

ARTSEEN

AMY SILLMAN *Thumb Cinema*

by David Rhodes

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The Greek word *soma* means body. “Somatic,” the name of our peripheral nervous system, is derived from this word. Responsible for relaying motor and sensory information both to and from the central nervous system, it controls voluntary muscle movement and the processing of sensory information arriving via external stimuli that includes hearing, touch, and sight. In many ways, we are this system.

The experience of trauma fragments sensory body memory. The energy released is so great that it cannot be integrated and it therefore has to be repressed, breaking out unexpectedly, and on occasion even violently.

What happens in a painting by Amy Sillman resonates with the struggle and discomfort of being a mortal, corporeal being. The painting engages in its very construction with the processes of reassessment in a situation of continual change, none of which can be conveniently divided and dealt with, whether we like it or not.

This experience is both immediate and fractured, due to the permanent flux of memory. The shapes, colors, and surface in a Sillman painting contribute to a disjunctive encounter that is as haptic as it is visual, and at times also very funny. Humor plays no small part in dealing psychologically with the outright liability of possessing a body. It is simultaneously a strong communicative tool and dynamic means of thinking on the spot. The reaction to humor, smiling, and laughter is of course very physical—it involves thinking and doing all wrapped up together, much like painting. Humor is not much associated with AbEx unless you think of Ad Reinhardt’s (1913 – 1967) cartoons and diagrams, or Philip Guston’s (1913 – 1980) tragi-comic late paintings.



Amy Sillman, “The Slight One,” 2011. Oil on canvas. Copyright: Captain Petzel, Berlin

Sillman also values humor: The poster for this show features a found cartoon with a modified text. An animation included in this exhibition, *Pinky’s Rule*, is the result of collaboration between Sillman and the poet Charles Bernstein, after an invitation to collaborate from the Bowery Poetry Club. A suite of digital prints of selected images from the animation, all made on an iPhone and exhibited in a room apart from the paintings, are made at the invitation of Sillman, by the artist and printer Nathan Baker. The words of the poem and the drawings happened simultaneously, in an exchange by e-mail. Neither illustrate the other; the exchange was back and forth, always open to change.

AbEx is usually characterized as macho and considered irrelevant these days. If at all, it's handled cautiously, with distance and irony, or as guilty pleasure, with wryness or embarrassment. Some painterly moves are borrowed blithely—as if proscribed, the moves are always in quotation marks. Hey, they say, I don't really mean it, it is only a sign for something lame and over. When looking closely at this period of American painting it is important to see past some of the accounts of the day to day lived difficulties derived from poverty and alcoholism, as well as the impact of Sullivanian psychoanalysis (Harry Stack Sullivan, 1892 – 1949), encouraging as it did, drinking, promiscuity, and confrontation—as if any encouragement was needed. Clement Greenberg, Jackson Pollock, and Joan Mitchell, to name a few, were at one time or another in Sullivanian analysis.

Sillman, however, is not afraid to engage seriously with the means of AbEx, fully aware of the baggage of gendered history and rhetorical, as well as painterly, gesture. Undeterred by a generally disparaging attitude from the art crowd, she has approached this kind of painting without submitting to its clichés. So-called “content-driven” art has supposed the emptiness of formalism and ignored the inseparability of form and content, though current thinking has re-engaged with aesthetics and the struggle to articulate links between art, politics, and morality, as can be seen in Paul Guyer's recent *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics*.

The importance of a performative aspect to making had also been disregarded in painting, yet this is crucial to Sillman's way of thinking and making. Willem de Kooning's (1904 – 1997) paintings are unimaginable without his very physical approach to using material, both technically and emotionally—the whole Whitmanesque shebang. Though Sillman's work is also layered and durational, full of coverings and reveals, its impact has nothing to do with the dry melt of a de Kooning painting.

Sillman's “The Slight One” (2011) is a painting where the surface is inscribed with drawing and space pushes back in time lapses of becoming and disappearance. There is a tenderness of touch and a feeling of disorientation that comes from closeness, emotional or physical. The shifts of tone and hue that breathe in and out of focus continue a sense of the impossibility of grasping anything definitively, however real it may feel. The colors of the painting encounter each other with the intensity of an embrace or the trace of its release. The shapes share the limbness of a Philip Guston painting, but not the heavy corporeal trail of his loaded brush. Two English painters, Roger Hilton (1911 – 1975) and Peter Lanyon (1918 – 1964), who both also expanded the zone between abstraction and figuration, are off the usual track, but are appreciated by Sillman; it is no surprise to find them within the wide scope of her interests. Sillman's work originates from both form and idea, improvisation and concept, and is not a priori-content driven, making her one of a number of artists representing a shift in attitudes toward painting in recent years.