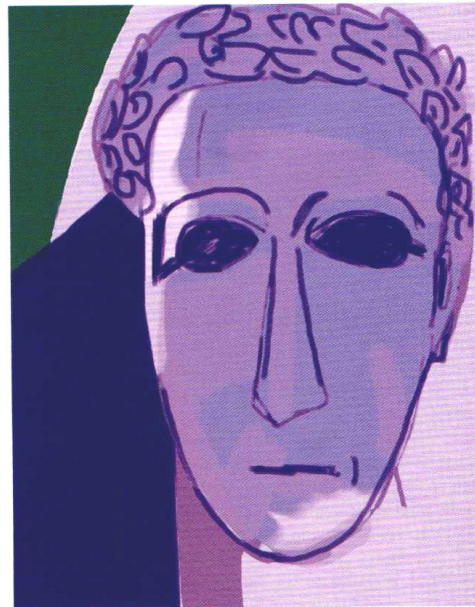


# KALEIDOSCOPE

Issue 17 Winter 2012/13

MAIN THEME



## Amy Sillman



in conversation with  
Joahna Fiduccia

# A Matter



# of Taste

AMY SILLMAN'S PERSPECTIVE



MAIN THEME

JOANNA FIDUCCIA I was thinking about how to describe the relationship of your animations and 'zines to your paintings. In an interview with Matt Saunders, you talked about your 'zines originating in the desire to scotch a German audience's preconceptions about the high seriousness of large paintings, and to put them in a mindset of irreverence before your work. So they're primers, though to me, they've seemed more like chatty escorts, inappropriately hanging around in an exhibition of paintings. That relationship changes afterward, of course—when you go home with them.

AMY SILLMAN I like the idea that they're inappropriate persons that you go home with! I thought of them as friendly, democratic things. Paintings often seem unable to speak in this friendly democratic way. A couple of shows ago at Sikkema Jenkins, in 2006, I was making bigger, more gestural abstract paintings, and I very specifically decided not to have drawings in the show—I always have drawings to accompany the work because my work is so drawing-centric. I thought: I'll do a show with just big paintings. Let the persuasion rest in the paintings. Seven big paintings. But then, it was terrifying to see how easily in a Chelsea gallery, big paintings would immediately inhabit this default position of all of the worst, most egregious, capitalist-trophy-horribleness you can imagine. There was one negative review that asked: "Why do we have these when we already had AbEx?" That was my worst nightmare. So when I was in Germany, the 'zine was an attempt to contextualize them the way I wanted to.

JF Were there other artists you were considering who had experimented with similar ways of mediating their paintings?

AS I loved the gesture I once saw at a Nayland Blake show at Matthew Marks: He'd made a mixtape and put it in a case. It wasn't in the main part of the show, and I don't remember if you could buy it, but it was great. Of course, there was also Félix González-Torres—the amazing gesture of his piles and take-aways.

JF What I like about mixtapes and the take-aways, which follows for the 'zines as well, is that they implicate other kinds of exchange—intimate communities and relations, little worlds of production and circulation—which are very different from the modes of circulation for large, abstract paintings.

AS It's an entirely casual world apart from the art discourse. It gives them a certain charm. I want that to contrast with the language of the paintings, which are so loaded with historical awareness.

JF Do you think about your animations in relationship to your paintings in the same way?

AS I started doing these animations as a collaboration with the poet Charles Bernstein, but they were completely inspired by the 'zines, because once the 'zine was a format for me, then all that stuff I do anyway outside painting became a format. If there can be 'zines, there can be posters, and if there can be posters, there can be prints, and there can be drawings on iPads, jokes, charts, cartoons, birthday cards, diaries. Everything is available.

JF Yet the iPad seems so different from the 'zine. It has no subculture, and seems inexorably to turn any small network of circulation into a tributary for the mass stream of information.

AS Maybe not the device, but the free apps can be kind of "zine-y." I started working on my iPhone, doing casual stuff with it that I've never done with any equipment ever. It's much more like a drawing tool. Whereas a laptop is more like a painting, like a little easel, an iPhone is like an extension of your hand. And you can download all these apps—the shittier the better.

JF What makes the shitty ones better?

AS It's a matter of taste—I like mundane stuff. It's like what direction you go in when you walk into the flea market. Some people gravitate toward the nice design stuff, and some people gravitate toward

the misshapen handmade ashtrays. I gravitate toward the lumpy ashtrays.

JF That seems to be reflected in the figures in your work. It seems to me like there are two kinds of bodies that enter your paintings: one that seems very syntactical, where sign-like parts—a knee, a foot, a fat roll under an armpit—combine into inscrutable sentences, and another, connected to your animations, ceaselessly transforming.

AS Making the animations has made me realize more keenly that I am invested in time and changes rather than results and endpoints. I don't think I'm that interested in images, per se; I'm just interested in the way they manifest and then go away. So making the animations has allowed me to express this sense of constant shifting, while at the same time, retain certain images—Command Save! My temperamental impatience and desire for change is more profound than any of the particular building moments, but I hope there is a tension between the desire for constant flux and the occasion when an image appears, somewhat fragmentary or awkward, bobbing up above the flow. In a painting, you have to be willing to destroy the whole thing in order to move to the next place, but these animations are like a Muybridge. They allow me to preserve a wealth of moments that otherwise would disappear into the past, buried under layers of paint.

JF So this very contemporary technology is unearthing something taking place, historically, and inevitably, in the medium of painting. The minor medium reveals the major.

AS But the minor medium provides the major medium more space, more grace. The video suggests that the painting is not the endpoint, it's the midpoint. The video tells you what could happen to the image you are looking at, and therefore the painting is now just something in midstream, something that is still being said or is struggling to emerge.

JF Something you seem to return to





AMY SILLMAN'S PERSPECTIVE



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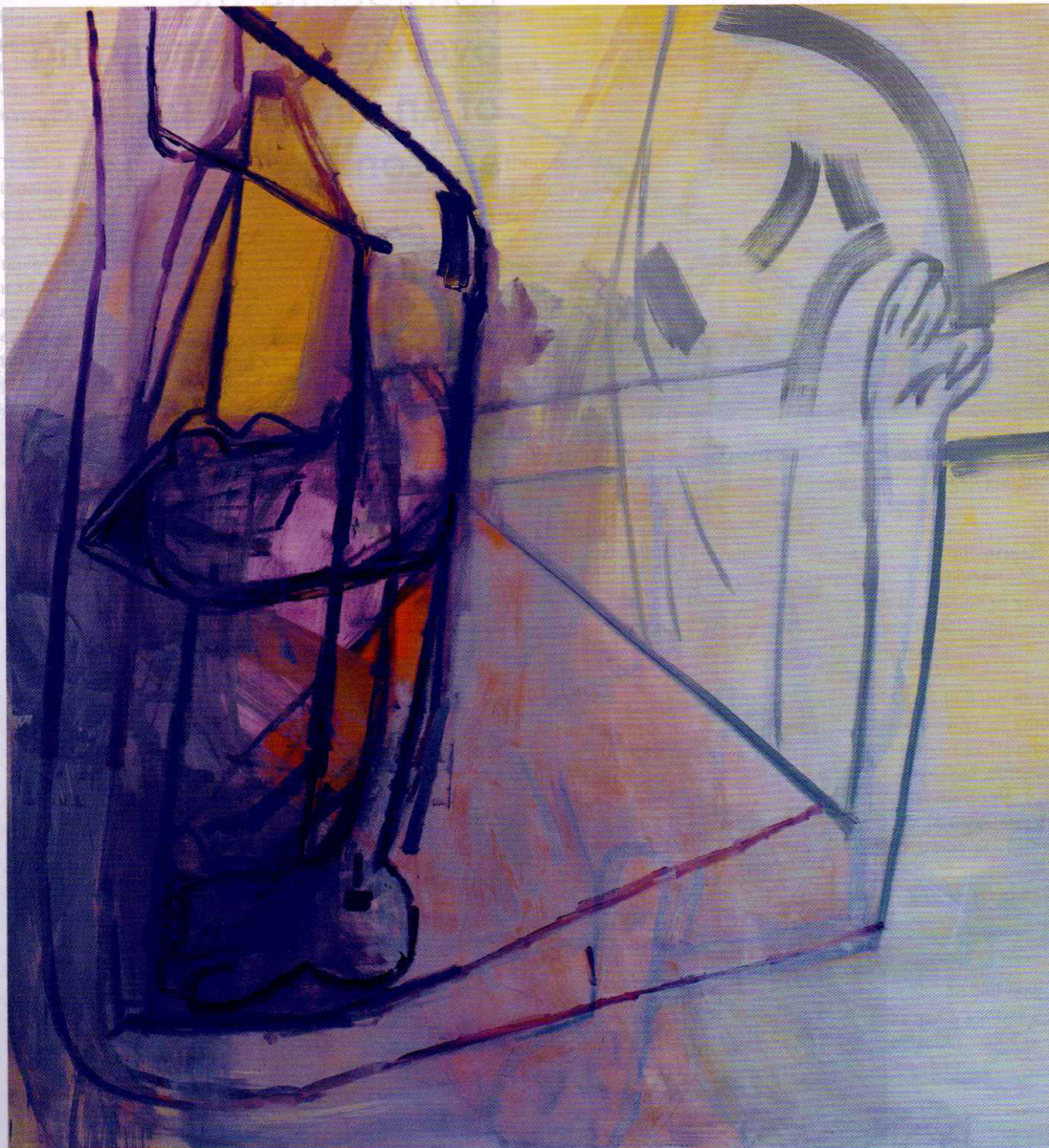


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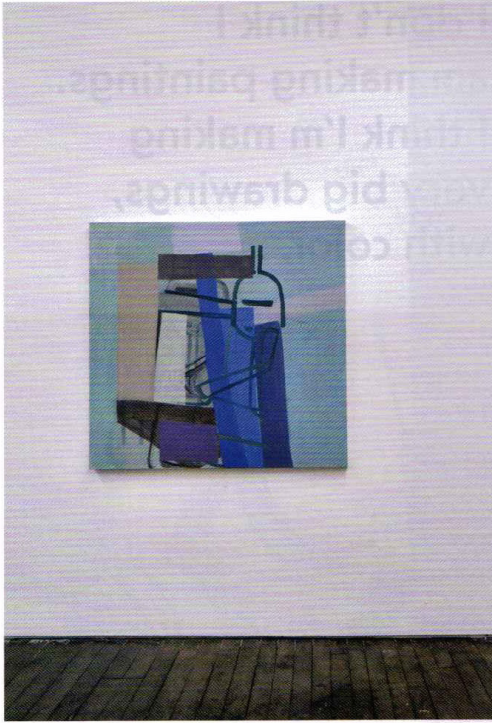
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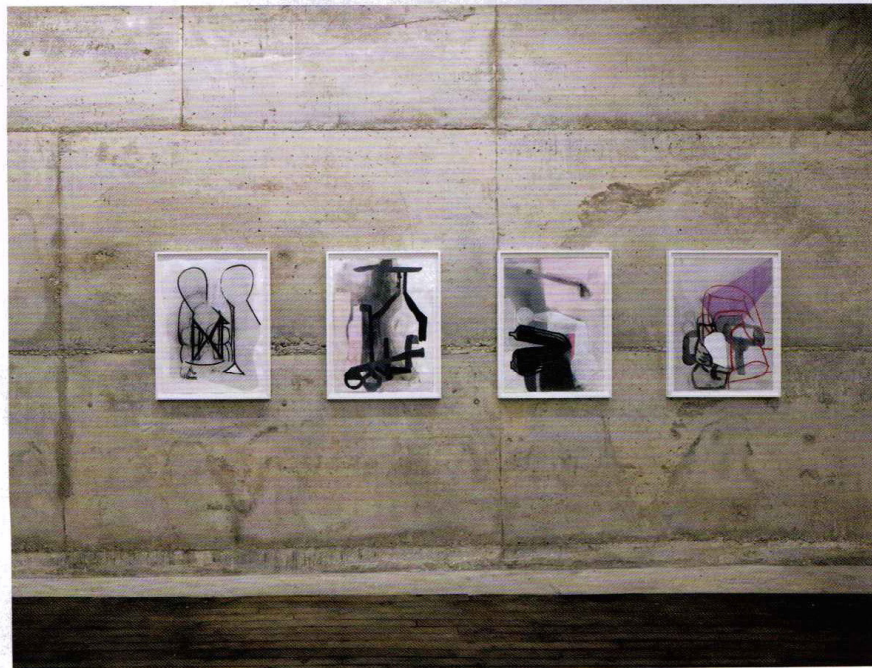


AMY SILLMAN'S PERSPECTIVE





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A shape that listens – New Drawings  
Installation view at Campoli Presti, Paris



- often is the distinction between drawing and painting in your work.
- AS These are arbitrary distinctions, but I basically feel like drawing is about making something from the bottom up, while painting is more about considering the overview, the meaning of an image, a picture, an icon. Drawing is a base-level operation. It's low-down, grass-level, from the ground up—humble. Draw-ers are artists who don't necessarily have a big picture from the get-go. It's also possible to deal with parts and fragments as a draw-er, rather than the whole. It can be fragmentary; it can have contradictory parts.
- JF That's a much more generous way of looking at painters working in other mediums at the same time. I could cynically observe that the video, sculpture, sound work and performances produced by painters in the context of their exhibitions today can look like so many contrivances to appear like they're doing something else besides producing portable, accessible commodities. But if you shift the primary mode from the making of a singular painting to the act of drawing—a way of diagramming, of rejiggering the parts—then the work can, of course, split off into paintings, videos, drawings...
- AS Drawing is akin to walking around.
- JF Painting is like posing.
- AS Painting is like striking the pose! This is simplistic, but Richter is painting and Polke is drawing.
- JF So why do you continue to make paintings?
- AS I don't think I am making paintings. I think I'm making very big drawings, with color. De Kooning is painting and drawing at the same time. Picasso and Matisse, too. The only thing that makes me a painter is that I have some relationship to color. When I'm drawing, I feel like I'm on a stringent diet, like eating carrot sticks and a cup of cottage cheese. It feels "good for you." But it's no fun. Color is like fat. Color is cake.
- JF Let them eat color!
- AS When I worked in magazines, I realized that there were people who were really good designers, and people who were good illustrators. Designers could think about the big picture, but illustrators could work from the ground up.
- JF You were an illustrator?
- AS Yeah, I studied illustration in college. I wanted to be an illustrator.
- JF And you ended up a painter.
- AS Well, not really a painter.
- JF A big draw-er. I wonder, however: Aren't some of the ways that you're characterizing drawing—the spontaneity, this hearty physicality—also the province of painting?
- AS For sure. I'm making up these arguably unsupportable categories, but some practices are about something to begin with, while I think that, as a draw-er, you can start with nothing. Drawing is closer to the bone; it's resolutely manual. It's more discombobulated and it's probably freer, more akin to free speech, free association—
- JF Or poetry, with all its combinatory logic, its contradictions. Something like Ted Berrigan's sonnets.
- AS Totally. I see fiction as painting and poetry as drawing.
- JF It seems that drawing, then, is at once a principle of innovation—something out of nothing—and one of rearrangement, manipulation, reinvention...
- AS Yes, it is completely about being in the moment rather than having a bigger perspective on time.
- JF What is a painting's relationship to time?
- AS Painting is like slowed time. It's like expanding something that wasn't supposed to be expandable: the moment. Like finding out that time is a marsupial. It has a pocket you can climb into. You can go backwards and forwards in painting. Time is elastic, nonlinear,
- because you can erase and rearrange.
- JF Maybe that's part of the appeal of paintings: they preserve some sense of contingency even as a fixed image. I wonder if that accounts for their humanity, or if instead it is simply that paintings seem to look back, to address you in your own posture of address.
- AS Making paintings is a weird experience where time literally changes and slows down. Paintings are complex. Like you said, paintings face you, confront you, as another being, but then they offer another kind of presence with a huge amount of time inside it.
- JF Something like looking at a lover or a friend. A dear face has past and future in it.
- AS That's how paintings are to me. They are relationships, completely full of feelings, just like beings. Not all nice feelings though: some hate, some love, some indifference, some boredom, some irritation. I wreck them all the time.
- JF Is it narcissistic, wanting to look at something that will relate to you like you relate to the world?
- AS Not all projection is about projecting the grandeur of yourself. You can enjoy seeing a projection of your own fallibility, which is both comforting and humorous.
- JF Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips have talked about different ways of conceiving that will to project as "impersonal narcissism," one that pursues the image, not of a unified self, but of some funkier, fragmented, self-un-same version. It's a way of seeing yourself in and among other, othered parts of the world, and in sympathy with them.
- AS It gets back to the idea of an escort. If you had an escort, would you really want one who looks like a model? I'd rather have one who looks weird so I don't feel so bad.

All images courtesy of the artist; Campoli Presti, London/Paris; Capitain Petzel, Berlin; and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York