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The Vicarious Warmth of Amy Sillman's Paintings

The artist's first UK institutional exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, London, showcases the singularity of her oeuvre



I vividly remember the first time I clapped eyes on an Amy Sillman painting, in a tent in Regent's Park. Mosquito limbs stranded in Neapolitan blocks of pistachio, strawberry and blackcurrant, fogged by pollution. No, not true – a cursory search discredits my recollection as unreliably textured, having mushed together *Bed* and *The Plumbing* (both 2006), and allowed the stilled playback of Sillman's painting to continue in a mental background operation. But then, Sillman deals, above all, in what she has called 'devotion to a procedure of transformation' and the glow of that first look – an impression of woozy, fugitive colour and unerringly varied groundstrokes – is undimmed.



Amy Sillman, *Pink Drawings*, 2015-16, acrylic, charcoal, and ink on paper, 40 drawings 76 x 57 cm each. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Capitain Petzel, Berlin

Sillman's process has an internal momentum that won't be quelled until it's had the last word. 'Landline', her first UK institutional show, steams through Camden Arts Centre: as if dossiers have been shaken loose, then stuffed back into a briefcase, her language is unpacked across extended sequences of works on paper, then compressed in the impacted, waxy surface of her canvases. In talks, the artist often shares photo-diaries of her paintings' journey – in toggling through, she lends patches of colour a living character. At Camden, too, shapes palpably expand, gobble up extraneous segments, elbow their way round the room. After all, contemporary painting is an unspooling, living thing; work is glimpsed unfinished on studio visits, 'WIPs' with enough optical game are dispatched to Instagram.

'Landline': somebody, somewhere noted a spate of old fashioned telephone motifs in this autumn's New York shows (from Charlene Von Heyl to Paul Sietsema). In conversation with the painter Allison Katz, Sillman acknowledged her procedure's roots in the work of Willem De Kooning and free jazz, noting she could not presume current students' familiarity with such tenets of improvised action and redaction. This, in Sillman's hands and words, isn't an ancient method, but thoroughly present-tense. Vicissitudes must be endured as the paintings play out over many months. It was memorable, then, to hear her insistence that working on canvas (rather than digitally) was 'totally not infinite'. The window will close; it will be done.



Amy Sillman, *What the Axe Knows*, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas, 1,9 x 1,7 m. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Capitain Petzel, Berlin; photograph: John Berens

Sillman's brushwork twitches extemporaneously, resonating with a host of other exponents. A polyglot switching tongues without dropping their accent. Along the bottom of *Edge of Day* (2018), ragged grey swipes over hazard yellow summon Cologne and St Ives in equal measure. The upper half has a bouncing, protean disorder punctuated by sheaves of modulating colour, chatting with Phyllida Barlow and Dana Schutz respectively. *What The Axe Knows* (2018) suggests Albert Oehlen in another odd mood, paying homage to Richard Diebenkorn. *Duel* (2011), the largest and saddest canvas here, has the feathery, mouldy lemon of Arshile Gorky veiling figures that wobble like Bruce Nauman drawings. Maybe the ache of pink choking on grey reminds you of Philip Guston, but it's no quotation. The defining feature of a Sillman gesture might be a total lack of contrivance. Change has a blunt inevitability, like the waterfall erasing a torso in Robert Gober's *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982-83).

Several pictures approach landscape – the blearily smouldering horizons seen in dreams. Near the picture plane, rebar-thick lines are toted like wands or sink into buttery, fuming colour. Where *Avec* (2017), painted solely in acrylic, is fast, chalkier and unyielding, the scrabbly, greasier surface of *Lift & Separate* (2017–18), has waves of movement that emanate from deep in the surface, not altogether unlike the stratigraphy of the Elgin Marbles. Lingerin, I wondered if it would eventually trap me, like an ammonite in a cliff face. Should you manage to peel yourself away, the vicarious warmth remains.

Amy Sillman, 'Landline' runs at Camden Arts Center, London, until 6 January 2018.

Main image: Amy Sillman, Dub Stamp, 2018, a multi-part series of double-sided acrylic, ink, and silkscreen works on paper, 1,5 x 1,1 cm each. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Capitain Petzel, Berlin; photograph: Damian Griffiths