



SAMMY PETERS





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Spend some time with Sammy Peters' paintings and you will find yourself in a realm of uncommon enchantments. Avenues of layered color embellished with curious diagrams and whimsical patterns arise from every corner. Adjoining plazas and arcades bounded by fences veer off onto sidetracks of stripes or polka dots. Ladders and stairways wander down Wonderland-like passages, while orbs hover and sink. Each one is like a small world to navigate, with juxtapositions of improbable forms and brilliant tones that captivate the eye and entrance the spirit.

Peters grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he still lives. An unlikely locale for a working artist so distant from art world centers, but he loves the lush green environment, and thrives well enough in the humidity that he jokes about having grown gills. A life in art was almost inevitable having come of age into the family sign painting business. In that environment he learned everything he could about paint in all its forms, as well as its accompanying additives and solvents. Peters describes color as *effervescing in the studio all the time*—a genuinely captivating image. He is eloquent in its language, and the

synergistic relationships he builds with color rule his canvases. A color theme may seep from one canvas into another until he has expressed it thoroughly and to his satisfaction. Besides paint, he collages bits of fabric and paper, of which he has a huge stash, into his compositions. Some are translucent, to allow the under layers of paint to show through, while others are printed with the dots and stripes he relishes. Color is his steadfast compatriot—it has even delivered him an edict: *"Use one or two colors only, the kind that you can call by name; the rest should be those that have no words to describe without much labor,"* Now written on his studio wall, it's a statement he refers to often.

Pick out a few of Peters' paintings and you will see how well his edict works. Take for example, *Beginning: current; integration*, from 2014, with its velvety blue heart and primary-yellow crescent. Sets of zigzagging blue stairs or maybe ladders ("I love ladder shapes and fence shapes," he says), lead to a faux Moorish tower in a sky-like space of pale yellow-blue. Or the more recent *Awareness: harmonious; integrity*, of 2019, with its passages of cement-gray and black anchored by a goldenrod







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curtain overlaying a brick red ground. Can you see a watering can in the adjoining blocks of color, a stream of water pouring in from above? Peters' carefully curated palettes ground these paintings—each color plays off of, or is an iteration of, or includes, or encompasses another, while familiar shapes and his fanciful patterns propose mysterious, otherworldly narratives. Every element works with every other to secure the balance of the whole.

Peters acknowledges several artists whose influence shaped his practice. The 20th century master Henri Matisse, maybe art's brashest and most unapologetic colorist (and pattern enthusiast), was his first art hero and inspiration. But it was the Abstract Expressionists who truly captured his attention. When a high school art teacher showed slides of this new and groundbreaking style, Peters searched the local library for every art book he could find on the subject. He settled on the fervent Willem de Kooning as his main emissary, but loved the dynamic paint handlers like Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell as well. He went on to venerate both Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—two

artists who, in the late 1950s, reinvented the idiom by thickly layering pigments and all manner of other materials, including three-dimensional objects, onto their painting surfaces. They had gone farther than most to obliterate painting's illusory dimensions, and Peters was all in. Then, working in theatrical production and set design (including a stint with the San Francisco Mime Troupe), Peters found that he was attracted to the edges of things. He especially noticed where one backdrop or prop met or overlapped another. "I love where a wall opens up and another room is disclosed," he says. A decisive encounter with Richard Diebenkorn's monumental 1970s series of paintings *Ocean Park*, with their adjoining compartments of luminous color, only reinforced his attraction to these border areas. It is noteworthy to consider that edges also describe places of transition: boundaries that separate one space from another, or thresholds that invite one into new territory. As he now says, "Edges are the most important thing to me in painting."

One of Peters' most beautifully realized paintings, *Practical: realized; fragment*, from 2019, comes alive in a syncopated



rhythm of muted stripes and underlying rectangles. Creamy pigments of sand, clay, and cloud, ochre, umber, and sienna are layered, incised, and abraded to reveal (but also to obscure) the wayward assortment of stripes beneath. Like mysterious pentimenti, they shimmer with echoes of blue, green, and hints of goldenrod complementing an otherwise primarily monochromatic scheme. But the daring Peters has just gotten started. In bold counterpoint, he introduces exclamations of brilliant tangerine and blood red, and most arrestingly, a definitive panel of black stripes and its emerging punctuation of black and white ovals. A seamless alliance plays out between these varied elements, emanating from and returning to the enigmatic outlined figure hovering at the center. Unified by its milky tonality and repetitive forms, and invigorated by the startling and exquisitely balanced contrasting passages, *Practical: realized; fragment* sparkles with the energy of a *tour de force*.

A word or two must be said about Peters' unusually quirky titles, determined as he was that they should not impose specific meanings on viewers or influence what they might find

in the paintings. But unlike a plain "Untitled," his three-word interventions make an offering to the spirit of the piece. Peters keeps post-it notes on the wall to jot down words he thinks of while painting, or remembered from his reading, or from dreams. These unrelated words require punctuation, which he addresses by another convention of three. His titles suit the paintings in just the way he envisioned: they leave no clues, and add a little mystery.

Sammy Peters' poetic abstractions are composed and exuberant, dreamlike and joyful, and entirely alluring. With their neighboring territories of ornamented and richly layered color, each canvas unfolds like a singular map of a just-envisioned world. Peters' attraction to edges—those meeting places where one thing (color, shape, pattern, space, time, idea) comes up against another—situates him in a liminal space at the threshold of transformation. It's a powerful position, filled with myriad possibilities. That is just where his paintings belong.

—Helaine Glick  
Independent Curator





Cover:

*Celebration: dynamic; assimilation*

2016, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 40 x 30 inches

Inside Flap:

*Awareness: harmonious; integrity*

2016, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 14 x 11 inches

Inside Panels:

*Beginning: current; integration*

2014, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

*Practical: realized; fragment*

2019, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

*Question: articulated; experience*

2007, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

Back Cover:

*Declaration: evolving; artifacts*

2018, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

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