



**NICOLE  
AWAI** VILCEK  
FOUNDATION  
**ALMOST  
UNDONE**







Go Go Green  
Maybelline  
Express  
Finish

Gleaming  
L.A. Girl  
Flare

Show Me the Way  
Sinful Colors

All the White Stuff  
Sally Hansen  
Salon

Magnetic Force  
L.A. Colors

Plum Seduction  
Revlon

Black Out  
Revlon

In the Navy  
Sally Hansen

Blue It  
Sally Hansen



VILCEK FOUNDATION  
EXHIBITIONS

# NICOLE AWAI

SEPT 17TH -  
OCT 29TH, 2011

# ALMOST UNDONE

# NICOLE AWAI REORIENTS EPHEMERA IN TIME AND SPACE

FOREWORD BY  
**RICK KINSEL**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The arts community is a dynamic one, ever reshaping and changing focus. A major force behind that dynamism today, I believe, springs from the creative energy,

imagination, and perspectives of the immigrant artists now living and working in the United States. In following the activities of this spirited coterie, Anne Schrueth, Events and Programs Assistant for the Vilcek Foundation, was drawn immediately to the work of the artist Nicole Awai, with its complex and layered use of imagery and innovative use of surprising (and sometimes startling) materials.

To learn more and see more, Anne invited Nicole to meet with us in the Foundation gallery, where she quickly won us over with her clear artistic vision and dedication to her work. We were fascinated by her relationship to time and objects and personal memory – how she develops themes over and through time, how in her mind and hands the ordinary can become extraordinary – even carnival-like. A McDonald's Happy Meal Tarzan doll, rescued from abandonment on a Brooklyn street, is to her as likely an artistic resource as are paint and canvas. From that first meeting, Nicole developed a clear vision for this exhibition, and over the past two years, Anne and Nicole worked together to bring that concept to life.

Multidimensionality, too, is a hallmark of Nicole's imagination. In this exhibit for the Vilcek Foundation, *Almost Undone*, she repurposes drawings from an earlier series, *Specimen from Local Ephemera*, to become anchors for new pieces. From these origins they emerge (some might say escape), reconstitute, and ultimately transition from one dimension into the next.

To describe Nicole Awai as a mixed-media artist is to state the obvious; to refer to her as cross-cultural is likewise apparent (she is by birth Trinidadian; she is by heritage Afro-Chinese). But to attempt to define her work beyond those evident traits is to limit the viewer's response to it, to restrict the pleasure of experiencing it firsthand. To do it justice, then, perhaps nothing more need be said than "Come see for yourself."

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**NICOLE AWAI**

IN HER STUDIO, BROOKLYN, NY  
2011





# NICOLE AWAI

ESSAY BY  
COURTNEY J. MARTIN

# ASSEMBLED MATERIAL

In one of Nicole Awai's drawings from 2005, entitled *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Resistance with Black Ooze*, a conjoined figure edges its awkward body underneath a jagged design motif.

The design – a technical, industrial-looking lattice – is cut from a shimmering pool of water, laced with the murky traces of a black substance. Is it oil, unspecified filth, or just a play between light and shadow? Who knows what it is? Whatever it is, some of it amassed on top of the double torso figure. The design, framed out in the white negative space of the paper, alternates between two shapes: an elongated spade and a round-top triangle, each completed by a small circle punched out perfectly in the border between the water and the rest of the image.

The lower half of the drawing is clinical. It is white, save for two precise renderings in graphite on the right side and a smattering of small, colored circles and a diamond. They are chits dropped down from the punched-out holes in the color above. The twinned figure cuts between the two spaces, each body-side seemingly at odds with the other. The left, clad in blue, reaches out to the lower zone. While the right torso, head up and fingers pressed firmly to the ground, enacts a refusal to be pulled down. Perhaps it is the latter figure's performative stance named in part of the title, *Resistance with Black Ooze*. Read another way, *Resistance with Black Ooze*, defines the pictorial boundary from the perspective of the figure; a body holding off the ooze seeping down into the rest of the picture.

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The most curious aspect of the drawing, however, is in the lower left corner. There, a color bar – nine shades from red to medium blue – composed of nail polish sits as a legend to the colors in the upper register of the drawing. It is evocative of the type of color control strips placed in the trim area of a print proof that are used to assure color correctness, or the full-screen kind that appears on television as a reference for televisual color value. In either medium (print or broadcast), the color bar is a record that needs to be constantly checked against and balanced accordingly. Placed in the margins of the drawing, the color bar sets the tone of the entire work, as one of productive exploration; a constantly shifting set of actions whose constant (the color) can be handily referenced.

The color bar, the exact, small-scale drawings opposite it, and the information (Awai's name, the drawing's title, and the hyper-technical jargon – "Slotted Nut 2 Split-Pin") at the lower edge suggests that this is a work product. The drawing functions like a guide or a primer, somewhere between architectural rendering, map, or field drawing, the latter indicating a hasty sketch taken in the course of active exploration. Its purpose may account for the abrupt compositional shift between the dense landscape view and the sterile white page, or the seemingly purposeful transition from a fantasized naturalism (the water) to design to figuration to typography (her name and the title). While the color bar and technical sketches might not show us how to "read" this drawing, they are the recurrent features in Awai's practices, a kind of code-to-the-code of her fifteen-year drawing and sculpture career.

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ASSEMBLED  
MATERIAL

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SPECIMEN FROM LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
RESISTANCE WITH BLACK OOZE

GRAPHITE, ACRYLIC PAINT,  
NAIL POLISH, AND GLITTER ON PAPER  
52" X 58"  
2005



NICOLE  
AWAI

LOCAL  
EPHEMERA

RESISTANCE WITH  
BLACK OOZE 1

# PERCEPTUAL VS. CONCEPTUAL

Born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to parents who actively encouraged her to make art, Awai travelled regularly to the United States as a child, usually New York or

Miami, before moving to Florida to attend college. In central Florida, she began to observe the disparate regional cultures that constitute America. In a 2007 interview, Nicole Awai described her art-making process, and the resulting objects, as “perceptual,” stating: “I make art about ideas, but for me, in some way, it is ‘perceptual’ art more than it is Conceptual Art. I am aware of the way people take things in, process, and live with – and – in situations.”<sup>1</sup>

Working her way through the conceits of Conceptual art makes sense for an artist of her generation. By the time that she entered the MFA program at the University of South Florida in the 1990s, Conceptual art was a regular feature of art schools and an understood component of recent art history. Later, Awai worked as an assistant to Sol Lewitt, whose idea-based systems brought visibility to concepts like volume and variation. That much of her work is serialized is but one example of how Conceptual art influences her practice. Yet, Awai’s prescription of perceptual versus Conceptual seems more matter of fact than reactionary. It is proof of a thoughtful approach to the specifics of her practice, like substituting nail polish for paint or responding to her expectations and perception of the American experience.

Awai began using foundation makeup and nail polish in 2002 for the painting series, *Identifying Desire*, a suite of three. Though she stopped using foundation, the nail polish resonated with her on a number of levels. Despite its seeming ordinariness, nail polish symbolized how women codified themselves and, in turn, how they negotiated their worlds, a resilient truth in both Trinidad and in America. Already humored by the titles of the various polishes (like Revlon’s *Drab* or L’Oréal’s *Pinpoint Black!*), Awai became interested in its materiality. She found that it worked with acrylic paint. The color bar is a one-to-one meter of the colors within each drawing. It alludes to a subtle marker of gender, like nails. When Awai began calling her color bar a *sensation code* she hit onto the multi-operation of gender and desire that color conveys.

In the drawing, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Go Go Green Compression with Black Ooze* (2008), the sensation code, née color bar, is lined up vertically in the right margin, directly adjacent to the central figure, another conjoined female body. Placed this way, the body is a direct referent for the sensation code: skin, hair, clothing, makeup, or environment (a green for outdoors, or a more sensational blue for water).

Just as nail polish is both a medium and a conceptual tool, Awai’s drawings approximate other styles. She calls them variously, blueprints, storyboards, and field drawings.<sup>2</sup> These are terms that conjure up specific disciplines like architecture, film, or archaeology. And, perhaps, owing to her education as a print-maker, where one must envision objects from multiple perspectives, the drawings also feel like topographical views, scenes taken out of context or fragments from a continuous panorama. “Feel” is an important word here since most of her imagery anticipates the viewer’s haptic perception. *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Go Go Green Compression with Black Ooze* evokes multiple sensory options. There is the contorted torso of the conjoined body whose face (Awai’s own) is nearly at eye level. One imagines that a few more turns and twists might allow her gaze to meet yours. As a result, one may empathize with the strain of the depicted action. It looks uncomfortable.

There is something about the mix of verdant green, sky blue, marine blue, and inky black in the drawing that seems to come from the natural world, like a fragmented view of the outside as seen from behind a fence or a covered window. It is a theatrical framing, like a curtain drawing back onto a performance. The pointed design motif, sharps on the left and rounds on the right, frames and features the figure. This is a more complicated version of another of Awai’s compositional devices, the *simple strip*, which she uses to divide pictorial space and to create a cinematic staging – or, in her terms, a *sliver experience*. The *sliver experience* is the action or emotion staged by vertical reframing.

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ASSEMBLED  
MATERIAL

<sup>1</sup> Nicole Awai, “E-mail from HERE,” Small Axe 24, Volume 11, Number 3 (August 2007): 109 – 117.

<sup>2</sup> In this interview, Awai discusses the idea of the “field drawing.” Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, “The World of In-Between: An Interview with Nicole Awai,” in *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 68, Volume 37, Number 1 (May 2004): 65 – 72.

LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
GO GO GREEN COMPRESSION  
WITH BLACK OOZE

SPECIMEN FROM LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
GO GO GREEN COMPRESSION WITH BLACK OOZE

GRAPHITE, ACRYLIC PAINT,  
NAIL POLISH AND GLITTER ON PAPER  
38" X 50"  
2008



# THE OOZE

The placement of the twin figures on top of the ooze also summons feeling. One wonders about the sticky viscosity of the black mound beneath them: Did they land

there? Are they stuck? Either question results from empathizing with the body; cognition of one's self moored in place. Here, perceptual becomes less about the way in which Awai works and more about how the viewer engages with her images. The ooze, as she calls it, was sparked by a passage in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. In a perfect Dickensian trump, a law clerk, in the middle of exchanging gossip, places his hand into "thick, yellow liquor... offensive to the touch and sight and more offensive to the smell."<sup>3</sup> The textual image of happening into a "stagnant, sickening oil"<sup>4</sup> struck Awai as a literal affirmation of disgust and a way to convey repulsion as the charged opposite to regeneration, because Awai's ooze is also a habitat that attracts as much as it repels.

In other drawings, the ooze is a compositional feature. Take *Haul* (2011), in which the conjoined bodies, set on top of the ooze, recline under a sliver experience, or break in the composition. A whole, framed by green foliage, gives way to a pastoral view of a line of truck-trailers, one of which is adorned with the word "Haul." Rendered in the style of Ed Ruscha's word paintings, Awai's "perceptual" ideal can easily incorporate key elements of Conceptual art, like text.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens,  
*Bleak House*  
(Boston: Ticknor and  
Fields, 1867): 258.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

# DRAWING INTO SCULPTURE

While sedate, the ooze at the edge of the picture plane in *Haul* is ready to move out of the drawing and into real space. It is, as Awai has described, in flux. It reoccurs in drawings, shifts shape, and appears to morph its viscosity, making what are clearly two-dimensional works on paper seem to ripple. A new body of sculpture sees the ooze move out from the page and onto the floor as a high-gloss black ceramic. In one of her latest sculptures, *Go Go Gone* (2011), the ooze appears to have slid out from the larger paper and found object construction to solidify on the ground. Now transformed into a more hospitable environment, lines of vibrant color (a purple one, a green one, and so on) trail through it, and a little patch of grass emerges out of it. And, instead of ooze, it is now an *island experience*, a far less caustic-sounding agent. The shift in terms declares the object as a singular fixed element, able to give weight to the draped and folded cast paper pulp sculpture that looms above it. And conceptually/perceptually "island" is just as easily a reference to Trinidad (and Tobago) as it is to New York, or the perception of America as a massive space divvied up and barricaded off by geography, culture, politics, language, or history. To read the sculpture from the bottom up, the ooze builds a base for the objects – a geometric chunk of concrete, wood sticks, cast rubber spikes, and the like – to expand and to meet the sculpted paper. Pierced by a piece of wood and pinned to the wall, the sculpture reacts like a limp body, its weight giving into the force. *Go Go Gone's* assembly is by turns formless, weighty, and disorderly. Yet there is graceful fold on one side of the paper that lends overall shape to the assembled material.

Awai's alight into sculpture is not surprising. Her drawings have always had depth, of both ideas and matter. What is surprising is the way in which she has reprocessed the paper by reconstituting paper pulp to build up a three-dimensional form over an armature that will end up looking like freestanding paper, essentially remaking the paper. This undoing to redo is known territory for her. It is what she did with the nail polish. She is exploring its materiality using many of the same codes first seen in her drawings.

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ASSEMBLED  
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Awai's alight into sculpture is not surprising. Her drawings have always had depth, of both ideas and matter.

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**HAUL**

GRAPHITE, ACRYLIC PAINT  
AND NAIL POLISH ON PAPER  
50" X 38"  
2011





**GO GO GONE**

ACRYLIC PAINT, POLYURETHANE,  
NAIL POLISH, GRAPHITE,  
COTTON LINTERS FIBER, WIRE FORM,  
WOOD AND CONSTRUCTION FOAM  
APPROXIMATELY, 60" X 48" X 72"  
2011

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ASSEMBLED  
MATERIAL

...Awai's prescription of perceptual versus Conceptual seems more matter of fact than reactionary. It is proof of a thoughtful approach to the specifics of her practice...

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FRONT COVER  
CLOSE UP OF **GO GO GONE**

FRONT INSIDE COVER  
CLOSE UPS OF  
**SPECIMEN FROM LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
GO GO GREEN COMPRESSION  
WITH BLACK OOZE**

AND  
**GO GO GREEN COMPULSION:  
MIX MORE MEDIA!**  
GRAPHITE, ACRYLIC PAINT,  
AND NAIL POLISH ON PAPER  
38" X 50"  
2010

BACK COVER  
CLOSE UPS OF  
**GO GO GREEN COMPULSION:  
MIX MORE MEDIA!**

AND  
**SPECIMEN FROM LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
RESISTANCE WITH BLACK OOZE**

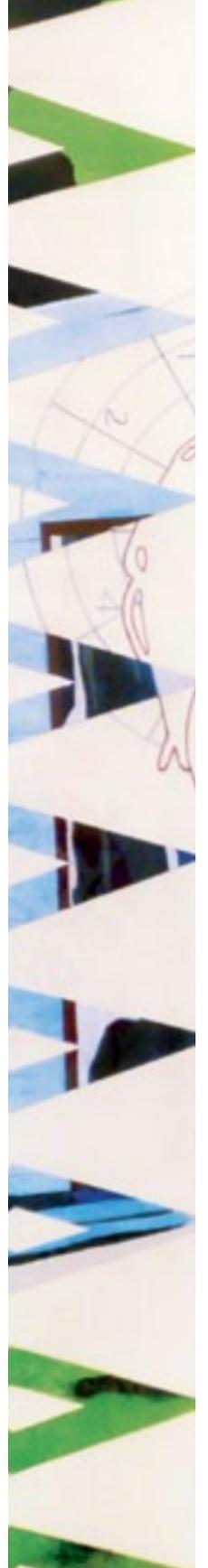
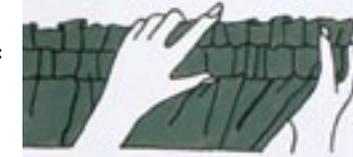
BACK INSIDE COVER  
CLOSE UPS OF  
**I'M NOT A TOURIST: PREVAIL**  
GRAPHITE, ACRYLIC PAINT AND  
NAIL POLISH ON PAPER  
34 1/2" X 47 3/8"  
2011

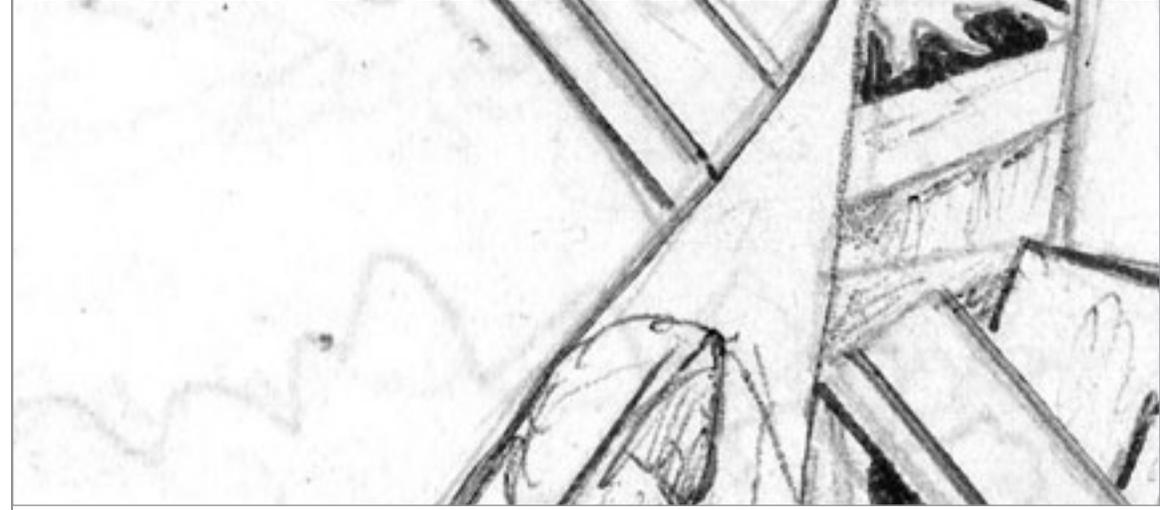
AND  
**SPECIMEN FROM LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
GO GO GREEN COMPRESSION  
WITH BLACK OOZE**

PAGE 4  
CLOSE UPS OF  
**GO GO GREEN COMPULSION:  
MIX MORE MEDIA!**

AND  
**SPECIMEN FROM LOCAL EPHEMERA:  
GO GO GREEN COMPRESSION  
WITH BLACK OOZE**

S MAY BE SHARP  
XPREMOS PUEDEN SER FILOSOS  
ORDS PEUVENT ETRÉ COUPANTS







## VILCEK FOUNDATION

EXHIBITIONS

THE VILCEK FOUNDATION HONORS  
FOREIGN-BORN SCHOLARS AND ARTISTS  
LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES WHO  
HAVE MADE OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTIONS  
TO SOCIETY.

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