked lines. The recurrent visual vocabulary provides us, the viewer, with some tools to identify a landscape and yet, as we know, the paintings reveal many elements that do not have such a direct reference. Ultimately, the back and forth of the gaze through the multiple frames is enhanced by the back and forth between representation and abstraction simultaneously present in Friedman's work. These paintings reveal some information while simultaneously resisting a thorough interpretation of them. They straddle both worlds (abstraction/representation) and find themselves inhabiting the uncanny realm of the in-between where neither has more weight:

“My layers do not have hierarchies, they are not a sequential thing like one led to the next because that was a better fit, meaning that landscape leads to abstract, and it is not the other way around either like saying that abstract trunks landscape...I make them go back and forth because they are just different, and they bring different qualities to the work. They both capture emotion in a different way”.

For Friedman, abstract art captures motion and emotion more than capturing the image of a thing. The intensity and direction of one swooping line in his work, he explains, may bring to mind the arm-stroke of a swimmer or the idea of something flying:

“Everyone is going to have some life experience that is going to have a connotation for a particular visual thing because, as humans, we are going to look for those connections .... we always look for connections ... that is why I start all my paintings again and again”.

The continued initiation of a painting is quite evident in one particular body of work by Friedman (*the Untitled painting on the opposite page*). Beginning the work from the edges toward the center of the painting, using tape to block out that start and continuing this process until he is left painting a small rectangle at the very middle point, is Friedman's strategy to avoid seeing the complete work until it is finished:

“At the end of my process I remove all the tape to see what the final result is. It is like doing an exquisite corpse with yourself with the intention of creating a composition half-blind and challenging the narrative boundaries created by some lines and shapes in the painting.”

In this manner, Friedman's compositions almost create themselves by growing from hints prompted by the immediately previous gesture. Of particular interest to him is understanding those “hints” as deployed of hierarchy, rendering the composition somewhat democratic.



However, since each layer responds and to the previous one and all the layers are connected through unexpected connections, those connections are confronted, questioned, or contradicted at each layer. The creative process based on an exquisite corpse precisely allows for ambiguity and paradoxes, being that the reason for Friedman to consider one single work as many paintings in one. To this matter he recalls the abstract work of Roy Lichtenstein:

“In Roy’s most abstract work you realize that one painting is the close up version of a previous painting but it becomes totally abstracted. Or that one painting is just the repetition of shapes that were making up a figure in another painting. He would find some kind of element that would let you know that anything can be abstract and that one painting can be several at the same time.”

And by attributing preeminent value to the experience of his paintings, Friedman concludes:

“I like the fact that I can create in the viewer’s mind a representation of something that ultimately relates to them.”

**Mónica Ramírez-Montagut**  
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*About Mónica Ramírez-Montagut:*

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, trained as an architect at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico holds a Master’s degree in Art and Architecture, and received a Ph.D. in Theory and History of Architecture from the Universitat Politècnica in Barcelona, Spain. She joined The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum as Curator in 2008 from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. There she served as Assistant Curator of Architecture and Design since 2005, where she implemented exhibitions on the work of Zaha Hadid, Cai Guo-Qiang and Frank Lloyd Wright.

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Sam Friedman are from the author’s interview with the artist on March, 2012 in his Brooklyn studio.

2. Yasmin Raymond, “Contending with Comfort: The Possibility of an Abstract Resistance,” *Abstract Resistance* (catalogue for the exhibition at The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, February-May, 2010), 15.

