

ART LIES

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Amy Sillman
Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston

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Amy Sillman deliberately chooses to walk the mean streets between representation and abstraction, so it's easy to fall into the mug's game of trying to identify the elephant or the bird, the boat or the figure and disposition of their alignment. But the fact of the matter is Sillman loves to paint, and the pleasure of the process is evident everywhere in *Suitors & Strangers*. We are better served to focus on the "how and why" rather than the "what" of her practice.

In *Untitled (object on table)*, the ostensible object seems to be a brown-violet thingy with strips from the red-orange segment of the spectrum—vaguely totemic, like a tribal mask perhaps (see how easy it is to fall?)—perched on the edge of a violet field and set against a sea-green field that reads as ground. This gives way at the extreme edge of the thingy to a receding field of lighter green. More interesting than what the "object" might actually be is the way Sillman works her materials, using a palette knife to thickly apply two sea-green hues and give them a physicality that is as compelling as the intricate, heavily textured browns, purples and magentas of the figure. Simply put, her fields are as much a presence as her lines. They read as ground, but they don't act like it. They don't necessarily—or decorously—recede.

That's the elephant in the room in *Elephant in the Room*—no ground and no figure. Sure, there's a prominent curving greenish shape that suggests a trunk, but why should we be so influenced by suggestion? Besides, Sillman counters this possibility. That curving shape is set against a field that, as it climbs upward, gives way to burnt yellow—a color that intrudes a single vertical bar where the rest of the figure should be. What's most interesting is the play of line and color—how one supports the other.

The eye is also drawn to a light, bright patch of violet on the extreme right; thick green and greenish-black lines laying atop the violet then draw the eye downward toward a silvery-gray patch. Those thick, linear elements dead-end at a bright orange field that covers the bottom of the painting, which provides our "elephant" support. At first, one's eyes say these colors shouldn't work together at all: violet and gray, fine, but adjacent to that orange? And those greenish lines pull it all together, linking the orange (as well as the green underpainting that peeks through) with reddish tints of violet. To

further undermine a representational agenda, a yellowish lime-green “ground” leaks over into the orange.

Two more recent works in the exhibition, *M & Y* and *O & N*, get to the crux of the representation versus abstraction issue. The titles are the initials of couples Sillman asked to pose for [life](#) studies, but later she relied increasingly on memory to realize the work. They are bold compositions defined by angular fields and strong, expressive lines utilizing forceful palettes, the latter relying on the clash between reds and blues, the former working out a more harmonious but still vibrant blending of nearly the entire range of the color spectrum. Some may claim to see the figures that inspired these paintings but I don't, and I don't care to try. Ultimately, it doesn't matter where these vitally intelligent paintings came from. It only matters that they are here.

John Devine is a freelance critic based in Houston and a frequent contributor to *Art Lies*, *Art Papers* and *artUS*.