

frieze

Issue 133 September 2010

Parts & Labour

New York-based artist Amy Sillman talks with Matt Saunders about dandyism, comedy and the legacy of Abstract Expressionism

For more than 30 years, New York-based artist Amy Sillman has maintained a serious engagement with drawing and painting. Often mining periods of art history considered outdated, such as high Modernist abstraction and Abstract Expressionism, Sillman reinvests painting with ideas from philosophy, psychology and feminism – as well as a healthy dose of humour – to create a conceptually and formally rich body of work. She has exhibited extensively in the US and Europe and, in 2009, held a residency at the American Academy in Berlin. Her most recent solo exhibition, ‘Transformer (... or, how many lightbulbs does it take to change a painting?)’, was at Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York, earlier this year.

Matt Saunders: I first heard your name in a 1998 Village Voice review by Peter Schjeldahl. After quoting you at length (describing you as ‘rangy and witty’), he confesses that a wall in his apartment ‘hankers’ for your paintings: ‘Go see. A new, slightly difficult, densely erotic relationship may commence in your life.’ You made Schjeldahl want to start something – a conversation, perhaps – and that made a huge impression on me. I feel like your work insists on that kind of engagement, more verbal and free-form than ‘oil on canvas’ would imply. I was reminded of this in your last two shows with their funny mix of big, gestural paintings alongside Xeroxed ‘zines, first in Berlin (at carlier | gebauer), then in New York (Sikkema Jenkins & Co.). What were you up to?

Amy Sillman: Two things: one, I was thinking about diagrams as a way to understand the way painting works; and two, I realized that in Berlin I needed a way to stage my paintings very specifically, to avoid the total cliché reading of highly aesthetic Ab Ex-derived things. In New York I sort of get around this problem because it’s my hometown, but in Berlin I was not known and who would know how to place the work? I do use the rhetoric and procedures of Abstract Expressionism but I’m trying to make something that isn’t comfortable in its skin. So I made a ‘zine as a kind of translation device and also included these joke drawings, fictional seating charts that I had made about art-world dinner parties with made-up characters. It kind of worked. When these jokes and ‘zines were present, it seemed like everyone knew

how to approach the paintings the way I wanted them to, with a certain irreverence. So I continued to include my 'zines and my joke drawings after Berlin.

MS: Do you think that's a vulnerable position, or more like stand-up?

AS: I guess it's both. In Berlin it really struck me: I approach painting the same way I approach these seating charts, so why would I not show that more? Make the whole exhibition more like my own personality, which is kind of funny, scrappy and contradictory. So I started thinking about the diagrammatic as a rhetorical device.

MS: A diagram makes relations.

AS: Yes, that perfectly expresses my attitude towards painting; I'm trying to investigate relations between things that don't go together. I thought of a diagram as a kind of homemade schema, an attempt to reconstruct something that happened over time. Then I realized that's really how I think of abstract painting. It's sort of a framework through which you try to reconstruct painting itself, and you're both detaching yourself from it and also inserting yourself into it, and also throwing in things that screw up the whole system, like comedy. In this way I was hoping that the paintings would seem more synthetic. Or absurd, even wrong.

MS: I've often assumed that Abstract Expressionism was overlaid in discussions of your work. But you seem to embrace the association.

AS: Well, I've accepted Abstract Expressionist materials: the large canvases, oil paint, the scale, stretcher bars, turpentine, brushes, gestural process, a process of adding and subtracting. It would be an over-estimation to say that I study it – like a monk, with art history books open in my studio – and try to recreate it. I don't do that at all. But it would be an underestimation to say that I'm indifferent. I'm passionate about looking at the work of the postwar period in painting. I've taken it on as a subject, a material subject, partly because I love it. My first art classes were taught by old Ab Ex New York School guys who hung out at the Cedar Bar – exactly the clichéd types I was trying to avoid being mistaken for in Berlin!

MS: What did you learn?

AS: Procedures. We would draw from the figure in a way that highlighted the things that Abstract Expressionists valued – like accidents, mistakes, physicality, tactility, transformation. This was anti-classical methodology.

MS: Perhaps an unappreciated way to work?

AS: Ab Ex painting was not the expectation for a female art student in the 1970s. At the time it was a surprise to my friends, who were rock musicians and filmmakers, that I believed painting could still rise from its ashes and say anything relevant at all. I approached this area precisely because I liked to draw

more than anything else, I liked to learn a foreign language – and painting for me was all that. Plus it was considered kind of taboo at the time for anyone smart, so I was curious about going to a place where I don't supposedly belong. I'd probably feel the same way about going to a hippie commune. I arrived with built-in skepticism, along with self-consciousness, but I wanted to go there.

MS: I never had much interest in the 'transgression' of running with Abstract Expressionism, but your work does, at times, feel perilous by insisting on expression as the end goal of a painting.

AS: In simple terms you could say there is a certain 'transgressive' goal in trying to exploit a collapsed and forbidden terrain in order to open it up, de-mythologize, exploit and change it for new people's use. At that time it was basically like trespassing. But 'transgression' sounds kind of juvenile to me. I'm more interested in the specific use of affect which seemed to be claimed by expressionism – and also in certain feelings like embarrassment, awkwardness, difficulty, antagonism. I'm less interested in the idea of taboo activity, than in wanting to find something where there should be nothing. I like the idea of a dialectics of form, not putting it in terms of so-called de-skilling. I felt I was re-skilling myself.

MS: I think of the early-20th-century idea of de-skilling as a cultural ploy – trying to move outside of a set of established values. What you're talking about is psychological.

AS: Maybe a psychological relationship to these forms is the most important thing I have to offer. I'm not offering psychological subject matter. I'm trying to make a psychological form: immersive form, permissive making, where things emerge out of you and where you make contact with the world. I am interested in a desire for pleasure and a simultaneous desire to fuck things up. Or at least it's a place to start.

MS: What about psychological processes?

AS: I have a really complicated procedure. I will attempt to overcome, paint out, destroy, erase, undo as I do things. My work is painted and destroyed 100 times before anyone besides me ever sees it. The result is a complicated surface that has been touched in many ways, with a strong sense of attachment and antagonism. It's not a nice, polite way of making art, where you plan and then execute some kind of model – this is foreign to me. My way of working is intensely analytical at the same time as intensely instinctual; it's done within a structure with certain materials that allow certain things to happen. I don't know if I'm a communist – a materialist! – or a psychoanalyst or a formalist. But I don't think the formal well is dry or inherently conservative.

MS: You have a certain formal way of moving paint around, yet the range of the ideas you're ascribing and thinking about is much greater. How complicated does that language become? How are things represented, specifically?

AS: I am basically a draw-er. I have several different registers of drawing. First comes big thickets of abstract marks, what Deleuze calls 'asignifying traits', through which I try to locate something, some

weight or presence. Into this comes a kind of semiotics, when I'm drawing an image, but it's usually from my head and therefore kind of weird and not realistic. Those two things fuse together with a purely subtractive form: erasing, painting over, scraping out, negating the image. All of that is then rendered in terms of colour and composition, and then all of that formal and material stuff is rendered in terms of destabilizing non-painting forces, things that I'm thinking about that cut in, like sex, jokes, language fragments, what I ate yesterday. It all amounts to a kind of dynamic formal machine that points both inward and outward. I'm not claiming any kind of unique territory here; this is probably a good description of any improvisational form, in music or film etc. But I think what is important is that it's not about aesthetics, beauty or decoration or any of that. It's a kind of structured interaction with the world.

MS: In your book with Gregg Bordowitz [Between Artists: Amy Sillman/Gregg Bordowitz, 2007], you invoke the idea of ugliness as a goal. I'm a bit skeptical of 'radical' ugliness, since taste is a shifting quality. By insisting on painting's material language, perhaps you make a tangle out of the question of translation? That seems like a form of 'resistance'.

AS: Ugliness is a way to describe the uncomfortable or difficult, not the abhorrent. I don't think about what's 'new' – I think about what's surprising, which is a goal worth pursuing. Saying I value what is ugly is a shorthand for being willing to accept discomfort and embarrassment and all the adjacent feelings that come with doing something you're not quite familiar with. Strangeness is the goal.

MS: Encountering your painting Blue Diagram [2009], the blue struck me as an aggressive interloper. Like it just stomped in. I was discomfited; the blue was electric.

AS: In that new body of work, I was using oil crayons purchased from a paint factory in upstate New York called R&F. I realized recently that all the colours of their crayons have a really specific palette – a lot of them look like the colours of sports jerseys or 1980s outfits. It's an interestingly weird, bright, but garish colour palette.

MS: I've never seen you at work with the crayons. Do they blend? Bleed?

AS: No. I don't use much solvent. I spend an incredible amount of time actually smashing these wax crayons, blending and mixing them, and when I'm painting I'm scraping a lot of layers off. I mix up my own greys and browns using the sludge and scraped-out paint from my paintings. I've been trying to mix a palette of two kinds of unwanted colours: one of shadow and dirt, and one insanely bright and uncool. A short-hand for that might be: enjoying the ugliness of it. The whole idea of shadow versus garish colour came from some drawings I made in about 2002 with figures and their shadows, where the shadows weren't obeying their figures, but were doing autonomous things to the figures. Since then I've been thinking about making paintings from two kinds of palettes combined.

MS: I re-watched the 1981 Clash of the Titans recently, and it's wonderfully synthetic like that. One character, for instance, alternates between being made of plasticine and being an actor with fake hair

glued to his face. With all the effects, they don't always get it right, so there are scenes where the light is warm and then cool and then warm. Shadows and light feel material. It's very wonky, very beautiful.

AS: Impurity and synthetic-ness are important qualities to me; not synthetic in the sense of plasticky and technological, but just in the sense that it's been synthesized from other elements. I know a lot of people who are obsessed with obsolete media, like old computers or out-of-date Super Mario-type games. Their pleasure is probably similar to mine in trying to reconfigure high Modernism from its place of veneration to a place of potential. I like something you said once about how when you were in art school, this area was like foreclosed real estate. Its handicap appeals to me; it's one way to think around professionalism in the art world. I once read an interview with George Kuchar, one of my favorite filmmakers, who said that he made his underground films because he was too disorganized to make Hollywood films.

But I think it's also about not wanting to be a hack and liking a certain crudeness.

MS: Like the jokes in your work. They're folded right into the dough. It's a kind of synthetic, wrong situation.

AS: They're folded in, and through them I hope the paintings are folded out.

MS: Earlier you called yourself a communist. How do you equate that idea with materials?

AS: In Berlin, I was friends with art historians who were studying the Soviet avant-gardes and I learned a lot from them. I was incredibly moved by the work of the early Russian poets, especially Alexei Kruchenykh. Apparently the poets in this circle were not Bolsheviks but more aligned with the anarchists. I was totally inspired by the books made by Kruchenykh and Olga Rozanova, and others. I was thinking a lot about the Russians last year and realized: one, that a lot of that history was not shown to me when I was an art student; and two, that I'm dedicated to struggle and materiality. I'm interested in labour and work. In this way I am the opposite of a dandy.

MS: 'Opposite of a dandy'?

AS: I used to object to dandyism because I hated the idea of imitating the upper class. I now realize that a dandy is a much more nuanced position than I had thought, but a couple of years ago, before I understood that so well, Michael Krebber came to Columbia to speak to the mfa students and really knocked everyone's socks off talking about the position of the dandy. I had to speak right after him and I thought, well, what is the anti-dandy position? I realized, I'm nuts and bolts. I'm the opposite of a dandy because I embrace work and struggle. I don't float around the boulevard, I get up in the morning and go to work. Ugh, it's so American! I'm like Mickey Rourke in *The Wrestler* [2008]. That's my version of the opposite of a dandy – a wrestler, maybe with a day job.

MS: What do you recognize as kin in the Russian books?

AS: They're not type-set or made on machines. They're made with purloined supplies you get at your day job. Kruchenykh made books while he was working in a railway office. They're absurdist and nonconformist even though they partly reference folkloric book traditions in Russia. They're not about such lofty things as mechanical reproduction or distribution strategies, they're just scrappy little books made with such intensity, with nonsense sounds and handwriting wrestling it out. So they're radical but not in a heroic register, like the Utopian overthrow of the government, but instead in the manner of a kind of desperate undertow. The rhetoric of these books is like a minor key, which reminds me of what I said before about ugliness. It reminds me of the American poetic tradition, where the poem comes out of the body, like in Walt Whitman.

MS: What comes out of your work for me is an invitation to look, and look with care. I'm always trying to identify the final brushstroke – where the last thread is, and then pull on that thread and go backwards through the picture.

AS: That's really almost a method, what you said.

MS: Is there anything else you want to mention that we haven't talked about?

AS: I feel like I owe a lot to my friends who are other kinds of artists, not painters necessarily – poets, filmmakers, etc. Sometimes I feel like the work is a gift to them. I like to see my paintings as a social act, a linguistic act, an attempt at conversation. It would be nice to be able to say that in print.

Matt Saunders