

# HAW/CONTEMPORARY

## “Eric Sall: Full Phase,” Haw Contemporary

Dana Self, KC Studio, December 8, 2015

Eric Sall is on fire. The collection of 15 paintings from 2014–15 on view at Haw Contemporary is perhaps his best work so far. His abstraction has always been sophisticated, internally complex, and riotously inventive. These paintings share a devotion to abstracted and repeated loose patterns and a groovy rhythm, embodied in recurring diamond shapes, stripes, X’s and squares.

Sall, a 1999 Kansas City Art Institute graduate, completed these paintings during a recent residency at the Roswell Artist-In-Residence Program, New Mexico. The paintings embody his energetic abstraction, yet are satisfyingly different from previous works.

When elements from his previous paintings show up, they are fantastically integrated, and never feel like relied-upon tropes.



In *Pecos Diamonds*, 2014, small diamond shapes emerge from underneath an overcoat of black paint, which is scraped back to reveal the more colorful, striped underpainting. As in most of Sall’s paintings, what happens underneath is as important as what happens on the surface. Through these layered accretions Sall creates a time/space continuum, and we float between each layer of time.

*Fata Morgana*, 2015 could be a stylistic companion piece to *Pecos Diamonds*. Predominantly white, the painting has a light, floaty feel. Sall thickly applies the top layer of white paint, and then scrapes it away to reveal the colors below. Small diamond shapes float in an irregular pattern of horizontal lines, vaguely suggesting landscape. By pulling paint across the canvas with some kind of palette knife, Sall introduces new pigment to the canvas while simultaneously unearthing the paint below, commingling past and present.

In *Harlequin*, one of the show’s monumental paintings at 80 x 100 inches, the diamonds have shifted to the painting’s foreground. Sall has painted them in more of a flat style, and they dominate the painting. Large, irregular black and white diamonds play across the entire composition, linked by a series of lines, while the background of the painting retains a smudgy, soft affect.

*Country Classic*’s diamond shapes seem arranged to resemble an antique quilt, covered by shadowy dark reds, blues, and black. Conceptually the painting is somewhat reminiscent of Pop artist Robert

Rauschenberg's combine painting, Bed, in which the artist actually painted on his own bed quilt. While Sall's is clearly a painting on canvas, the quilting pattern may suggest Americana material culture.

Similarly related to cloth, Frazada, with its multicolored horizontal stripes and diamond patterns etched in a vertical strip of white paint, suggests the colorful textiles and blankets of the same name.

Language is a salient aspect of Sall's paintings. His thoughtful titles often add a narrative layer to the stories that the paintings tell, despite their dense abstraction.

Harlequin may suggest art historical harlequin images by Cezanne, Picasso, and even Watteau, to name a few. While these are figural representations of the commedia dell' arte figure, the word invokes the diamond pattern of a harlequin's costume and the clown figure himself, lending Sall's work broader depth and context.



The multiple pinks and blues of Makeup Kit, a painting whose composition is anomalous in this show for its composition which seems constricted by the edge of the canvas, conjures images of smeared lip glosses and eye shadows.

Stripes figure prominently in Sall's paintings. In Seam Ripper, the black and white horizontal stripes are

continuously interrupted. Different colors have been dragged across the surface, a large x divides the painting, and what looks like a seam divides the painting vertically. The large X motif carries over into Rags to Rags.

In Sign of Age, the black and white stripes dominant in many of Sall's paintings are disrupted multiple times by a kind of nervous energy of fractured stripes running perpendicular to the primary horizontals. Blurts of color interrupt the composition and give the entire painting an agitated dynamism that isn't present in the other paintings, which, despite their differences, all seem to have a cool kind of musical beat to them. Full Phase comes closest to the kind of disrupted rhythm of Sign of Age.

While not the largest painting in the show, The Moroccans (2015) is one of the best, in which Sall utilizes all of his motifs to supreme effect. Black and white flatly painted diamonds float on the very surface of the painting, while the busy middle and background seem to recede. The diamonds psychedelically appear to float out and away from the painting into the viewers' space. Their hard edges suggest their difference from the rest of the painting, creating a new dimension of time passing in a way that is markedly different from the way time passes in the background. While his trademark pinks, yellows, blues and reds are also present, they seem to take a back seat to the subtle grays and black and white that dominates the composition.

Combining hard-edged geometrics with gestural passages of abstraction, pattern, and language, Sall unites the discursive idioms of painting in powerful and always-intriguing paintings. Meaning emerges between the layers, images, and titles, from canvas to canvas and from past to present and back again.