

Derosia

Louis Block, The Brooklyn Rail, May 4 2023



ArtSeen

Kern Samuel: *Paining*

By Louis Block



Kern Samuel, *Together Again*, 2021–23. Turmeric, paprika on paper mounted to fabric, pieced together with stitching, 23 x 23 inches. Courtesy Derosia, New York.

It is uncommon for painting to be pulled apart at its threads with such care. Kern Samuel's preoccupations with the medium are obsessive and unabashedly earnest; each of his deconstructions is mirrored in an equivalent statement of confidence. Two years ago, Samuel presented nine paintings in the same size and format, a consistency that allowed

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for experimentation not only in process but in tone, ranging from rusty material studies to ecstatic compositions pigmented by the dyes of commercial breakfast cereal. For his second show with Derosia (formerly Bodega Gallery), Samuel has expanded the format but has refined the mood. There are tondos, jigsaw-like piecework, squares, and crosses, but overwhelmingly, the painting is dark. Yellows are sticky, reds are rusty, whites are raw. That the scope of Samuel's work has expanded while its tone has sharpened indicates an investment: painting is the context, and each movement is an elucidation, even if it requires chipping away at the foundation.



Kern Samuel, *Recollections*, 2023. Bleach on sewn fabric, 30 x 29 1/2 inches. Courtesy Derosia, New York.

No matter our hesitation, mediums are stubbornly ingrained in the way that we work, even in a muscular interpretation of the world. Francis Ponge felt the writing table “place itself under [his] elbow,” and I imagine Samuel feels a similar pull toward painting. At its core, painting is about change, modifying substances to alter their appearances. In Samuel's understanding of the medium, destruction is implicit: a material must be damaged in order to change. This is not far from certain etymologies of the word, which trace its roots to pre-Latin terms for all sorts of modification, from cutting and embroidering to tattooing. What is important here is that decoration becomes a sort of reconstruction. In *Together Again* (2021–23), a brown

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target is cut up and sewn back together with bright orange stitches like sutures; a blackened hole at the center implies a burn. The piece's main pigments, turmeric and paprika, combine in an earthy expression of age, and greenish patches read almost as mold, so the whole picture is as if lifted from a wreck. That aged quality of the work recalls the natural fate of many oil paintings, varnish stained with years of smoke and dirt. A piece like *Between Day and Night* (2023) is all about that surface affect, but Samuel has used novel materials—black ink on rusted steel—to achieve something akin to a Ryder seascape.

It is a testament to Samuel's craft that material actually yields to an image despite being the main source of form. Samuel's hand necessarily aligns with borders signaling change: stitching, collage, pigment against raw substrate. In two parallel compositions made up of cut-up and reassembled Calvin Klein briefs, Samuel has written lines of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" in bleach. The compositions are circular in two ways: in the unfolded patterning of the briefs and in the hand lettering moving through the compositions, crude paths connecting lines together around a Bontecou-like void. Optimism turns into nostalgia in one circling, as "every common sight ... apperelled in celestial light" becomes "that which I have seen I now can see no more." It is almost a narrative of the painter's experience: those gemlike pigments becoming muddy and obscure, untenable.

Paining. The *n* runs softly into the *ing*, the *t* hardly missed. Samuel has written that the show's title has to do with phonetic assimilation, learning to pronounce a word as others do; but it is also about what is done to things to make them into paintings. In earlier series, scraps that were excised from compositions appeared in later works, suggesting Samuel's studio as a place of continuous experimentation rather than discrete projects. Here, those missing scraps also take on a metaphorical life: in the show's second room, two skinny vertical pieces resemble an uppercase and a lowercase letter *t*. In *Crossing* (2023), Samuel has taken an inverted steel *T* and covered it in fabric that has rusted in tandem with the metal and then been allowed to droop, perfectly centered, so that the whole composition resembles a deep orange crucifix. The falling flap flutters when viewers pass by it, surprisingly vulnerable next to the solid steel. Beyond its iconography, it signals a form in the midst of change—flayed and multiplying. It is hard to read optimism in these paintings, but the way that their materials can sometimes stand in for bodies, and the way that Samuel treats each stitch and brushstroke with care, indicates a rare tenderness.



Kern Samuel, *Crossing*, 2023. Rust on sewn fabric, rust on steel, 37 x 18 inches. Courtesy Derosia, New York.