

ART + AUCTION

Amy Sillman

by Rachel Wolff

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It's a brisk, sunny winter Monday in the artist-populated but not quite postindustrial Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick. As I make my way up to Amy Sillmans fourth-floor studio, I'm greeted by the high-pitched yaps of her mostly Chihuahua mutt, Omar, and then Amy's deep, soothing voice. Omar, dressed for the weather in a red cable-knit doggie sweater, leads us into the artist's studio, where she has accumulated nearly three dozen paintings and some *200brut*, abstract drawings. It's an open, light-drenched space, with artworks lining the walls and a messy painting table in the middle. But it feels homey and lived-in, as Omar holds court from the bed beneath the windows. Sillman moved in here about six months ago, after converting her former Williamsburg studio into her apartment. She's one of many artists in the building (painter Dasha Shishkin is another), which has become a cultural hub of sorts, as has Brooklyn Fire Proof East, the new, quietly hip café-bar next door.

But Sillman's not involved in any of that. She's here to work. This morning she's wearing a paint-splattered Smith College sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off at the elbows, comfy cotton pants, and well-worn sneakers. She's a bit disheveled but in that utterly-immersed-in-her-work kind of way. She has spent the past few hours manipulating two huge abstract canvases for possible inclusion in her forthcoming New York solo show: "Transformer (Or How Many Lightbulbs Does It Take to Change a Painting?)," which will be at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. from April 15 through May 15.

"When you do these paintings for a while, sometimes you find that the world takes them more seriously than you do," says Sillman, who's been at her craft for more than 30 years and has exhibited her work professionally for some 15. "To me they're workaday surfaces; they're not precious." Indeed the pictures, rich and densely layered, reflect her willingness to throw herself into the painted medium, with all its limitations and potential. Her disavowal of her work's preciousness comes through even in the way she handles it — aggressively flipping through a series of ink drawings depicting a lightbulb's wonderfully weird transformation into a flashlight, then a sex object; unceremoniously lugging a seven-foot canvas to the side to focus on other, less polished paintings.

In many ways Sillman, 54, is a contemporary action painter. She gets in there and gets dirty. "Just the idea that she goes into the studio and wrestles with these materials — it's very throwback; it's performative," says her longtime dealer Michael Jenkins. "Her work grows and changes. It becomes this kind of living thing." Sillman's new pieces border on pure abstraction, with fields of Day-Glo orange and misty blue-gray overlaid with odd shapes, gestural oil-stick strokes, and occasional suggestions of hands, fingers, lightbulbs, and the letter A. But mostly these paintings, like much of Sillman's oeuvre, seem to be about paint itself — how it can be pretty, ugly, thick, thin, quiet, loud, gentle, and unforgiving, all at once.

Unmoved by trends, Sillman often refers to herself as "old-school" and "bookish." She's a painter's painter; other artists followed her work long before curators, critics, and dealers discovered it. Unlike one of those hip young things swept up by a downtown dealer seconds after finishing her mfa, Sillman has had to work for her success.

In 1975 she came to New York via Chicago to study Japanese literature at New York University. A solo trip to Japan a few years earlier had sparked her interest in the cultural and anthropological aspects of Japanese language and linguistics, but she soon found the field too technical. So she started taking art classes.

"I was completely waylaid by painting," says Sillman, adding that she threw herself into the gestural tradition that grew out of the New York School, influenced specifically by Willem de Kooning and the early Philip Guston. "It was liberating to think about the flow, the mark, the gesture, the daubs, the dashes — the kind of abstract language of mark making. It was an easy shift [from] Asian writing." She transferred to New York's School of Visual Arts to refocus her studies.

After graduation, she worked in magazine production, enjoying the tactile process of pasting layouts together and readying them for print (something she's revisiting these days with a series of irreverent zines that she produces in conjunction with her shows and sells for \$1 each). The job allowed her to keep painting, if only for herself. "It was the 1980s, and I didn't make work that was Pop, work that involved mechanical reproduction — it wasn't my language," Sillman recalls. "I think of that time as sort of a long apprenticeship."

A stylistic breakthrough came in late 1987 during a six-month sojourn in India, where she did a series of drawings that brought her back to the poetic mark making that inspired her in her first art classes. She expressed different streams of consciousness through layers, shapes, and text.

When she went home, she applied these techniques to painting, developing the bold and strikingly physical look she's now known for.

By 1990 Sillman's magazine gigs were becoming more digital and less satisfying, so she quit and took a position as painting and drawing instructor at Bennington College, in Vermont. She spent summers working on her mfa at Bard, in upstate New York (where she is on the faculty today), and kept painting, producing stronger works that jibed with the emerging trend toward more introspective art. Although largely abstract, these early pieces still included figurative suggestions — pared-down bodies, elongated limbs. In 1996 she had her first major solo exhibition, with the New York dealer Casey Kaplan. By 2000 she was showing with her present dealers, Brent Sikkema and Michael Jenkins, and selling to a wide variety of collectors.

Sillman was enjoying commercial success, but it was "a challenge getting museums and critics to take notice — especially given some of the prevailing trends," recalls Jenkins. "There are a lot of people who respond to [her] kind of gutsy, interesting painting, but there just wasn't a lot of it to go look at." One such piece from 2003 is *Me & Ugly Mountain*, in which a cartoonish figure (presumably the artist herself) walks through a winter landscape lugging a boulderlike form composed of shapes, lines, and body parts. The following year she got her big museum break: The Whitney, in New York, invited her to participate in its biennial and afterward acquired her contributions. Her reputation grew. Then came Sillman's solo outing at Sikkema Jenkins, in 2006, for which she scaled up in size with pieces like *Big Girl*, a nod to de Kooning's abstractions of the female form. The art press finally noticed, lauding her visual hodgepodge of modernist influences and her rich, colorful surfaces. The critical attention led to the Museum of Modern Arts purchase of her *Psychology Today*, in which two nude figures are obscured by an abstract jumble of lines.

In 2008 Sillman scored her first major institutional show, a solo survey at the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C. "She's a very serious artist who has been exceptionally devoted to her practice over a long period of time," says Anne Ellegood, who recently left her curatorial post at the Hirshhorn to serve as senior curator at the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles. "In many ways, I think those careers are the most meaningful. She's worked so hard and has earned everything. And the work keeps getting better and better."

For her exhibition at the Hirshhorn, Sillman resolved her relationship to the figure. She started working from life, sketching friends in their living rooms, then reduced these drawings to their basic shapes and angles. The abstract paintings that resulted feel organic, anthropomorphic — derived from something living but ambiguous in form. "I think I purged the figuration in the

early stages," she says, "then started thinking about weights and balances and space and tilts — really formal things I got out of drawing people."

Sillman's focus on form has remained. Her May 2009 show at the Carlier Gebauer gallery, in Berlin, was almost pure abstraction. The paintings were sprawling and very similar to the large canvases lining her studio today.

Some of the paintings she shows me are clean and finished, such as the striking piece in which a translucent angular mass hovers over a shocking orange background; others are experiments, in which she allows herself to serially rework surfaces, textures, shapes, lines, and colors. One particularly dense painting has been "finished" three times; Sillman's hands-on process has taken it from simple to ugly to garish, but she says she's finally gotten it to a point where it feels alive. "I do get overworker's remorse sometimes," she admits. "I am kind of heavy-handed, and I know it. Sometimes I get really good results from it; sometimes I wish I had just stopped."