

DER TAGESSPIEGEL



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Signs of Intelligent Life

by Claudia Schmuckli

Painting for Amy Sillman is more than just a medium; it is a condition. Marked by doubt and skepticism toward the validity of the enterprise, the status of painting requires constant rethinking and redefinition on the part of the artist. Sillman belongs to a generation of painters who came of age during the medium's greatest moment of anxiety, and who – despite resistance and derision from an art world in thrall to anything but painting – have reclaimed the medium for themselves. Without resorting to conceptual bracketing, photographic mediation, or ironic detachment, they paved the way for a new generation of young painters to flourish in today's atmosphere of newfound appreciation.

Sillman's works possess a rare quality in that they openly and proudly invoke myriad forms of painting, ranging from historic to contemporary, western to eastern, and high to low art, only to freely and confidently blend them into a new painterly language that is decidedly contemporary and personal. Unlike most of her peers, Sillman unabashedly professes her love for the modernist trajectory: for the formal push toward abstraction as well as for the emotional pull of the illogical manifestations of the unconscious revealed by the then new science of psychoanalysis. Sillman likes to compare her process to a form of psychoanalysis that pits the free, associative flow of thoughts against analytical critique. This is an apt metaphor for a practice that is both intuitive and critical, relying on insistent questioning of each decision to such a degree that the correction of one gesture potentially eclipses what came before to the point of eradication. In her practice she assumes the roles of both patient and doctor.

As a result, one of the most powerful narratives implied in Sillman's paintings is that of their own making. Figures and shapes always seem to be in various states of becoming or changing, projecting temporariness and fragility. They tell stories that are equally fragmentary and provisional, in a state of emergence or approximation rather than conclusion.

With Philip Guston as her intellectual guide, she works in the very gap between representation and abstraction, and mines the riches of a philosophical divide now long since overcome. Her inclusive embrace of a phalanx of genres and styles over the years has been driven by one desire: to render "intelligent life as lived through the tissues and

organs of your own interior body," giving form to something that is both physical and psychological.

"I want to pose doubt as a subject," says Sillman. "That's what's great about painting – you can see the hesitation and uncertainty. Painting is a performative record of not knowing where you are going." Sillman works intuitively, her process a slow sequence of actions and reactions, carefully weighed and examined, confirmed or rejected, until she arrives at a result that withstands second-guessing. In painting her own doubt, she has made deconstruction in the form of un-painting – or as the art historian and critic Linda Norden has aptly called it, "constructive erasure" – as much a part of the process as its positive counterpart.

The oft-mentioned awkwardness of Sillman's compositions is a result of an oppositional dynamic at work in each canvas: her deployment of contrasting painterly strategies make her paintings appear, as she has said, "slightly wrong, or off, versions of things at the same time that they are those things." Each painting is, in her words, "an attempt to make oppositional forces come together" in order to "portray the dialectic between interior and exterior, to mix up the idea of feeling and thinking and remembering and knowing, really being there or not at all."

Although she defines her enterprise in terms of a struggle to render visible something as intangible as consciousness, it is a struggle rendered with admirable ease and a healthy dose of humor, grounded in, and engaged with, everyday existence.

As a self-described "Romantic Modern Postmodern Aesthetic Sensualist," Sillman is always one to relate art to life, and she paints the way she lives: driven by passion and desire, full of doubt but also courage, never at an end but always at a beginning and likely to take us by surprise. *Claudia Schmuckli*

Excerpts from "Amy Sillman: Suitors & Strangers" exhibition, Blaffer Museum at University of Houston