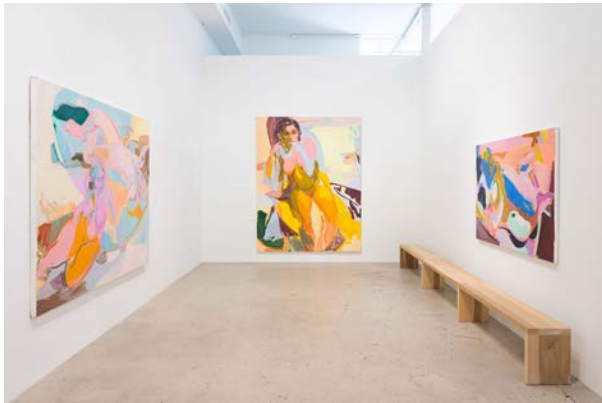


## LITERALLY FIGURATIVE: SARAH AWAD, by Jason Ramos (Feb 26, 2014)



*The Women* was the title of Sarah Awad's (NAP #93) first solo exhibition at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art this past November. The press release provides an immediate context for the work: "The artist reawakens our detached assumptions about the transcendent purity of minimalism and - in what becomes a return of 'The Return of the Figure' -- continues a contemporary conversation with the work of Cecily Brown, Marlene Dumas, and John Currin."

The figure in art can exist as a fundamentally formal aspect of how we perceive 2D images (any shape on a picture plane that appears in front of a pictorial *ground* is technically a *figure*), and also as the specific subject matter designation of people in the picture. Somewhere between and to the side of those notions is the issue of the female nude in art.

From John Berger to Laura Mulvey to Lynda Nead, the female nude is a subject of discourse unto itself. For the informed and learned viewer of art, and in particular of modern and contemporary painting, Awad's recent work serves a satisfying contribution to the story, one that stands alongside the above mentioned contributions of Brown, Dumas and Currin in terms of their influential takes on similar subject matter. Where Awad differs from them, and consequently excels, is in her dispensing of the need to mine contemporary popular culture sources such as pornography in order to make productive statement regarding the established art format of the female nude. Instead, Awad's work takes its cues from specific points in art history's record of such format – points where the basic structures of Classicism were decades into a modern mulling-over and restatement.



Many of her references are from the either side of when Kandinsky (and perhaps, Hilma Af Klint) went all-in with regards to abstraction, during Picasso's leading influence on what followed, and before the discoveries of Kandinsky, Malevich, et al., were assimilated, packaged, and branded as AbEx. Restated figures from the works of Dufy, Maillol, Beckmann, Kirchner and others are brought together, a conference of sorts, in a



continuing attempt to understand the desire for, function, and power dynamics involved in the representation of the nude female in art. The artists of this rich period ranged from a near monolithic focus on the female nude (Maillol), to others who subjected other formats to a variety of methods of abstraction. This weaving in and out of historical references affirms one of Awad's stated claims of wanting the "work to be as much about the questions of painting in general, as it is about the nude."

Indeed, since the modern era, the female nude in art has stood as a site for the definitions and limits of painting's formal relationships with representation as much as it has chronicled and responded to a pervasive trend submitted by feminists that it is evidence of systematic objectification and oppression. In this sense Awad's paintings can be seen as a sort of historiography, and as a way to engage with a kind of mark-making and paint application that reveals how alert our perceptions are in recognizing human forms amid formal decisions informed by a painting's internal, abstract logic. An original algorithm for much of that logic, especially regarding color, is derived partially from the painterly innovations of the Fauves.

This is evident aesthetically, and is a precedent historically within Awad's source material, yet the the pictures cut a contemporary edge that frames it all in a way only an informed painter can accomplish. Waves, divisions, patches and scrubblings of paint seem related to similar concerns of many non-figurative, abstract painters working today. Awad brings that vocabulary back around to compare and contrast with a figurative era that seemed, to some, to have "died" with the establishment of mid-century abstraction. Two-dimensional figuration in this more specific sense was one of the "little deaths" of painting before the current general notion of the entire format's demise arrived later.

Past paintings by Awad were figurative in a broader, often more formal sense. *The Women* is less a break from previous work than a tightening and specificity of focus. This intersection of Awad's sifting of color, figure and ground, and one of paintings most storied subjects finds swift purchase in regards to the kind of formal rhetoric familiar in previous work. Where this intersection is the most fruitful is in her identifying source material that has found itself previously at this intersection. During the





early 20<sup>th</sup> century and inter-war period in Europe, the modernist overtures in regards to the female nude were powerful enough for the subject to remain as an identifiable element within the first wave of work from the artists of the next acknowledged major shift – towards completely non-mimetic pictures.

Like many artists, Awad also maintains a teaching practice. An active dialog between roles is a familiar refrain of working artists today that Awad joins – “I don't think an artist can compartmentalize any area of her life like that.” Awad's arrival to the imagery of *The Women* came partly as a result of her experience teaching painting. Making explicit the specific figure of the nude female form was a choice that came about from re-encountering the traditional academic setting of drawing from models. Her efforts in getting students to think about the formal concerns of picture-making during a conceptual drawing class served as a catalyst. “Unexpectedly, this situation influenced the type of work I was making in the studio,” Awad explains, “beginning with a return to painting the figure and reconsidering the place of the nude in contemporary painting.”

The female nude, like figuration, like painting itself, dies, but is inevitably resurrected back to life by artists willing to put life into it. Awad's work in *The Women* presents a sort of overview of the status of this idea by referencing some of the last attempts from the era of historical modernism, while simultaneously casting a 21<sup>st</sup> century light upon them. This light illuminates how paintings of charged imagery from another era can be torn down and built back up into paintings that transfer new, substantial rhetoric to the ongoing dialog of painting, art, gender, picture-making and representation in general. This is an approach that could be described as metamodern, in its oscillation between historically modern formal references and more postmodern notions of gaze and gender. The latter issue, especially here in Los Angeles, is a backdrop that makes Awad's investment cogent and potent. Awad responds that, “I find it strange that female artists have to deal with a certain apologetics that male artists never have to. We have to address the question of feminism in the work or why there is unequal gender representation in the art world. But a male artist would never get asked that. Maybe that's just evidence of how things haven't changed as much as we want them to.





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