

ARTSCENE™

Sarah Awad by Andy Brumer (September 2015)



Wrought iron gates of varying degrees of design complexity and artistic quality lace Southern California's residential landscape so ubiquitously that their presence tends to go unnoticed by motorists and pedestrians alike. However, as this exhibition attests, they've been anything but overlooked or unconsidered by the Pasadena born and L.A.-based painter Sarah Awad. In the body of work that comprises "Gate Paintings," the artist certainly soars beyond the blind spots of one's hometown comfort zone and enters a rarified painterly atmosphere shared by the likes of Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" series and David Hockney's "Mulholland Drive" paintings.

The show deals both visually and conceptually with the idea of borders and boundaries, as the image and idea of the gate provide readymade and metaphorically rich examples of both considerations. Gates explicitly signal the boundary line separating private and public property and space, while simultaneously serving as portals for an imaginative narrative of comings and goings. They also organize one's visual field into protracting and receding planes or zones of perception. Gates ask people to look both at and through them simultaneously.

In varying degrees of extraction, abstraction, deconstruction and displacement, Awad uses the gate motif as a kind of aerated template. Through the gates' parallel, curlicue, square and arabesque spaces and shapes, the artist deftly applies alternately bold and delicate brush strokes of vinyl and oil paint that meander, straddle, overlap and intersect one another. The airy apertures of the gates' variously shaped sections also establish a fertile working of negative space, kind of meta canvases within the actual one. Color, line and volume establish a dynamic tension of depth and flatness that never seems to want to fully resolve itself.

In "Desert Comfort," for example, the sturdy vertical black line suggesting an extended gatepost bifurcates the canvas into a virtual diptych, with both sides of the gate's arches rising on either side of the bar. The effect is one of a displaced and porous proscenium that frames a fission-like frenzy of marks, with a fully abstract city of paint behind it. The left side of the picture plane sits in the protruding bold light of a Southern California summer afternoon. The right side recedes every so subtly into the poetic gloaming of an L.A. late autumn sunset.

Each painting is a different size and varies in proportion. "Studio Door" is tall and rectangular, while "Bloom" sits squat, almost a square. When scanned together, the group offers an impressive range of modulated color values and emotions. Yet there's a free-flowing, free-wheeling lyrical abandon in all of these works as well. In "Unter den Linden" that spontaneity brews to the brink of chaos, as if Jackson Pollock and Hans Hofmann met and managed to get along.

Awad's brushwork strengthens the paintings' associations with Southern California's Mediterranean climate and geography. The water soluble vinyl paint allows for a washy type of transparency reminiscent of the region's cleansing winter rain storms, while the thicker oil paint anchors and deepens the paintings' earthy solidity and internal glow, reminding us that while much of it's population might continue to transition and migrate, the wizened land itself remains rooted, patient and proud.

This is an impressive body of work by an artist not yet 35, but who has already discovered her unique visual voice and personal idiom. Expect that voice to be heard well beyond the borders of the Southland.