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Sam Mattax: *Spotlight*

By Patricia L Lewy



Sam Mattax, *A bird called*, 2026. Oil, oil stick, lead pencil and colored pencil on canvas, 72 × 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Cary Whittier.

Spotlight
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Nearly a year ago, in November 2025, I was crossing West 24th street when I was gobsmacked by a series of canvases that looked as if they'd been assaulted by buckets of paint thrown from across a room and then gutted, oozing oily viscosity. Looking through the gallery windows of Fredericks & Freiser, I found paintings by a young artist from Springfield, Missouri named Sam Mattax, who runs bent, multidirectional skeins in grids, starbursts, cone shapes, and sloping horizon lines across expansive canvases (generally 6 by 7 feet), doubling his vivid chromatic markings in surges of obsessive overpainting. Mattax produces searingly messy pictures, which to my eye are among the most original constructions of surface in recent times.

Fredericks & Freiser discovered the thirty-one-year-old Mattax in Hunter College's 2023 MFA thesis exhibition and featured him in his first one-person show in 2024. Now, three of his paintings are on view as part of Fredericks & Freiser's "Spotlight" series, an emerging-artist showcase.

Explosive and sprawling, these intensely worked paintings are accretions built up from insistent, repeated returns to the canvas, whether to retouch particular gestures or to overpaint the originating, generative line drawings, a sketch in colored pencil and/or oil stick on the primed substrate. Plotting his compositional arc, Mattax ties together what he told me he calls "building blocks of little micro-conversations." Assembling obliquely representational motifs pulled from his life, he juxtaposes and overlays a portmanteau of references. Jumbled rather than linear, the motivic messiness is also sonic: "Music is a huge part of my practice," he says, whether he's taking in the crushing angst of rapper Isaiah Rashad or the scalding grit of Long Island hardcore, both of which, like Mattax's paintings, are assemblages of blends and riffs, pulverizing in their intensity.

Shifts in perspective, distortion, stacking, and overpainting move real-world objects from the literal to the metaphoric. In *A bird called* (all works 2026), the fabric of a blue couch from Mattax's past appears as a group of contiguous blue loops in the right middle register. Flowing diagonally downward, this scalloped trim frames the pink-orange-yellow-and-brown pattern of the Persian rug on which it sat. The couch is not an oblique reference for the artist but an emotional and psychic anchor: it belonged to Mattax's grandmother, the "Sue" of the title of last year's solo exhibition, *Dinner with Sue*. The couch was a refuge, standing for continuity and communion, charged with a sense of place and belonging. Mattax has written that for him a dinner with Sue was "something of a spiritual thing, it restored my faith in life, and it always made going forward a bit easier." Always alert to the rhythmic effects of opposing line and shape, Mattax balances darkened conical forms (riffs on art-school buddy Nick Fusaro's early sculptures) on the delimiting upper line of the couch, creating "a new mix … that allows the shapes above to come to life just through line, movement, and the act of continuing to draw." The contrasting textures of a series of muddied areas at the lower edge of the painting make them seem like a slop board for the sludge of brush residue, which Mattax then overlays with erratic, warped white grid lines. Frenetic repetitive hatching in greens, blues, and yellows at the painting's upper right corner touches a curving white horizon line that extends the breadth of the canvas. Here and throughout his works to date, Mattax's demarcations help to organize and contain disparate painterly episodes.



Sam Mattax, *Gorgeous appetite*, 2026. Oil, oil stick, lead pencil, and colored pencil on canvas, 78 × 70 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Cary Whittier.

So I ate potatoes is structured as a crowd of repeating contiguous peaks set at diagonals. For the artist, these peaks encode a life spent hiking, camping, and fly fishing with family, most vividly in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley, where, tragically, Sam's brother Ben lost his life. A witness to that horror, Mattax stretches and distorts circle shapes, elliptical references to the reels that Ben, a fly-fishing expert, taught Sam to handle amid the waters of the river, which are loaded with iron-ore sediment that is conjured here in admixtures of reds, browns, and yellows. The fiery orange-red slashes and drooping, beaklike shapes in this and other works on view are ambiguous but may suggest the great flock of cardinals that suddenly descended after Ben's death. That the artist's mother sensed in cardinals the spirit of the son she lost gives these red slashes, shapes, and lines a memorial aspect.

More literal is the line drawing of an inverted cardinal placed centrally in the upper register of *Gorgeous appetite*. Mattax follows the curve of its back downward, first in a red of intense chroma and then in black, which he uses to limn a vertical white-blue artery or "spine" and its branching horizontal extensions. As if fractured into Philip Guston–like painterly tendrils, downward curving strokes in reds, pinks, and yellows hang parallel and riblike, suggesting a carcass, the remains of a predator's meal that Mattax saw on safari in Africa. Also informed by Mattax's experiences, in this case of fly fishing, the title *Gorgeous appetite* refers to the "hatch": the period when aquatic insects float to a river's surface as they mature into winged flies and the trout simultaneously rise up to slurp them down.

With a sly wink, Mattax inserts homages—what he calls "secret references"—to painters he admires. In *So I ate potatoes*, a number of half-circle shapes ride an upward sloping line in the center of the painting. One of these, a high-keyed blue mound outlined and internally marked in a darker hue, suggests the parted hairline and forehead that Guston depicts peering over a horizon line in one of his portraits of his wife, the painter and poet Musa McKim. Another might refer to the white bathing cap or the conically betoweled figure in Max Beckmann's *Lido* (1924), a favorite of Mattax's, in the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum.



Sam Mattax, *So I ate potatoes*, 2026. Oil, oil stick, lead pencil, and colored pencil on canvas, 72 × 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo: Cary Whittier.

Mattax is obsessed with oil paint. Having started out as a sculptor, he demands a thick yet malleable viscosity: not wet, not glossy, but resistant, grainy—indeed, he often adds marble dust to the pigment to "push the texture." That dust also allows him to work with "skins" of paint, peeling off what he has come to feel is a superfluous layer in one area and tacking it onto another, stacking these strata or placing them collage-like to fill "holes" in the surface texture. Teeming with painterly incident, Mattax's profusion of markings embraces line drawings, gestural swipes of the brush, scumbling, slow up-and-down brushstrokes, palette-knife layering, thick impasto, and soft viscous areas, all describing a collision of disparate terrains. These are landscapes both exterior—planted fields, looming mountains, trails through pastureland, fence lines, winding riverbeds—and interior, whether domestic or more internal still, the inscapes of the mind. For the paintings suggest both external (experiential) and internal (psychic) hybridities inscribed in paint and in "doubled and repurposed" motifs—a mapped disorder within a single frame.

Conceived as networks of lines and curves that splay outward to delineate shapes riven with internal hatch marks and painterly rivulets, Mattax's paintings seem to gain in momentum as they build in density. The artist moves color and line with what at first seems abandon, yet the paintings often suggest figurative workings-out of considered, iterative, and sequentially "drawn" metaphors linked to his life. Apparently effaced by iterative and haphazard gouging, his paintings have been described as sites of excavation—but they are not. They appear wholly abstract—again, they are not. Rather, they are constructed as diaristic visual metaphors of lived experiences. The writer Gabriel García Márquez once remarked, "It always amuses me that the biggest praise for my work comes for the imagination, while the truth is that there's not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality." Mattax, too, mines his own reality in every line, color, texture, and shape.

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