

# UNSOLVED COLLECTIONS: THE PAINTINGS OF SARAH AWAD'S TRANSFERENCE AND SPECULATION

by New American Paintings

November 30, 2012, 8:30 am

Filed under: Review, Seattle | Tags: Erin Langner, James Harris Gallery, Sarah Awad

Sarah Awad's orange and white parachute beams broadly like sunshine across the confines of its modest canvas. Sharing the stage with a blue alligator head, a shiny space shuttle and a set of turquoise artillery, bold objects dominate the artist's new show *Transference and Speculation* at Seattle's James Harris Gallery. While anonymous human forms make appearances with an indifference and anonymity similar to the figures seen in her previous series, *Instruments of Culture*, the particular combination of recognizable and unrecognizable things the artist constructs in her new set of paintings takes the work in a more dramatic direction, building complex layers of narrative that never remain as comfortable as they first appear.



Sarah Awad | Apex, 2012, Oil on canvas, 22" x 24". Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.

A lightheartedness initially seems to wash over the paintings, coating the imagery in rich layers of Majorelle blue, orange, and chartreuse. Individually the works evoke the stories of photographs—travel scenes in Rome and Paris, a couple on a beach, a moment in aerospace history. But, then obvious references come to light; Matisse’s blue nudes, Seurat’s famous Sunday afternoon, Damien Hirst’s iconic skull unfold from Awad’s imagery. The disjointed objects and allusions present a disordered compilation that makes unexplainable sense. The relationships between the divergent subjects are obscured, but when taken in together, the show congeals as a mysterious collection.



**Sarah Awad | Untitled (Temple), 2012, Oil on canvas, 20” x 24”.** Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.



Sarah Awad | Sunday Afternoon, 2012, Oil on canvas, 15" x 18". Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.

The curious objects within many of the paintings generate an instant magnetism through their familiarity; yet, a persistent darkness underlies each scene, most prominently in the works that contain humans. Sunday Afternoon's impenetrable lawn of green constructs an atmosphere of void and melancholia to surround its unexplainable nude that gazes at its own shadow. The Visit at first looks like a delicate portrait, until the details of its bizarre composition are fully comprehended; its Audrey Hepburn-like figure stands beside a group of black men with faceless expressions, who watch a disembodied hand graze her chest. In Split, two men stand in what may or may not be the tip of a boat, engaging in a confrontation stance. Across all of these works, action happens, but the narrative Awad abstracts is only a tease; there is no explanation to be found.



Sarah Awad | *The Visit*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 24" x 20". Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.



**Sarah Awad | Split, 2012, Oil on canvas, 24" x 22". Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.**

Forming a collection of relationship fragments as divergent as the assortment of objects across the set of works, both the object- and human-centered paintings of Transference and Speculation exist in a state of pointed irresolution. Through the thick substance of her painted surfaces, Awad reorders rationality, leaving us the addictive pleasure of trying to make sense of it all.



Sarah Awad | Couple, 2012, Oil on canvas, 20" x 16". Image courtesy of James Harris Gallery.



Sarah Awad | Skull, 2012, Oil on canvas, 15" x 18".

Transference and Speculation is on view at James Harris Gallery through November 30. Sarah Awad received her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. Her work has recently been featured at CUE Art Foundation in New York, NY; BB Galerie in Berlin; and 5790projects in Los Angeles, CA, among other locations. She was awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 2011.

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<http://newamericanpaintings.wordpress.com/2012/11/30/unsolved-collections-the-paintings-of-sarah-awads-transference-and-speculation/>