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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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## Beer with a Painter: Sarah Lutz

by [Jennifer Samet](#) on October 5, 2013



Sarah Lutz, "Pinball" (2013), 30 x 24 inches, oil on linen  
(all image courtesy of Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA unless otherwise noted)

While on Cape Cod this summer, I visited the painter [Sarah Lutz](#) in her home high above the bay. We drank wine and talked about painting, then walked down the dune hillside to her studio, in a two-story cottage from which you can see the Edward Hopper house. Her set-up looks like a mix between a laboratory and a confectionary, laden with hundreds of paint tubes, pigments collected from trips to Paris, and kitchen tools that Lutz uses to paint.



Sarah Lutz (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

As we talked, the light was pouring into the living room, in that slightly-too-harsh afternoon way. I felt sun-struck at the time, making it almost hard to focus, but now it seems a fitting backdrop. Lutz's work embraces exuberance, that sickly-sweet meeting point of the artificial and the real.

Lutz lives and works in New York during the year. She received her MFA from American University. At the time of our meeting this summer, she had a solo exhibition with the Schoolhouse Gallery in Provincetown. She has also exhibited with Kevin Rita Fine Art in West Harford, Connecticut, and Lohin Geduld Gallery in New York City. In 2012, she was awarded a residency, along with fellow artist Beth Dary, to create a site-specific installation at MAPSpace in Port Chester, New York.

\* \* \*



Sarah Lutz, "Loom" (2013), 20 x 16 inches, oil on panel

**Jennifer Samet:** *Can you tell me about your childhood and background and how that may have influenced your work? Your family lived in Guatemala for a while?*

**Sarah Lutz:** I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, and then lived in Vermont, Spain, Ohio, and Guatemala. My father is a Latin American historian, so we lived in Guatemala from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, from the time I was nine to thirteen years old. I wasn't really aware of the ways that influenced me, until later in life when I went back and saw the colors, flowers, candle-lit churches everywhere, and the abundance of richness amidst utter poverty.

We lived in the old colonial capital. During Easter season, there is a ritual called *Semana Santa*: processions from cathedrals in which men carry giant floats with statues. Before the procession, people make elaborate carpets out of colored sawdust and stencils in front of their property. They spend all day making them, and then they are trampled over by the procession.

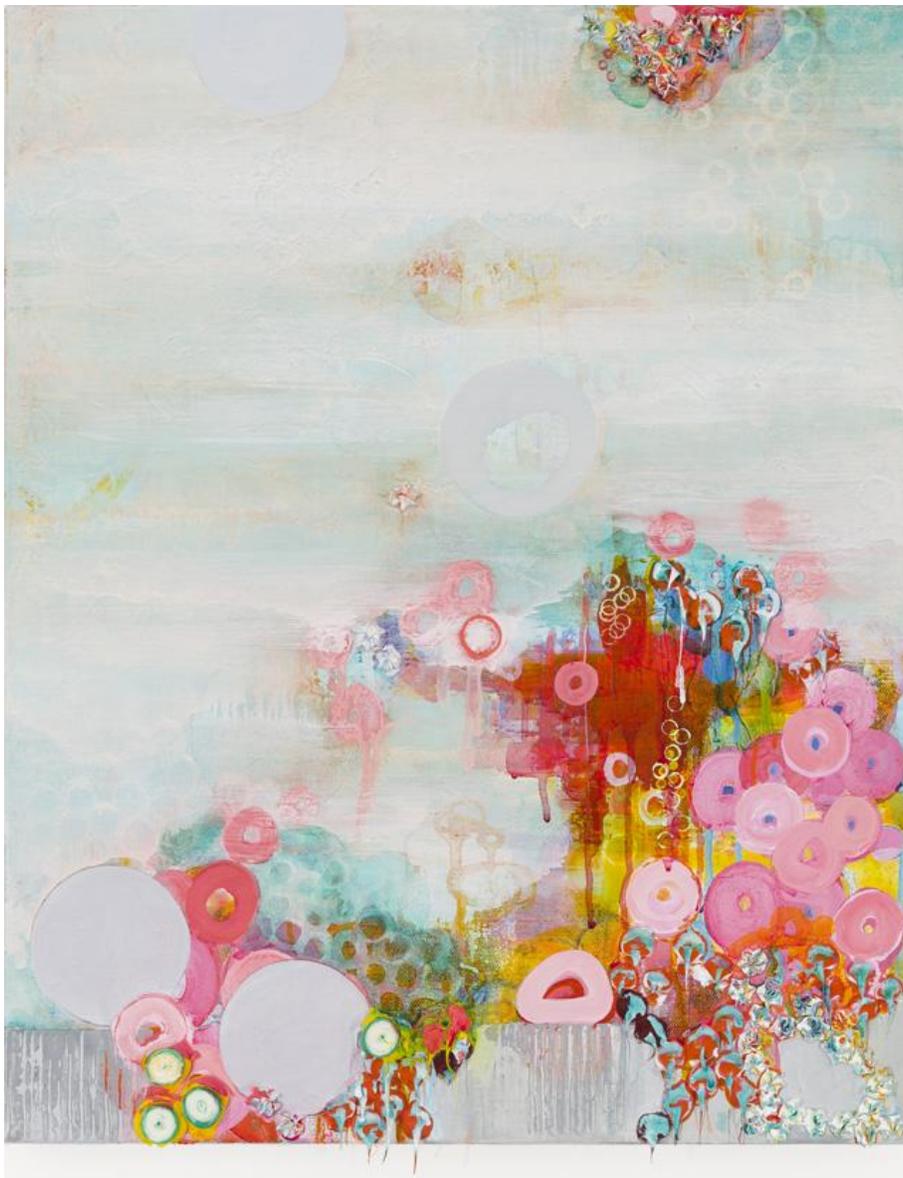
The exterior walls of the buildings are painted in beautiful colors: ochre, pink, white, deep rusty reds. Over time, people paint over them, so there is layering and *pentimento* of colors. When I returned to Guatemala as an adult, I realized that was why I am so fascinated by layering paint, scraping, building it back up, letting it show through in places, and be completely matte in others. It was one of those moments when everything in your life makes sense.

After my family returned from Guatemala, I went to boarding school in Connecticut, I had amazing teachers who encouraged me to take art classes in the summer. So I came out here to Cape Cod and took a painting class with Jim Peters every summer for six summers. One or two times it was co-taught by Paul Bowen.

**JS:** I know Jim Peters was an important teacher. What were some of the things he talked about?

**SL:** Jim had been in the navy and gave up a military career to paint and enrolled at the Maryland Institute College of Art. When I met him, he was incredibly passionate about his desire and need to make things. He had a limitless idea of what painting could be. There were always sculptural,

construction elements in his work. He had an insatiable love of art and always came in with a box of books. He was in love with the process of making, and with drawing. His enthusiasm was contagious.



Sarah Lutz, "Bouganvillea" (2012–13), 20 x 16 inches, oil on canvas

**JS:** How did you end up studying at American University?

**SL:** I did my undergraduate work at Skidmore, then went to American University after taking a year off. Stanley Lewis arrived the same year, to teach graduate painting and drawing. He talked about space, and the picture plane. I found that so liberating: to have rules, and work within that framework, to create chaos out of the order, or order out of the chaos.

We would go to museums and look at Piero della Francesca and Poussin. Stanley carried on a teaching tradition from Leland Bell. One year the department had extra money and Leland Bell came as a visiting artist. He took us on a four-hour tour of the Phillips Collection.

The painter Brenda Goodman wasn't formally my teacher but she was very forthcoming and generous with me. She shared some of her tools and tricks, and expanded my ideas about how to get paint on the canvas.

For instance, I paint with a cake decorator, which is something she shared with me. People often say that one shouldn't divulge their technical secrets, but I think it is *how* you use something. I'm grateful to Brenda for sharing these things with me. Whenever I go into a kitchen supply store I buy things like squeeze bottles and squeegees, with the idea that they can be tools for painting.

**JS:** I think that the technical part of art education is untold art history from the ages. But perhaps it is less part of art education these days.

**SL:** Technique was taught, but not the kind of tools that I am employing now. There are rules you are taught in art school that you eventually can give up. For instance, you are taught that you're not supposed to paint right out of the tube. Now I often do that. It is another device for getting paint onto the canvas, and it's a good one.

The way my paintings are made is an important part of their meaning. There is not a separate "subject matter": they are about how they are made.

I am interested in all the different viscosities of paint. Right now I am making paintings that have a variety of transparent and flat opaque areas. They have built-up areas, but also areas where you see the raw canvas.

Spatial effects result from using a tool like the squeegee. Color lands on high points, but doesn't get into low points. There are controlled accidents that are created and that you deal with later.



Sarah Lutz, "Macaroon" (2011), 60 x 48 inches, oil on linen

**JS:** Yes. Contemporary painting is often about an a priori, conceptual idea of subject matter. Yours is more process-based.

**SL:** Yes. Although, you want painting to look almost effortless, loose. That is the beautiful thing about Matisse, or about Paul Resika. Although we know it is not effortless.

**JS:** Yes. I was just in Resika's studio, thinking how that existentialist idea of painting, questioning, re-working, is alive and well there.

**SL:** They work and work but somehow there is a freshness to the painting, even though it took labor and struggle. But I think in late career Matisse, and in Resika, they get to a point where they can almost skip the middle steps and just do it. It will be interesting to see if that is possible for me in 30 years.

**JS:** What are some of the references in your paintings? I thought of candies when I looked at the circular "nibs" in your paintings. But they also seem to have underwater associations.

**SL:** Yes. They have both artificial, synthetic references, and also refer to things in nature. I like how the two things clash.

I have titled paintings *Confection* and *Nonpareils* — those chocolates with the little white dots. I think about hard-shelled candies and bubble gum with some of the forms. But I also spend a lot of time here on the Cape walking and looking down at rocks. And I like to visit aquariums to see jellyfish and sea anemones. My grandfather lived in St. Thomas, and as a child, I learned to snorkel there.

You might feel like you are making up the wackiest color, but then you pick up a *National Geographic* and there will be a tree frog that is real, but crazier-looking than anything synthetic you could imagine.

When I was pregnant with my first child I basically stopped painting. When I came back after that hiatus, I began painting circular cell-like shapes. They may have gotten into my head from reading pregnancy books, but it is also a universal thing. I am fascinated by the idea that it is all at once a DNA structure, a honeycomb, a pomegranate, a group of bubbles floating to the surface, and at the same time, totally abstract.



Sarah Lutz, "Nonpareils" (2011), 18 x 15 inches, oil on panel, (Private Collection)

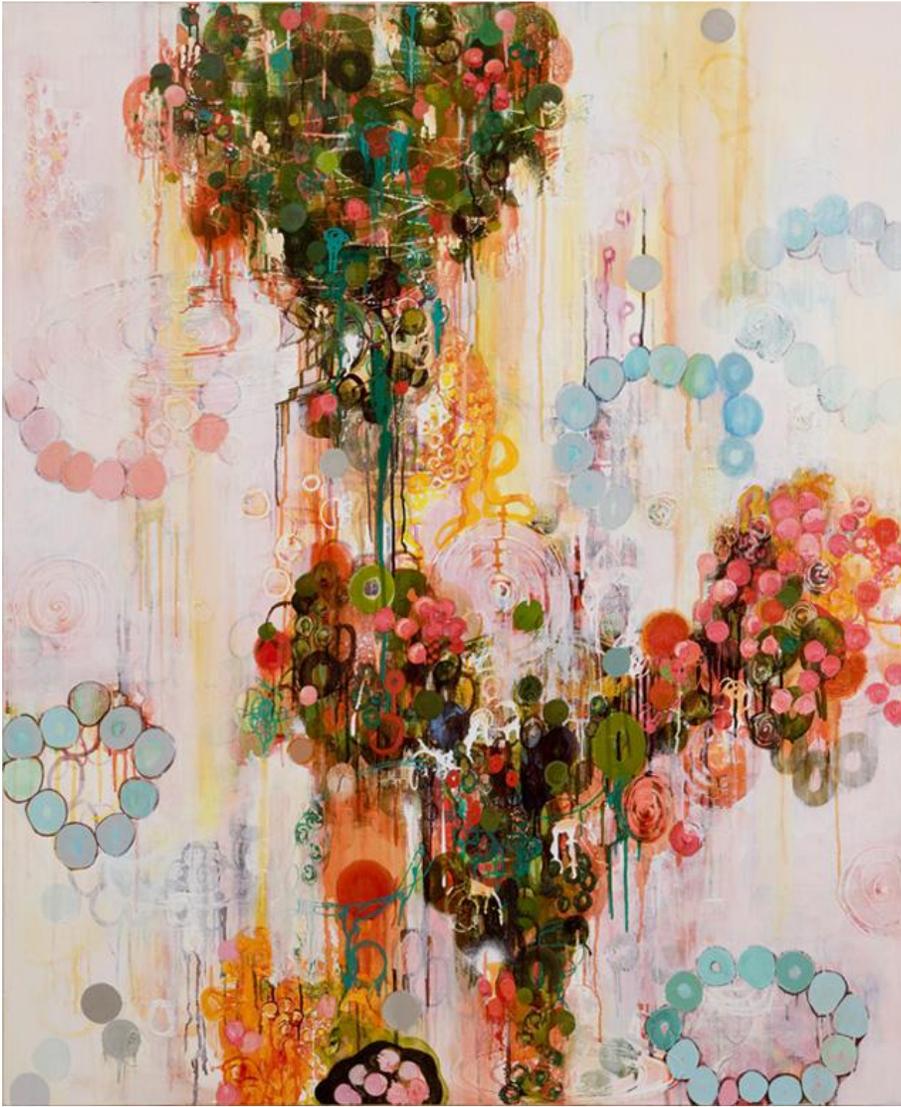
**JS:** Despite this, I do not consider your work to be pattern-based. The forms seem more deliberately placed and associative.

**SL:** There was a time when there was more of a grid element, simply because I was using that device as a matrix to hang the painting on. But one of the painters I most admire is Philip Guston, because I love the heaps of stuff in his paintings.

For a long time, my work was about this development of the heap at the bottom. The shapes, which I called "morulas" (a divided-cell structure), were first floating on a loose grid, and then they floated down to the bottom where they became aggregates. My friend, the poet Mary Gannon, termed them "congeries" — a disorderly collection of similar things that congregate.

The work is now becoming more layered with different materials, paper balls and these dollops that are made with a synthetic polymer paint that dries very quickly. It is also projecting out into space more. There is this ultimate dichotomy in painting, between the flatness and the illusion of the third dimension, so I wonder what happens when you continue to build out into space. At what point are you making reliefs?

I work on the painting in two directions — flip it vertically — to control the drips. I got some really good glitter recently. I love it, but it is a little dangerous!



Sarah Lutz, "Pavlova" (2010), 54 x 44 inches, oil on canvas  
(Private Collection)

**JS:** Glitter is one of those materials we can't help but associate with girls, although I know Chris Martin is using glitter these days in his painting. Do you worry that your painting is too exuberant, or even too feminine?

**SL:** As a young artist, I loved Rembrandt, Giorgione, Giotto, but I also loved Joan Mitchell. I had an idea about what serious painting and serious color was supposed to be like, and I felt like I needed to make serious art. But eventually I decided you can make serious art that is also joyful and playful: art that is celebratory.

Obviously, there are beautiful paintings that are about organic color. I love early Flemish still-life paintings — with their oysters, or lemon peels falling off the table. But the idea of making a painting myself that is about observed color, or a painting only about synthetic color, does not interest me. What interests me more is where they clash, or where they combine and come together.

I do feel that becoming too elegant or decorative is the kiss of death in art. But, I enjoy abundance, things that are crazy and over the top. I love exuberance: aquariums full of fish, baubles and candy and chandeliers. To make the best work we can requires making our true work.

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