

Witty and bright, Amy Sillman's work is freshly urgent

The derelict factory of inherited ideas and dim intuitions that is the human mind melts into its complicating consolation, the body, in the work of Amy Sillman, an artist in her late 50s. Sillman was born in Detroit and lives in Brooklyn. She has been producing major paintings since about 2005, and fascinating works on paper, many of them mordantly funny cartoons, for much longer.



"Fatso" by Amy Sillman is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

"Amy Sillman: one lump or two" at the Institute of Contemporary Art reveals a skittishly self-conscious yet rambunctious artist, and one of the most exciting painters around.

Along with more conventional works, Sillman has also managed to turn out a series of animated drawings made on iPhone and iPad apps. The three displayed here, book-ending an exhibition beautifully installed by ICA chief curator Helen Molesworth, are wry, captivating riffs on the artist's abiding interests: psychic gunk, solipsism, and the gorgeously vexing, oftentimes arousing problem of other people.

Sillman's work synthesizes improbable idioms. It has some of the verbal and graphic wit of Saul Steinberg, the cartoon-inspired clunkiness of Philip Guston or Carroll Dunham, and the effulgent color sense of Richard Diebenkorn and late 1950s-'60s Willem de Kooning.

If such a pedigree sounds all a bit masterly (not to say jarringly male), it's by no means a stretch. Sillman is in fact one of a cohort of painters — among them Dana Schutz, Charline von Heyl, and Albert Oehlen — who have lately made painting feel freshly urgent and alive, not only within the contemporary art world (which in itself is surprising) but within the culture at large.

But perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise? What other medium has so many resources, so much suppleness, and such a long history of complications, constraints, defeats, and dashed potential? What other medium, that is to say, can answer to our frustrated human predicament with such ancient, instinctive sympathy?

Right at the heart of Sillman's work is the question, simply put, of what counts as a shared predicament and what remains, by contrast, incommunicable. Sliding with ever more resourcefulness between abstract and figurative registers, her works are engaged in a game that corresponds uncannily to the endless to-and-fro between our social, sexual, and interior lives. (Love life, of course, falls somewhere in the middle, and Sillman does not fail to give it a face — even if that face has a very abstract look.)

"My work is always psychological," Sillman has said, "whether I want it to be or not." And elsewhere: "I like to see my paintings as a social act, a linguistic act, an attempt at conversation."

"Attempt" is the key word there. Like Matisse during World War I, endlessly turning back on his own images, purging them of referents, or like Cy Twombly, whose scribbles were so often illegible, crossed out, or erased, Sillman's conversations can feel at times like silent monologues. But that is part of their poignant beauty. Even as her lines hint at shapes or signs we struggle to read, her colors carry an emotional directness that is the equivalent of two fists clutching your collar.

In the process of introducing us to her talents in gouache, watercolor, oil paint, and iPhone app, the show's first two rooms contain several examples of an ongoing series called "Seating Charts." Mordant excoriations of social life in New York's art world, these text-heavy diagrams spell out the kinds of silent assessment we all instinctively make in the social arena.

One person is identified, for instance, as "Frustrated artist who still has her beautiful looks but who also has financial problems that keep her up at night. She can't reconcile her beauty with her difficult row to hoe." Another is summed up more

bluntly: “Guy who’s really a fraud and just there to suck up to the curator at the next table (keeps looking over . . .).”

Another “Seating Chart,” this one describing guests at a benefit dinner, is pithier still: “Strange rich woman with snazzy wardrobe and frizzy hair.” “Money guy — can’t wait to leave — keeps checking time — can’t remember if he fed the dog.” And “Plus one — only here by accident.”

The humor is sharp. But it goes beyond humor into a kind of pathos that runs all through Sillman’s work: the pathos of being unable to transpose our own thought bubbles into social life; the fraudulent feeling of having to operate continuously in two registers.

Or more than two. Sillman’s paintings address you above the neck and below the belt, and they also go straight to the gut. They are full of blurted sensuality, of striving, thwarted thought, and yet also, unexpectedly, of lyrical emotion.

A painting called “A Bird in the Hand,” for instance, can be read as a green stick figure extending a hand that holds a bird. But when you look again, you see Sillman has made three or four clumsy stabs at creating a bird shape, and that one of those attempts — a small, duck-like shape — seems to double as the green figure’s head. Thus we usher forth our best ideas.

Meanwhile, those abstract lozenges of royal purple call out to the soothing green . . .

Diagrams, which are an attempt to deal with the problem of how things relate to one another, appear again and again in Sillman’s work, whether the medium is oil, gouache, ink, or digital, and whether the image is abstract or figurative.

One memorable early painting (it rises above the speculative scrappiness of the others) is called “Me & Ugly Mountain.” Against a blank landscape, with distant trees on a hilly horizon and a blue sky, a disconsolate, cartoony figure drags along a giant pile-up of parti-colored abstract notations.

Does this giant sack of random crap represent the figure’s psyche? I assume so.

“Me & Ugly Mountain” is conventional in one sense: It’s a painting of a figure in a landscape. But it’s also a diagram. It’s about how two things, connected by a line, relate. (The answer? With tremendous difficulty, and with a second question tucked inside: Why are they apart in the first place?)

Around about 2005-06, Sillman really hit her stride as a painter. Color is a big part of the reason — and, as always, the hardest part to talk about.

These more recent pictures tend to leave a sense memory of musky pinks, livid oranges, soft yellows, and various hues of green. Acidic and sweet, in other words, with a touch of something alkaline. It’s a palette that recalls the vivid, figurative paintings of Alice Neel, or the more abstract pastoral paintings of de Kooning, with touches of screeching intensity — very 21st century! — thrown in.

In truth, though, Sillman’s colors are not so easy to pin down. Yellow-enriched greens give way to close-toned blues in “Nose” — a flat-out, pedal-to-the-floor masterpiece. Blacks give point to riotous orange, yellow, and pink (“Psychology Today”). And whole paintings turn sickly green and gray (“Fatso”).

Textures, too, change dramatically, not only from painting to painting but within each work. “Junker 1” is covered in an unpleasantly dry orange, the texture of crayon. “P & H” combines smooth saturated surfaces with wispy white overlays and roughly abraded infill.

All this variety and complexity is suggestive of thought itself, with its endless second-guessing, its surging, erotically charged advances, its tendency to tire, flop, and fall to the floor.

To express such rhythms, a painter may crave the tool of time — and that’s where Sillman’s animated drawings come in. Look out, in particular, for “Triscuits,” a 12-minute animation that leads a merry dance around the putative line between abstraction and figuration, and is filled with zinging snippets of text. (My favorite: “Meanwhile, I’m at the dean’s house thinking about frottage.”)

If I’ve made Sillman’s works sound clotted, hectic, and generally unsympathetic, that’s because I haven’t emphasized enough their strongest qualities. They are bright, witty, and ribald. Yes, they convey psychic strife. But they are big, confident, and sensuous works. In front of them, you feel joy and exuberance.

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