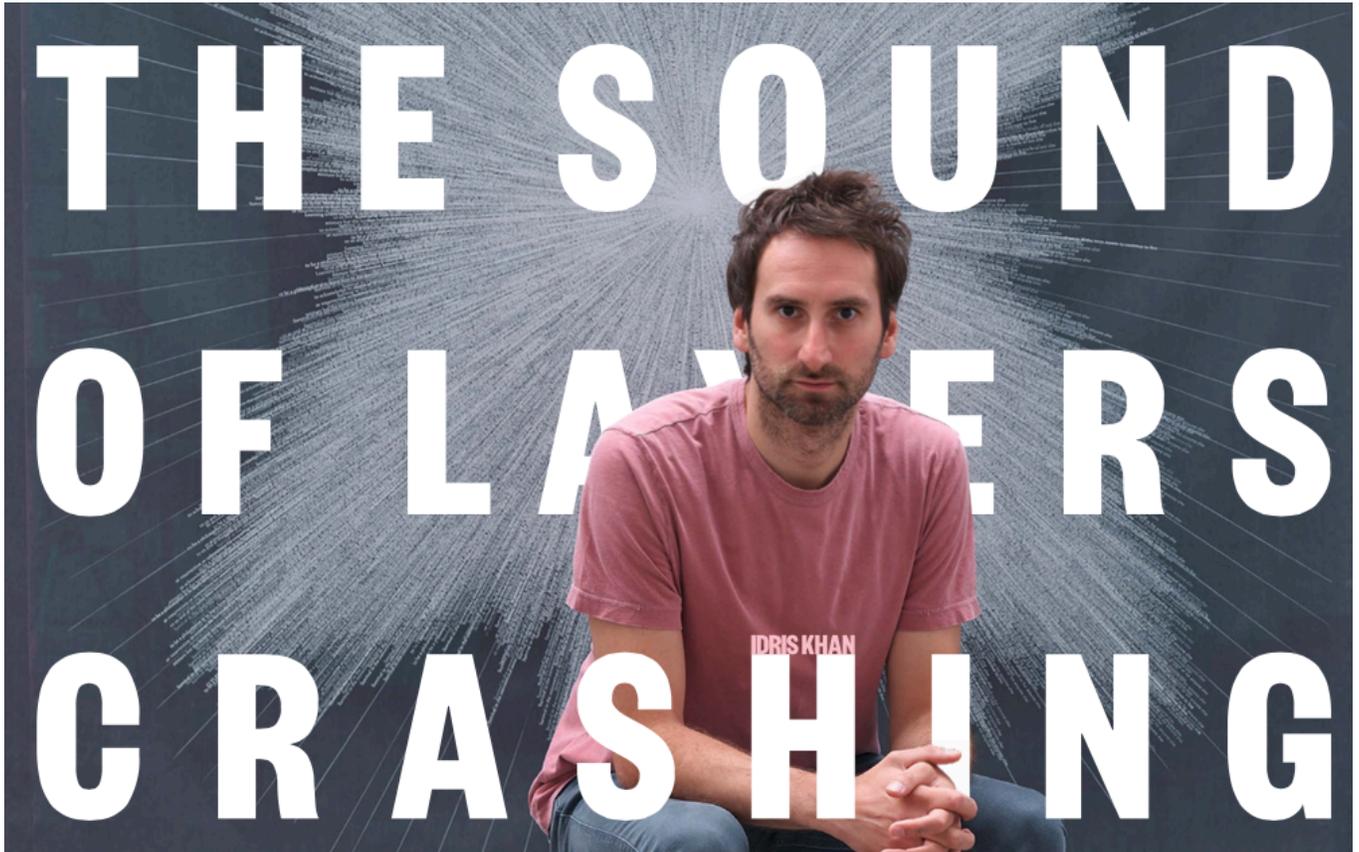


SEANKELLY

"The Sound of Layers Crashing," *Elephant Magazine*, October 2015.



A

Who knows once a career has begun where it will end? Mark Rothko began by painting expressionist figurative scenes of the New York Subway but finished painting symmetrically stacked rectangular clouds of colour, emptied of representational detail. Joan Miró began as a Fauvist but later declared an ‘assassination of painting’ and toyed with the idea of gas sculpture. But, as **IDRIS KHAN** tells **ROBERT SHORE** when they meet in the studios he shares with his artist wife Annie Morris, his final work involved the simplest, most elemental kind of mark making.

nyone who associates Khan’s practice solely with his breakthrough photographic works—those wonderful layered visual palimpsests, blurring the line between photography and painting—of nearly a decade ago might be surprised to discover where he’s got to in early mid-career. And the exhibition *Overture*, at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York this autumn, represents a great opportunity to catch up with his progress.

‘It’s the first time I’m actually showing the real breadth of the work in a single space,’ the artist explains, sitting at a table in a quiet North London street that was formerly home to Waddingtons, makers of the classic whodunit board game *Cluedo* among other things. There will be sculpture, stamp paintings and photographs of paintings—but little in the way of rephotographs of photographs or canonical texts, which is where his practice really took flight. ‘I’ve never actually shown all three disciplines together before, but the space is big enough so I think it can hold them all. And I’m doing a wall drawing! It sounds like a middle-career retrospective of all the work,’ he laughs.

In some ways it’s overdue. ‘I’ve always separated the different disciplines in shows. I don’t really know why. Maybe it has something to do with confidence. But now I’m looking back at the last five years of work and thinking—actually there is a reason why you’re doing all these different disciplines at the same time.’

As Khan says, there’s a term that could be (and often enough is) used to describe his

approach in all media—layering—but there are other factors unifying the work, including the use of language. The latter points towards a thematic coherence as much as the former does to an aesthetic wholeness.

‘The idea that binds it all together is probably looking back at conflict, which I touched on in the Victoria Miro show earlier this year [*Conflicting Lines*]. And also displacement.’ The displacement of people in Syria in particular has been preying on his mind, although it’s a phenomenon that stretches beyond the Middle East. ‘I think there are 3.2 million people in refugee camps at the moment,’ he says. ‘The words in the paintings are about that and finding yourself lost.’ Lost both physically and emotionally, as he makes clear when he mentions the death of his mother five years ago as a spur to his work. ‘The writing,’ he sums up, ‘is an exploration of what’s happening in the world right now, but also personal loss.’

When I suggest that that makes his practice sound almost like a form of therapy, he agrees. ‘The stamp paintings definitely came out of that, out of grief. In a way they became art therapy.’

But if the works are about something—they have an ‘aboutness’, as I like to torment haters of International Art English by announcing as often as possible—nonetheless they don’t give up that meaning without a fight, certainly not on a literal level. For instance, the words on the stamp paintings are handprinted on the canvases using five- to ten-inch stamps that Khan makes

himself, but the impressions are difficult to read. More or less impossible, in fact.

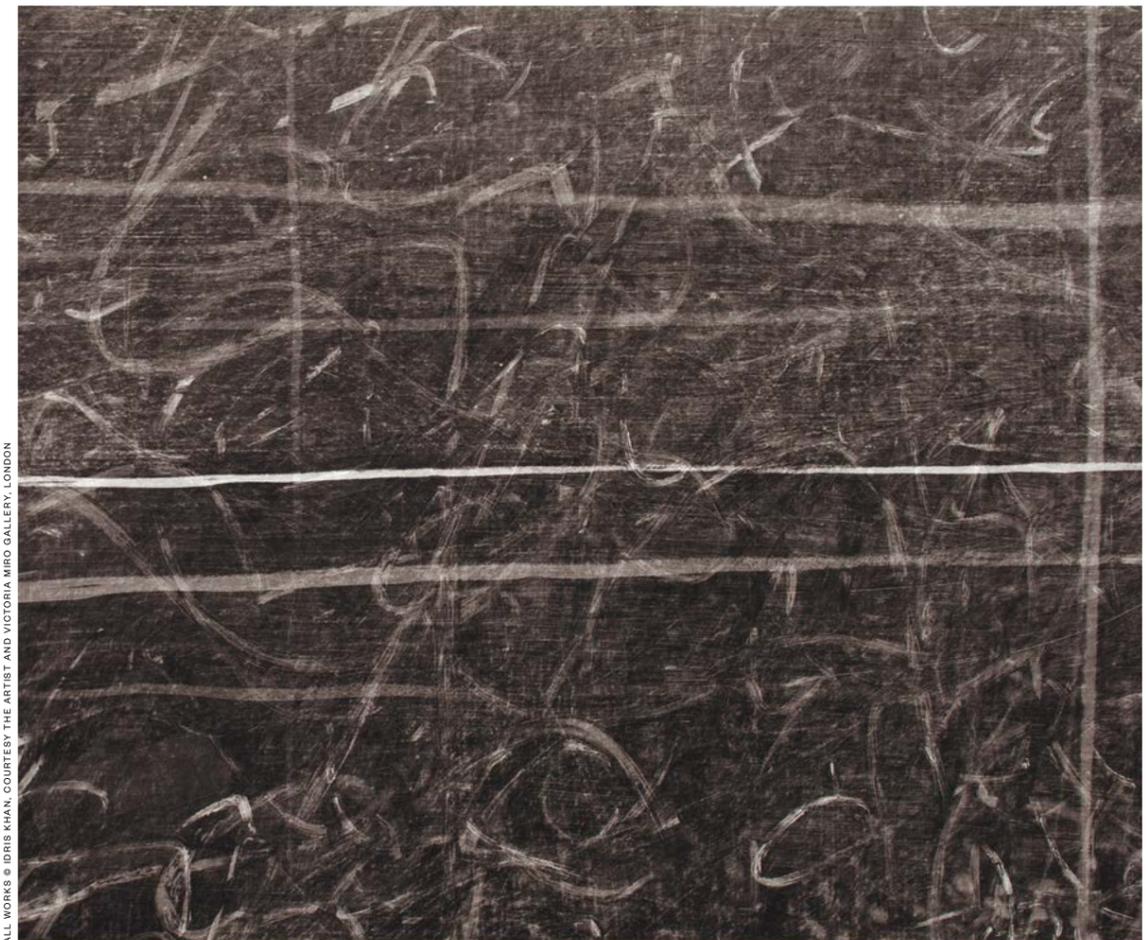
‘No, they’re not [easy to read],’ he agrees, pointing to the abstract, deliberately secretive quality of the work. ‘People can get frustrated because they want to read it but I always say it’s not word art, it’s just a way of creating a mark on a canvas that becomes unreadable and overlaid.’

Ultimately these works are designed to convey feeling rather than literal meaning—sensibility rather than sense. There’s a mystical quality to the work that Khan, a non-practising Muslim, compares to Sufism—‘wanting to experience something that takes you to a different world, a higher place’. There’s a delightful, spiritually elevating paradox about work that, as Khan puts it, ‘is made of language but you don’t know what it means because you can’t read it’. The layered repetitions of the minimalist composers Philip Glass and Steve Reich might provide an occidental musical parallel.

If Khan’s shows are growing in scale, so are the individual works. ‘I used to be in quite a small studio, until 2011/2012. Back then, all the work was photographically based—I was using scanners and rephotographing things and the results were much more intimate. But then suddenly you get a bit more space and that makes you think slightly bigger about what you can actually have on a wall: “I could make a painting or a sculpture instead.” And that’s what’s interesting about having this show now: it allows me to think a lot bigger within my practice as a whole.’



Left, top
Church Walk Studio 9
2015
Platinum palladium print
30.5 x 40.6 cm

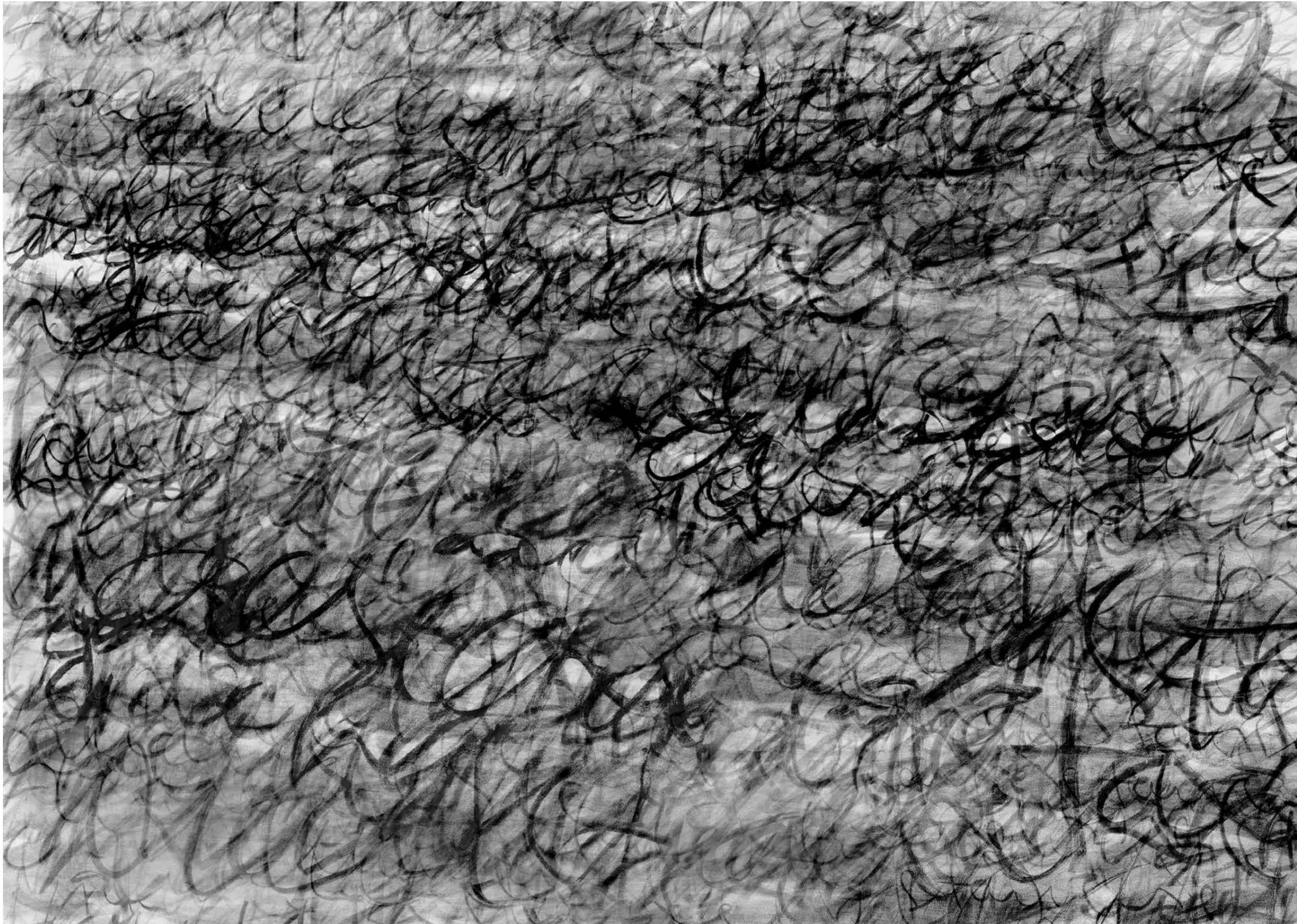


Left, bottom
Church Walk Studio 11
2015
Platinum palladium
30.5 x 40.6 cm

Previous spread
Portrait by Julia Grassi

Next spread
Nude Descending Staircase
2014
Digital C-print on aluminium
177 x 240 cm

ALL WORKS © IDRIS KHAN. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VICTORIA MIRO GALLERY, LONDON.



The stamp paintings are two metres and more in height and width, and take several months to complete.

Indeed, Khan seems less and less a photographer—or even a post-photographer. When I ask whether he ever thought of himself in those terms, he says that he loved working in the darkroom when he was doing his first degree, in Derby, but his interest was always in ‘using the photograph as a tool, to close the gap with painting’, he says. After his Midlands apprenticeship, he went to the RCA in London to do an MA, which is when he began to confront all those big cultural sources—Freud, Nietzsche, the Qur’an—to such striking effect.

‘In London and at the RCA, there were so many smarter people around me, and people with greater knowledge of art history. So I couldn’t make any photographs for a while. I was sort of stuck. There’s a tendency to have that experience on an MA,’ he says disarmingly. ‘There was a huge influx of knowledge. The first piece I made was Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*. It was kind of a joke. I wondered: if I rephotograph every page of the book, does it have the same power? It was kind of tongue-in-cheek.’

S

o he was working on the hoof, discovering major influences and cultural icons and daringly putting them straight into his own work. ‘People experience things through their cameras rather than looking at them directly. When you rephotograph something that exists in the world, it’s about ownership,’ he notes. With his celebrated layering of the photography of the Bechers, he wanted to discover: ‘Can you add anything? Can a photograph be made to look like a drawing? There’s always an element of playfulness.’

How easy has it been to allow himself to evolve given that early success? Has he been encouraged to stick with a trademark or signature style?

Galleries can play a wonderful enabling or terrible disabling role in an artist’s development. Khan is clearly happy with the course of his relationship with Victoria Miro, who has represented him since his early breakthrough. ‘If I had a different London dealer, they might have said to me: “Take your music pieces and keep making

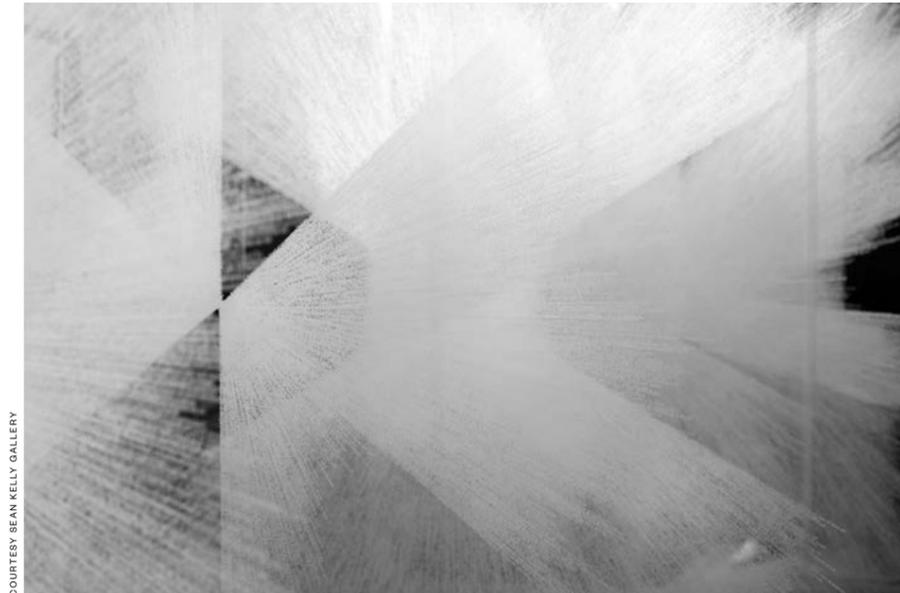
156

every... page of Susan Sontag's book On Photography

157

every... page of Susan Sontag's book On Photography

“IT WAS KIND OF A JOKE. I WONDERED: IF I REPHOTOGRAPH EVERY PAGE OF THE BOOK, DOES IT HAVE THE SAME POWER?”



COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY

Opposite
every... page of Susan Sontag's book On Photography
2004
Lambda digital C-print
mounted on aluminium
87 x 103 x 4 cm

Left
Overture (detail)
2015
7 panes of glass
oil and aluminium
400 x 184 cm

them. Do every single Bach piece, every single Beethoven piece—they've sold incredibly well, we can sell those." But I always thought that the work could be a much bigger thing.' And the people around Khan have clearly helped him to remain free of obstructive commercial expectations. 'There is a "look" to the work. As an artist you want to hold onto that,' he says. 'There's always been that element of layering. But within the context of trying to find something that held everything together I've really always felt quite free, actually.'

He thrives on the relationship with his audience. 'I love that engagement. I don't care whether they love it or hate it, it's the engagement I'm after.' It's a relationship that has evolved significantly since those early rephotographic works. 'At first, it was about a deception: not being sure whether they were looking at a painting or a photograph, that's what I wanted. But now, because I'm making paintings and I'm photographing them, they're asking: Why don't you just show the paintings?'

So why doesn't he just show the paintings? 'The reason is I don't think I'm that good a painter

right now,' he says simply. 'In some way there's a confidence aspect—you're simply not trained as a painter.' He's rightly proud of the stamp paintings but insists that they're of a different order: 'They're process-led paintings.' Away from the gaze of collectors and critics, in the privacy of his studio, his 'pure' painting practice is growing. 'I'm becoming a lot freer with an actual brush,' he says.

For the moment, though, those private paintings are only presented to the world after heavy photographic mediation. Khan paints, takes photographs of what he's painted, continues painting, takes more photographs, and so on, in order to create densely layered (naturally) works that, when finished, can look deceptively like paintings but are actually the result of laborious photographic manipulation. 'There's a real exploration going on in my photographic practice,' he confirms. 'At first the idea was to [take other people's photographs and] make them feel like drawings and paintings, then came the stamp paintings, and now the photographs of paintings.'

'Using photography in this way—to photograph paintings at different stages—allows

me that element of control. If I make a mark and then photograph that mark, it can become anything in Photoshop or whatever. The line can change, its length can change, and then I can make the composition, that's the element of control.'

The work is undoubtedly becoming more handmade in look and feel. Is it important to Khan, whose first layered appropriations announced technological avant-garde wizardry, that he might eventually be recognized for his achievements as that most elemental of artist types—a painter?

'I wonder if that is the actual goal of this whole thing,' he says, and points to the example of Joan Miró. 'The last painting he made before he died was just a pencil line across the page, a massive piece of paper and he just drew this pencil line.'

'Perhaps the studio-based practice may actually be trying to get to being a painter. It may never actually happen. But maybe that is the goal.'

Overture runs at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, until 24 October.