

artnet news

"I'm After Something More Sublime': Sam Falls on Making Art Out of Nature to Capture the Nature of Time"

By Taylor Dafoe

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Sam Falls. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tin Ojeda.

Roughly a dozen years ago, Sam Falls was photographing square pieces of construction paper pinned to his studio wall. He was creating, through film, photoshop, and—finally—hardware store paint, iterative, multimedia prints that traced the translation of color from the digital to the analog.

It was a "very didactic way of trying to pull painting out of photography," Falls recalled of the project. By his own admission, it was not "good" art.

But that was okay. The artist was in graduate school back then and thinking about how to make pictures that decentered the process-driven rhetoric popular among photographers at the moment. "I just thought, how can I take away all these precepts of photography, all the technical

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elements, and use just the core values of it, which, in my mind, would be time and representation," he said. "That was a real brain-teaser."

One day, the artist returned to his studio to find that the squares of construction paper had fallen from his walls. When he picked them up, he noticed that sections of the paper had faded in the window light. Falls had, in a crude kind of way, created a photograph—and he needed only one material and the sun to do it.

"This evolved into the first sun works where I would roll the paper and put it in the window for almost a year. When unrolled you had a faded image of the material itself," Falls explained. "I always loved the minimalism and self-reflective element of the material as an image of itself, just by the nature of time passing—like wrinkles in our skin."

Today, the process by which Falls makes much of his work is surprisingly similar: Through prolonged exposure to the sun and other elements, the 38-year-old artist transforms his materials into portraits of a time and place—and often does so at a humbling scale. The results have grown increasingly sophisticated. They're also frequently misunderstood.



Sam Falls, *Field to Forest (Summer)* (2022), detail. Collection of Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger.

Recent examples of those portraits make up his new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (moCa) Cleveland—which is billed as Falls's first major solo museum outing. "[We Are Dust and Shadow](#)," as the show is called, brings together some 20 wall-mounted canvases—several of which

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run the length of a school bus—as well as ceramics, carpets, and sculptures made out of old books and automobile airbags he pilfered from junkyards.

It's the canvas work for which the artist, who works between California, New York, and the Hudson Valley, is best known. To make them, he often treks out into nature—favorite destinations include national parks, beaches, his own backyard—and lays out long swathes of blank canvas on the ground. Atop the fabric he'll place objects found nearby—flowers, branches, rocks—and the powder of a special cold water-reactive pigment.

Then, over the course of days, or sometimes even years, the sun imprints the silhouettes of those objects onto the fabric, while drops of rain or morning dew spread the pigments like stains on an apron. What's left is a ghostly impression of the very place in which that impression was made. (His ceramics, which are fused with flora in the fire of a kiln, achieve a related effect, too.)



One of Sam Falls's canvases in the wild. Photo: © Sam Falls. Courtesy of the artist.

Indeed, Falls makes art about nature *with* nature. And many of his canvas pieces are chocked with paradoxes: They are made through a brand of primitive photography but look like paintings; they're abstract but also representational in an unmediated, one-to-one way. The canvases are created almost entirely from objects sourced from nature and not corporations (only the canvas and the pigment are store-bought, and even those are mostly organic, according to Falls), but anti-capitalist objects they are not.

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Falls's textiles may look like nature—messy, impossibly intricate—but ultimately they act like art. And they are priced like art too: His New York dealer, Lisa Spellman of 303 Gallery, said prices range from \$90,000 for mid-sized pieces to as much as \$250,000 for the largest ones. (Interestingly, it is painting lovers that most flock to Falls's creations; Spellman said she's never sold it to a photo-focused collection.)

Falls's subject matter may prompt assumptions that what he makes is a form of "environmental art." That's true, in a way: It's really the earth that does the heavy lifting during the creation process, after all, and Falls willingly cedes control, often preferring to throw, rather than arrange, his pigments and plants onto the canvas. It is mother nature's craftwork almost as much as it is his own, and standing before it one certainly gets a sense of both the power and precarity of the environment.

That's especially true of his monumental 2020 canvas, *Untitled (Santa Monica National Recreation Area, CA, Woolsey Fire)*, included in the moCa show. With its ash-black color and jagged branch marks, the 55-foot-long piece evokes the devastation of the titular wildfire that scorched nearly 100,000 acres of Southern California land in 2018.



Sam Falls, *Untitled (Santa Monica National Recreation Area, CA, Woolsey Fire)* (2020).
Photo courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York.

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Still, it would be a stretch to say that it's an ecological "message" that the artist has in mind. Falls's work doesn't tell its viewers anything; it merely invites us to feel.

"For me, I'm after something much more sublime," he said, noting his abiding love for 19th-century Romanticism and the movement's reverence for nature. "That was a big reason why I continued with this kind of work, because I felt like it really has that potential for the viewer."

For his part, the artist downplayed the political element in his art, saying that his efforts as an environmentalist exist largely outside of art. "His work," said Spellman, "is definitely more open than that."



Sam Falls, *Diver* (Leo Carrillo State Beach, CA) (2019–20). Photo courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York.

So what is Falls's art about? Well, more than anything, it's about time.

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Courtenay Finn, the chief curator at the Orange County Museum of Art who organized "We Are Dust and Shadow," was drawn to this idea too. (Finn worked at moCA when plans for "We Are Dust and Shadow" began.) In an essay she wrote for the exhibition, she argued that "Falls employs a method of image-making not in but with time, imbued by radical slowness, deep listening, and a mutuality with nature."

The show, too, emphasizes the emotionality of Fall's work and its preoccupation with time's passage.

"What we were really interested in was the choreography or pacing for the audience," Finn said in an interview, describing the layout of the show as a continuous circle, where Falls's artworks appear to flow into one another.

"There's no end or beginning," she said. "We really wanted it to feel like a loop—a time loop—so that you feel like you're moving through time. The idea, Finn explained, was "to bring people in through an embodied experience rather than through reading." She and the artist wanted visitors to "feel a connection to a place."



Sam Falls, *Untitled (San Bernardino National Forest, CA.)* (2017-19). Photo courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York.

Underscoring these thematic ideas is Falls's new video installation, *Sunrise/Sunset (Golden Hour)*, in which a pair of projectors are pointed at opposite gallery walls. One projector live-streams

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footage of the sunrise from various locations around the world; the other does the same for the sunset.

The 24-hour feeds, compiled through complex code, line up so that the two suns climb and dip in sync. Stand betwixt the artwork's screens and it feels as if the day is simultaneously, and perpetually, ending and beginning.

"I'm [trying] to embed a sense of—it sounds cheesy—the beautiful quality of time on Earth in that universal way," Falls said. "I'm focusing so precisely on time that it becomes abstract."

"I'm a very anxious person about time passing and kind of have a big fear of death," the artist added. "It's nice to do things that remind you of everything but that."

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