

Hend Samir: Hide and Seek

30 Orchard St, Gallery 1 ▪ Apr 9 - May 12, 2022



Harkawik is thrilled to present Egyptian painter Hend Samir's second exhibition with the gallery, and her first in New York. Here she pushes further into territory defined over her exhibitions of the past 3 years: the transgressing of boundaries cultural, normative, geopolitical and painterly; the implication of the viewer as an at-scale participant in a series of interconnected vignettes; the fearless exploration of contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes evident in the vicissitudes of human affairs. In *Hide and Seek*, abstraction comes to the fore. Samir's figures, which dominated the compositions and narratives of previous paintings, here meld with the marbled eddies and whorls of fluid acrylic paint. Often, figures seem in danger of being absorbed back into abstraction, engulfed by the maelstrom of the painting, but paradoxically it is often the paint itself that suggests to her new narrative directions and figurative motifs. A sensitive colorist, Samir often works with a narrow palette, a technique that directs the viewer's attention and ensures coherence across diverse pictorial events, often at epic scale.

The evolution of Samir's practice has been marked by her willingness to break away from familiar architectural forms, allowing her figures to occupy a free flowing abstract territory that adapts dynamically to each vignette's compositional dictates. This is seen most fully in *Hide and Seek's* title work, a 17-foot canvas whose color palate is defined entirely by the co-mingling of yellow and black. Here, children occupy a kind of warped belvedere, using it as one might a public park or monument. A young boy urinates casually on a wall that also seems to hold an array of curios; a girl, back arched, emerges saint-like from a gust of cumulonimbus paint (a fish just below her reminds us she is in fact earth-bound, and headed, perhaps, for a body of water); a hooded figure reaches out in supplication, hand outstretched, a nod to the wretched of the Renaissance. Buildings are for these characters the kinds of trusty things that are "just there," and everything in *Hide and Seek* is caught in precarious, exuberant, galeful motion. In what seems an exception, a young girl

in swimming costume looks straight at the viewer—her platform is, however, an inner tube, and this moment of stasis will soon be ripped away by a churning current. *Hide and Seek* illustrates perfectly the central mystery of Samir's practice: how are her paintings composed? When does she know what is a limb, a door, or a sconce? It is a stunning testament to her vision, and impossible to experience without a sense of unfolding wonder and enigma.

Samir “sketches” in paint, freeing her from the traditional studio cycles of composition, execution, and refinement, and making space for her course of discovery in the finished work. This is seen clearly in *A Disruptive Impulse, 2022*. At first glance, the painting is monochromatic—looking closer, we see a delicate interplay between warm and cold greys. Samir has used these shifts to suggest skin tone or faded memories; here they do something different. The addition of a face and hand transforms the upper portion of the canvas into a celestial body, peering down on what might be a miniature cut-away trailer home; dog and plant address the painting's central tempest, making an acropolis out of a few passes of the brush. The interplay between incidental and intentional abstraction is heightened in other works. In *Carnivals at the Doors and Passages, 2022*, a troupe of children traverse an impossible landscape of sherbet lehmarchitektur; *Two Dissonant Structures, 2022* shows a family gazing casually at a lake emerging from the mouth of a birdlike creature; *The Abrupt Plunge, 2022* places thirteen figures peering out from a dazzling marbled debouchment. In this painting, her first in this mid-size format, Samir fully abandons the notion of an environment for her figures—built, natural, interior, exterior or otherwise. Building on discoveries made in prior works such as *A Stormy Night Gathering, 2020*, and *Quartet of Joy, 2021*. *The Abrupt Plunge* allows for an entirely new type of figure ground relationship; a total union of subject and environment.

Executed between 2020 and 2022, *Flickering by the Lotus Pond* is Samir's largest completed mural. Its marbled ground, suggestive of celestial and Earth-bound havoc, enframes a series of vignettes, threatening to overtake them from all sides. Samir's experience with repressive sexual politics informs her approach to scenes of pleasure and transgression, which defy Western notions of feminism, protectionism and sexual liberation. The children she paints adopt ambiguous gestures that simultaneously betray joy, fear, celebration and, occasionally, the worldly knowledge of adults. They face the viewer at human scale, inviting us into the picture, and completing the pageant of youthful rollick that is Samir's stunning accomplishment.