

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

"Sam Falls"

By David Rhodes

November 2017



Exhibition view. Courtesy Eva Presenhuber, New York.

Two concurrent exhibitions in New York this fall refer to natural and cultural forms in poetic installations with entirely different, conceptually framed takes. Both use painting as intellectual and physical currency, and both excerpt works of literature in their press releases. Chris Ofili cites John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. For Sam Falls, the relevant citation comes from Vladimir Nabokov's novel *The Gift*: "A jail with no jailer and a garden with no gardener—that is I think the ideal arrangement." With its central fence and cage, Ofili's exhibition exposes a dark side of the nature/culture dialectic—pointing at desire, exclusion, and control. Falls, on the other hand, reaches out to the viewer invitingly with New Age connectivity and participatory action, with benches and a curtain inset with healing gemstones.

This is Falls's fourth exhibition with the gallery, the first in Presenhuber's New York digs, and one which sees the Los Angeles artist begin to split time between the West and East Coast of the U.S.

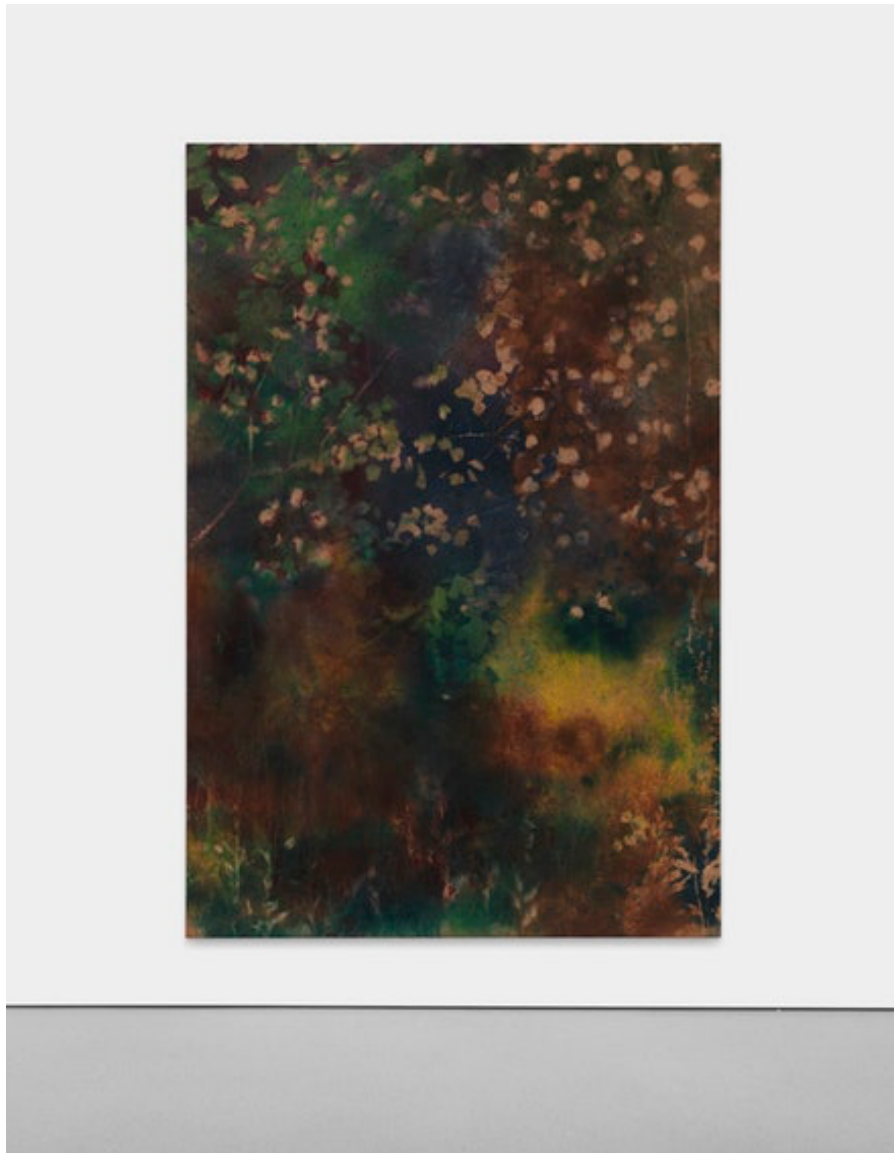
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In an approach to process that appears to have a lot to do with a consideration of early photography's alchemical side (the artist considers photography the origin point of all his work), Falls leaves his canvases out of doors during rainstorms to be marked by and absorb natural elements. The paintings in this exhibition are made upstate by first dying the canvas in natural clay pools made in the road after a storm. Moving off-road and into the trees, he then repeats the process using pigments. But Falls's paintings embrace imagery as much as they do process. Each moment of contact with weather and local plant life forms a trace like a photographic multi exposure. In this way, the work becomes a literal landscape painting, you could say, rather than a painting of landscape. Falls has spoken about the speed of travel by car, train, or plane, and avowed to explore a slower experiential path by walking away from the velocity of mechanized transport; in his own words: "What I'm doing now is getting out of the car and walking, away from where the cars, trains and planes can go. It's slow and quiet, very intimate." The paintings take time, the artist often working through the night, the word exposure again comes to mind, exposure to wakefulness and, to a natural metaphysical dark room—the night.

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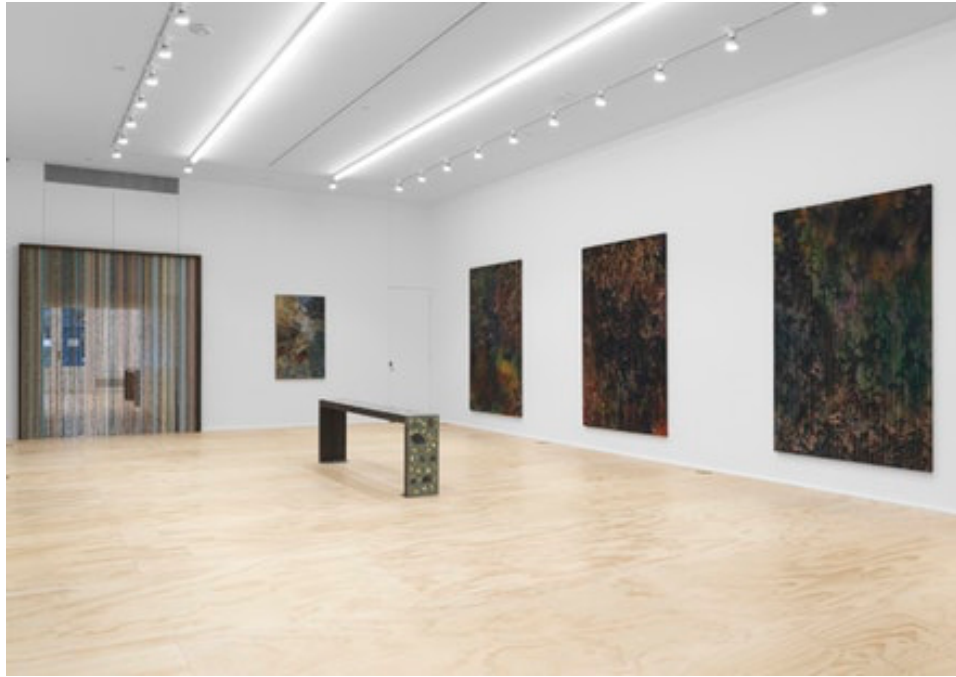


Exhibition view. Courtesy Eva Presenhuber, New York.

Untitled (Bovina, N.Y. field to forest 1) (2017) is typical of Fall's paintings in this exhibition. On the canvas—which looks like a drop sheet judging by the horizontal seam—layers of plants have left their negative shape after being sprinkled over with pigment and left in the rain. The effect is earthy, corporeal and also photographic, like light sensitive paper, partially covered, and then subjected to a brief moment of illumination. For such direct methods, the results are extraordinary. Far from the banality of some recently lauded monochrome process paintings, these works bring together unexpected threads—land art, process painting, photography, installation.

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