

# EAST COAST

Alberti, Ward Jackson, Seonglan Kim, and Raymond Martin are so personal as to evade generalizations.

Since Campbell himself is responsible for picking the 31 artists for the show at 1708 East Main, it may be that he intended to make clear that the history of painting is best transmitted through painting itself. The work in both shows transcends criticism couched solely in terms of style. Perhaps all painting is the same "when you get down to the essentials"—all good painting, that is.

Price range: Campbell \$50 to \$8,000.

Others, \$200 to \$7,500.

PETER BECK

## New York

### DONALD SULTAN

Blum Helman Gallery

20 W 57th St., 212/245-2888

One of the most appealing aspects of Donald Sultan's paintings is their carefully orchestrated balance of image and surface. Sultan's heavily encrusted surfaces of tar, vinyl tile, spackle, and housepaint are so well crafted that one is quickly taken in by their seductive appearances. It is natural to be impressed with Sultan's expert handling of such mundane materials. In fact, the paintings are so attractive that it almost doesn't matter whether one is looking at lemons, a vase of flowers, a burning building, or fighter jets; all are

equally and sumptuously rendered.

Despite their physical power, there is one question that must be considered; how important are the images in Sultan's paintings? My guess is that Sultan's "subject matter" is as much spawned by his experimentation with his materials as it is by his desire to paint a particular scene or object. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with this method of working, since much of twentieth century art is founded on such an approach, but Sultan's chosen images of disaster, for example, suggest other concerns, and that is where it gets a bit confusing.

This is a more somber and austere group of paintings than those Sultan exhibited a little over a year ago at the same location. In that show, Sultan's humorous transformations of, say, massive black rectangular steers with their stark white heads was as whimsical as it was well composed. The *Cantaloupe Pickers* and *Pumps* combined spontaneity and precise delineation, in the best tradition of Matisse and Moskowitz.

Sultan's imaginative use of color and shape can still be seen in *Sailboat* and *Flowers and Vase*, both extremely flat but bold compositions that resemble Roman or pre-Renaissance frescoes. His reduction of the fruit in *Lemons* to a single large organic shape, reminiscent of early Jack Youngerman and Ellsworth Kelly, emphasizes contour, whereas *Four Lemons* has three overlapping lemons and one blackened one (rotting or in shadow?) sitting atop the others. They are

displayed on a black oval plate scraped out of the background resulting in a spatial ambiguity between figure and ground.

Throughout this exhibition, Sultan has focused on a refinement of his technique that borders on formula. Consequently, some of the spontaneity has been sacrificed for greater clarity and cohesion. These paintings are meticulously made; they are easier to read than the former works, and somehow less amusing. If there is one weakness in these works, it is that they sometimes look too pre-meditated, too finished and absolute. However, Sultan's work can also be quite powerful and totally convincing. One needs only to look at paintings such as *Poison Nocturne* and *Firemen* to realize that Sultan is capable of delivering completely convincing works with narrative force. At the present time, Sultan seems to be drawn in several directions; it remains to be seen which way he will go.

ROBERT G. EDELMAN

DONALD SULTAN "Fireman March 6, 1985," latex paint and tar on vinyl tile, 96" x 96" 1985. Photo courtesy of Blum Helman Gallery, Inc.

