



CRITICS' PICKS

NEW YORK

“Kamrooz Aram, Anwar Jalal Shemza”

HALES PROJECT ROOM

64 Delancey Street

January 24 - February 25

Historically, the relationship between painting and decoration has been uneasy. Critics have long regarded the decorative as anathema to serious Art. It is precisely that contentious space that Kamrooz Aram probes, implicitly asking the audience to consider the values that we ascribe to categories such as ornament, design, painting, and architecture, which his work ultimately suggests are all inextricably linked. Two of Aram’s paintings here, *Ornamental Composition for Social Spaces #14* and *#15*, both 2017, display layers of abstract gestures and figurative marks

rendered in oil, wax, and colored pencil. He borrows floral motifs from Persian rugs, which appear both buried and partially revealed amid flurries of expressionistic smears and hard-edged forms, including the grid—a symbol of modernist painting’s aesthetic rigidity. Likewise, Aram’s visual references to Persian rugs address the summary dismissal of nearly all non-Western motifs as “merely decorative,” which begs the question of why the decorative is considered undesirable in the first place.

While nods to Cy Twombly or Jo Baer are evident, the juxtaposition of Aram’s painting with aquatints by the older artist Anwar Jalal Shemza reveals further spheres of influence. Like Aram, Shemza grappled with simplistic readings of non-Western art forms, but at a time when politics were even more exclusionary. In 1956, when Shemza moved from Lahore to London, he was disillusioned to hear the storied art historian Ernst Gombrich relegate Islamic art to the realm of the functional. Shemza’s works in this exhibition engage with the legacy of European modernism—via soft pastels and repeating curvilinear forms à la Paul Klee—that also recall the visual rhythms of calligraphy and Islamic architectural designs. Shemza’s negotiation of these fraught cultural relationships illuminates a history that still drives Aram’s practice today.

—Paula Burleigh