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Exhibition Review by Evan Moffitt

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SARAH AWAD

Diane Rosenstein



Sarah Awad: *Unter Den Linden*, 2015 (Courtesy Diane Rosenstein)

Sarah Awad's paintings are sluices barely holding back a flood of Fauvist color. An emerald canopy bursts through an indigo grate. Dark leafy smears clash with splashes of fluorescent lime. Warring daubs of crimson and cornflower capture the full flame of a desert sunset.

Awad's previous work played with odalisques and other motifs from classical painting. For the 12 medium-size paintings in "Gate Paintings," her fourth solo show, she has turned her gaze to ornament. In each painting, she renders a metal gate with broad strokes of oil on a canvas coated in matt Cel-Vinyl. The airy garden glimpsed through the subtle suggestion of a grid pulls the viewer into the picture.

When depicted shut, a gate is a formal device that encourages the eye to look beyond its bars. As a grid it makes the painting flat; as a portal it gives it dimension. *Pied-à-terre* (all works 2015) spans two canvases, a small square attached to a larger rectangle, and the gate seems to swing across the joint. One can imagine the posts painted in the work's right side cresting a low brick wall enclosing the stoop of a Brooklyn brownstone. Exuberant gestural strokes accrue as the curlicues of ornamental ironwork. There's a surprising amount of movement in Awad's vision of a static object that is designed to limit movement. Each wrought-iron whorl rises from its rigid frame like a wiry hair stubbornly resisting a comb. Such unruliness peaks in *Blue Hour*, where latticework rendered in purple snarls like an errant kudzu vine, twisting in rusty tones at the painting's lower lip.

In *Studio @ 9*, the door to Awad's own studio is shown, split by shades of ocher and cobalt. The doorway contains the kind of steel-mesh screen ubiquitous among L.A.'s industrial art spaces. The surface of this type of screen catches the afternoon sun, turning opaque to passersby while remaining transparent to those inside. At night, interior light casts a glow on the sidewalk, the barrier becoming a translucent membrane for people on both sides of it. In *Studio @ 9*, this shifting transmission of light acquires a palpable presence, as day and night hues are juxtaposed in the single composition.

In *The Poetics of Space*, French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard said of the word "door" that "through meaning it encloses, while through poetic expression it opens up." The same could be said of Awad's gates and their relationship to the history of painting. If Awad felt fenced in by the opposition of abstraction and figuration, the works in "Gate Paintings" manage to escape this constricting narrative by refusing to commit to either mode. As much as the paintings seduce with surface beauty, they invite us to break through the picture plane and enter a garden of possibility.

--Evan Moffitt