

# Amy Sillman by R. H. Quaytman

I don't remember when Amy and I first met—must have been in the mid '90s. However, I do remember that she saved my life by being one of the few artists who genuinely seemed to admire and enjoy what I was doing, at a time when my work was barely known.

The following dialogue typifies the discursive tug and pull—support and doubt, laughter and pricking annoyance—of our friendship, a friendship grounded in a mutual need and hunger to test what we are doing against a good strong argument. We seem to need each other's thinking. Or at least I need hers—I feel Amy's paintings the way I feel music. "How do you do

that?!!!!", I want to scream. It recently struck both of us that, when we talk, I am like her painting and she is like mine. Between our heads and our work we make a figure eight, or something like that.

For the past 15 years our mutual working lives have been inseparably intertwined. Sprouts from our opposing positions have taken root, and our connection has unquestionably fertilized the soil and stretched the horizon we struggle to sustain our thinking and painting in. Also, we love to dance, and I mean LOVE.

— R. H. QUAYTMAN



*A Shape that Stands Up and Listens*, 2012, gouache, charcoal, and chalk on paper, 30 x 22 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

R. H. QUAYTMAN Let's talk about your show coming up at ICA in Boston—so this is your first survey show?

AMY SILLMAN Yeah, it's the first big survey show. It's called *one lump or two*.

RQ I find that doing a museum show stops you in time. And, ugh, how could you ever think about painting another painting again? But you have to, and you do.

AS I've noticed that sometimes the next show after someone's survey show is fantastic—because all of that work has been thoroughly seen and digested—and they can move on to what they really meant. Anyway, yeah, the ICA show includes work from the '80s!

RQ See, to me that would just be so hard to show.

AS It is terribly embarrassing. I called Helen Molesworth, the curator, at one point and said that I hated the first two rooms worth of work.

RQ Are you doing it chronologically?

AS Mostly chronologically, but we are including a whole spectrum of funny side stuff as well—so, we're hanging the paintings chronologically with non-chronological videos and zines and cartoons. You know, I've been doing cartoons and stuff like that forever, it's just that I didn't think of putting them into my painting shows until 2009.

RQ And how did that happen?

AS Well, I went to Berlin where I had a show in 2009 and I thought I needed a kind of translator. So I wrote an essay, I put some cartoons and some jokes in,



*Untitled, 2012, oil on canvas, 51 × 49 inches.*

and it turned into a zine. People came up to me afterwards and said the exact thing that I'd always wanted to hear, which was, "I don't usually really like painting, but the zine made me see where you are coming from." And I was like, wow, did I just blow a couple of decades *not* making these part of my painting shows?

**RQ** Do you think that's actually true?

**AS** Yeah, I think I was so earnestly trying to learn how to paint all those years. Now I realize I should have acted differently all along, because I have this fairly critical, analytical way of thinking—

**RQ** You really do. I mean, that's our joke, that my paintings need your brain . . .

**AS** And my paintings need your brain . . .

**RQ** We need to switch.

**AS** Totally. Or we just say, "I can understand your work."

**RQ** My paintings have the look of high intellectual rigor, but they are based in the emotional and the instinctual—

**AS** —and even the capricious.

**RQ** You not only understand other

languages, but you also understand color theory, history, and philosophy much more rigorously than I do.

**AS** Well, I don't know about that. I didn't exactly take the royal road to critique. I didn't study academically, and I only started reading a lot of theory when I was older. But I did have the same attitude all those critical thinkers had, which was basically: fuck you. Only my fuck-you attitude was more whimsical—more of a heh-heh than a critique kind of thing.

**RQ** I definitely have the sense that no matter what your education was, these paintings would be what they are today.

AS I grew up in the Midwest, kind of dorky. You're more sophisticated than I am because you grew up in New York with artist parents, and then you studied in France at the Institute [Institut des Hautes Études]. However, it is quite obvious that you also do love pictures.

RQ I really do.

AS So I'm always interested in your conceptual method of making relations between family, history, form, picture-making—you know, object. Your relations, and your specific way in and out of those relations, are different from mine, but maybe we have a funny parallel.

RQ Well, I think we're both interested in almost the cliché of painting, like (*snap-ping fingers*) the first read, the surface. I am interested in a slow reading and I'm interested in the fast reading of a painting too.

AS I would say the key difference between us, which accounts for everything, is that my initial gesture is calligraphic and yours is photographic.

RQ Well, I do paint, but I paint very, very small, with tiny brushes.

AS Even if you paint with little brushes, the details make themselves into a picture while mine make themselves into letters. What I'm doing is really writing.

RQ But all those things that you say about your humor and your insecurity about your education or a lack of criticality—on the surface, these paintings are saying also exactly that.

AS They're saying that they're dumb?

RQ Not dumb, but more, um, rude and aware.

AS Rude? That's good. Well, you know, they're casual.

RQ This big new one has got some anger in it for sure.

AS They're angry? Huh. Well, along with the notion of the calligraphic, I'm also mostly interested in mood and in time. What I learned from doing a survey show is that the main thing I've been doing all along is making one thing change into another thing. A series of appearances and then negations. And that's pretty much it.



*Untitled, 2013, oil on canvas, 49 × 51 inches.*

RQ That's really true. That's why you love doing those little animations.

AS Yeah, that's it. I felt our connection especially since I first saw that show you did at the Queens Museum in 2001, with all the paintings that went around the room in a horizontal sequence, accumulating meaning as they slid along the wall from left to right, punning "the sun, the son!" I was also always totally interested in the horizon line as both a spatial and a time line. My iPhone movies allowed me to open up the layers of imagery in my paintings, to expand on the time and changes buried underneath.

RQ I've been thinking about square paintings lately. These over here are almost square, but not quite, right?

AS Yeah, not quite. These are all based on the dimensions of a meter by a yard.

RQ I like it when a painting asserts that there is no top or bottom—that the only orientation would be on a table or **a flat surface**. I realize I'm doing that a lot unconsciously. When installing the paintings in a space, I often turn them all the way around or switch them.

AS Oh. I didn't know that.

RQ Well, they're made flat, especially if they're silkscreens, so they could be in any direction.

AS That's so interesting. But are they like monitors? Flatness is different once you have a screen.

RQ With silkscreen it's a pull in one particular direction, but that often doesn't relate to any necessary orientation. The way I paint is the way I make the silkscreens—instinctually and in the moment.

AS But you come to them with images in mind?

RQ Yeah I have screens, but then I decide on the color and how to pull it and use the mistakes and everything.

AS I make these on the floor. So it is the same.

RQ These two very much have tops and bottoms.

AS Yes, but the orientation is changeable. I have these sequences of snapshots that

## A painting can be calculatedly deceptive. It doesn't lie but it's deceptive.

I keep as a record of the direction and the history of the paintings. The parts underneath might go any which way, though **each has a certain direction**, and then often I turn them upside down.

RQ Isn't this a bottle?

AS Yeah, but when it started it wasn't anything. Then I turned it and it looked like bottles on a shelf. Then I turned it sideways again and it became a person and a mitt, and then it became a phallus.

RQ (*laughter*) That's hilarious. How often does it become a person?

AS It's basically always a figure—an extremely bad indication of my ability to be in a relationship, because the process is very destructive. You know, Isabelle Graw has this critique of anthropomorphism in sculpture and painting. I think that, for her, it is a myth that the object is alive and tells you what to do—

RQ That's not a myth!

AS I don't think it's a myth, either. But it was helpful to hear everyone's talk when **the three of us** were all speaking at Harvard recently. I realized all of a sudden that the personification that Isabelle criticizes is not the one that I'm dealing with while I'm working—which is a negative one, not the mythic, glorious or marvelous incarnation—

RQ Yeah, I agree.

AS The work becomes a figure against which you struggle.

RQ The second you do anything to it, it becomes a living thing in opposition to you. And then it's a huge argument and a problem, and it always takes over.

AS You have that experience too, even though you make work with photographs. Maybe even more so because the figure in your work is a very specific person, whom you've posed and described—whereas I can totally disguise my figures.

RQ Well, I've done disguised vaginas and stuff. (*laughter*) I mean, you say a phallus appears, with me a vagina always appears.

AS I get all kinds of body parts: eyes, hands, boobs. I was pleased when

someone from down the hall came into my studio and said, "I like the big purple boob."

RQ I know you really like those kinds of words: boob, or lump—sort of degraded, rude words. Hence the title of your show, *one lump or two*.

AS I do enjoy shabbiness.

RQ What is shabby in your paintings?

AS Well, they're all cut up, and dirty, and the edges are bad. I drag them around the floor. I mean, I'm careful about the workmanship in a sort of purposeful, immediate way—I don't want to crack the surfaces or anything. But I don't care for them as fetishized commodity objects—I treat them really poorly, considering that they're so expensive. I think the expense irritates me and that's why I do that.

RQ But the pristine would be in contradiction to their spirit—

AS Well, I guess that's one of the only things I can have an assistant do: help me clean up. What else would they do? Well, actually my beloved assistant Rebecca Watson Horn helped me a lot with the production of my zines. But she wouldn't make the same jokes as I would.

RQ Paintings always tell the truth, because they do have their own lives outside of you. If it were just us, we'd be lying constantly.

AS (*laughter*) Could a painting lie?

RQ I don't think it can, not if you're a good viewer.

AS But as a good painter, could you make a painting that lied?

RQ I don't think so—that in itself would be telling the truth.

AS Now of course I want to make a lying painting.

RQ I think you can only discuss the position of the viewer.

AS: You can disguise things though. A painting can be calculatedly deceptive. It doesn't lie but it's deceptive.

RQ How?

AS Well, first of all the notion of *this should be perspective* is a deception.

RQ But it's an exact reproduction of how our vision works.

AS Not at all, because it doesn't account for peripheral vision, for one thing.

RQ I recently read that Eastern perspective is the inverse of Western perspective. It hadn't occurred to me.

AS You mean it comes forward?

RQ Yeah. I just never thought of it so simply and clearly as that.

AS It makes sense when you look at certain Japanese screens and Chinese paintings. I just saw one the other day at the Barnes Foundation and it was so obviously inverted in relation to all the other paintings in the collection.

RQ There is a hierarchy of legibility.

AS Perspective is one trick of painting, but another one is trying to evoke light. And the deception that interests me the most is making something hard look easy, which is what Matisse did.

RQ But that's because he was so skilled at understanding when it's saying something true on its own—after he'd done the work. He knew how to stop or how to see something youthfully true, or youthfully honest and real.

AS Well, maybe a painting is both a very deceptive thing and a very transparent reality.

RQ It's very transparent. I guess that's what I'm trying to say—it is a truth without the artist.

AS I don't know if I understand that idea of the truth.

RQ I don't know if I understand it either. I think it's something weak and precise at the same time.

Paintings now tend to be read as super-flat computer images and there is a question of what it is going to look like on-screen, once you have access to the picture in that way. That's why I think

painting is having such a comeback. It's in a narcissistic relationship with the computer screen—

AS But aside from commodity and computer screens, paintings—or paintings like mine, I guess—arise at the moment when bodies are full of apprehension. Paintings are also weird-looking things, things that are trying to speak or are touched. It's true, most people don't touch them that much but, you know, our students do.

RQ Oh, yeah.

AS Part of the goodness of art school is **sitting** around and **talking** about the object all the time. I think at Bard we talk about that more than at a lot of other places.

RQ Really?

AS Well, I think (but I know this is not the European model) that a good art school is one where you actually talk about the way that the object is made. To understand the thing, you have to look at it in real life.

RQ Oh, yeah. It has to be in a space and you have to be in front of it.

AS But it also needs a receptive, curious viewer.

RQ I think that the Internet places a too-heavy demand on the appearance of the painting, its type and its cliché.

AS Maybe like on OKCupid.

RQ Exactly. OKCupid for painting.

AS People who don't put their profile pictures up don't get dates. (*laughter*)

RQ There is an aspect I think about in terms of your work that is related to this issue, which is that it looks like abstract expressionism—

AS But it ain't abstract expressionism. That's my worst nightmare!

RQ Why?

AS Because I woke up after 20 years of pleasant slumber and was like, "Oh shit, I am an easel painter."

RQ But easel painting wasn't abstract expressionism! I'm the easel painter.

AS Well, I'm conflating the two things, but I mean, I wanted to learn about both abstract expressionism and the critique of easel painting—not because I wanted to emulate them, but because I didn't like them. (*laughter*) And what is the biggest glitch for you? Your biggest nightmare?

RQ The biggest glitch, which is maybe a good thing, is that my paintings are sold as if they are paintings, although sometimes they aren't really paintings per se, in the traditional sense. Often, they're props for installations and don't function like singular paintings usually do.

AS But they are paintings?

RQ (*whispering*) I don't know. That's the thing, I mean sometimes obviously they are, but sometimes it appears that they're not.

AS So in a sequence of your works, one might actually be a painting, and the next one might not?

RQ The best thing it's doing is changing the painting next to it, instead of being itself.

AS That's one of the reasons that I feel an affinity for your work.

RQ Because we are both dealing with sequences.

AS It's about turning the page, contradicting the page before it. But then the problem is, if somebody buys one and puts that in their house. What if they're plucked out of the sequence? And the contradiction includes oneself: all artists I love want to figure out how *not* to make the thing that they're known to make.

RQ How did this particular painting start?

AS This fast one?

RQ Yeah, what was the first shape?

AS It was that beige-y diagonal. I think the next one was the ochre thing that comes right over the bottom tip of it, and then the next thing was the brown blob, then that bright orange blur, and then there was some of the grey stuff, and then the last thing was that acid, see-through green, and I liked immediately the way it made that right-hand tip of that orange thing look grey. And I was like, "Oh, it's done!"

RQ I think it would be beautiful to see a series of this **starting** with the pink rectangle and then stop at the bottom blob and then—



*Untitled (Fast painting 2), 2013, oil on canvas, 66 x 75 inches.*



*A Shape that Stands Up and Listens 26, 2012, gouache, charcoal, and chalk on paper, 30 x 22 inches.*

**AS** You mean do it again and again? That's how I make my animations, I guess.

**RQ** I like it.

**AS** These are my new collages, cut paper and chalk and you can see through the paper to the back—the front paper is black and white and the back is color. It's following the logic of the animations to make these very fast, physical drawings.

**RQ** That's a good idea. It would be so cool if you just had a phone app too, for your process.

**AS** That's a great idea. I don't know how to do it though.

**RQ** Whether your works are fast or slow, they are interior scenes, not still-lives and not landscapes. People are in them.

**AS** You have a really good eye—these collages *are* interiors, they are based on rooms. The assignment was to draw a room as fast as I could, a room in which I remembered feeling shame.

**RQ** What do you mean by assignment?

**AS** The assignment to myself. The starting point was shame. I had to remember a feeling that I couldn't get rid of, which quickly became a room. And they were all based on palpable—

**RQ** (*yelling*) Ah!



*A Shape that Stands Up and Listens 57, 2012, gouache, charcoal, and chalk on paper, 30 x 22 inches.*

**AS** —memories of feeling embarrassed.

**RQ** Are those beds? (*laughter*)

**AS** Yes, many of them are.

**RQ** Thank God I'm not giving that assignment to myself.

**AS** I felt a breakthrough (*eating a cracker*). I felt liberated; it was great. It was just like fast psychoanalysis: I got to the symptom, through the symptom, and at the end I was the symptom.

**RQ** That's exactly why you can't see it when you're making it.

**AS** Yeah, you're blind to it. But then it comes out in all these ways. I understood

the connections between the urge and the object with these "shame" drawings. Speed really helped me.

**RQ** I think you should make really slick, speedy surfaces. Or even paint on metal.

**AS** So there is no resistance whatsoever, yeah—

**RQ** —paint would just slide on fast.

**AS** That would be a bit like those surfaces that Sue Williams made in the '90s, they were just toothless, perfectly slick, smooth surfaces for those dirty images.

**RQ** Would it be closer to the way you're making the drawings on the iPad?

AS Yes, the digital allows me a way to go fast. I need to go faster and faster—I don't have much time left.

RQ While I was in Rome I saw all these old paintings painted on copper. And I learned a technique in Venice in my hotel room, which had a little sign to say that the walls here were made in this particular way, using this technique, and I was like, "Note to self."

AS Note to self. That's the reason to travel. Hey, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but I'm curious about how you look at these geometric-type paintings here. when I have you in my studio, I think of Harvey, your father, too.

RQ Well, Harvey and I would be saying, "Get out the ruler and the tape, make a square, make a rectangle." That's a thing I got from my father—there has to be geometry. In a sense I get nervous without the tool.

AS So does it look too sloppy to you when you see something like this painting? Does it bother you that it asserts those kinds of geometric spaces, but without any precision?

RQ Well, I notice it a lot. It's not that it bothers me, but it's the thing that I absolutely couldn't do. Not wouldn't, but couldn't. When I was young, I would try and it would just upset me.

AS It would upset you to make something imprecise?

RQ Yeah. I don't know why. Most aspects of painting don't do that to me, but I did inherit a thing about the straight edge and the sort of parallel-ness, from my father, and it is my prejudice. But do you ever do a straight rectangle, ever?

AS I don't—but you know, it was my job for 12 years to prepare perfect lines. I worked at magazines doing paste-ups and mechanicals, working with tiny rapidographs, drawing all the perfect squares around the photos that are now put down in an instant with a computer program. I was hired for my ability to be ultra-precise! But to me, this painting is a cartoon of a geometric painting. It's the desire for that situation, without the patience. I'm rigorously precise when it comes to writing, spelling, grammar . . . I'm really precise with language, I'm completely imprecise with my hand.

RQ I think your work is always very much asserting that it is hand-drawn.

AS You have much more trust and belief in the model of the eye, and its relation to the ideal. You imagine an ideal of something, and an ideal viewer to receive it.

RQ That's true.

AS I have no ideal.

RQ I'm Platonic. I thought, I'm just going to make a painting like the Platonic idea of a painting.

AS It's square. The ideal.

RQ If you thought of painting in your head what would it be? This!

AS Right, the iconic. If you are Plato then maybe I'm more Aristotle.

RQ I want to be Aristotle but sadly I'm Plato. Lately I'm reading Diogenes.

AS Me too!

RQ Oh my God! (*laughter*)

AS He is my beloved!

RQ You *are* Diogenes, I have to say.

AS I am obsessed with Diogenes. You know how I got into it? Because when Tom McEvilley died, I thought, How come I never read much of his work? So the first thing I found **by him** was a fantastic essay on Diogenes. And then **I read** *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, his big book on Greek and Roman culture and **how** it **was** more "impure" than it **was** cut out to be—that in actuality, ancient thought was forged from theologies and cultures from both East and West. I love the idea that even at our supposed highest point, in antiquity, we actually lived in a mixed bag.

RQ Diogenes is so rude and funny. He was so rude to Socrates.

AS Yeah, "Get out of my light!" Oh, he said that to Alexander the Great. Then there's the famous anecdote about Diogenes going into the agora and holding up a plucked chicken to mock Plato's statement that man was a featherless biped—

RQ —which reminds me, you have a lot of feet in your paintings.

AS Probably because I have been struggling with a bad left foot.

RQ But I think it's something more: there is something unacceptable about the foot.

AS Isn't it strange that I'm interested in the hand and the foot? Well, it's the opposite of the brain.

RQ The foot is the anti-brain and it's also this kind of appendage that's very hard to make beautiful. That's why we fetishize about shoes—

AS I can't wear nice shoes anymore because I have this arthritic foot. There's this one kind of really fancy orthotic shoe that's molded to your foot screaming, "I'm disabled."

RQ Oh, the one with the lace on the side?

AS Yes, that. I'm thinking of getting that.

RQ Totally. You should.

AS But, how does Diogenes come into your work?

RQ One of the images I used for this show at the Pompidou, *Une leçon d'histoire! A qui cette lanterne?* is this picture of a lantern I found which has two little angels. First I thought it was a hidden picture, and **that I'd** find the person in it, but I couldn't find one, but then I wondered if it might be Diogenes—

AS I'm sure it was Diogenes with his lamp. I have a facsimile edition of this art book that Tom McEvilley made with Peter Koch, called *Diogenes: Defictions*. He wrote out these stories that were like maledictions, which Diogenes wrote as curses, or hexes.

RQ And he was such a pain in the ass, obviously.

AS Oh, he is so mean.

RQ I would say that your paintings are sort of Diogenes-que—how Diogenes would respond to the Platonic solid.

AS Oh, thank you. That's the highest compliment that could ever be made. I do like the idea of being funny, because then it means you're smart but not too fancy—

RQ —because you're on the side of the audience.



*Untitled, 2013, oil on canvas, 49 × 51 inches.*

AS Yeah, you're on the side of the foot, and the not-knowing. Basically doesn't everyone really fear being an idiot? Like at that symposium when all the art historians were secretly in their hotel rooms fearing that *they* were idiots.

RQ Oh my God, I loved that the art historians were as nervous, if not more than the artists were.

AS Yeah, they were terrified.

RQ Well, Diogenes would say they were right. They are an idiot. *(laughter)*

AS That should be the name of a show: They are an idiot. They *is* an idiot.

RQ But, you know, it's hard to maintain that all the time.

AS There's this amazing story, when Diogenes was sold into slavery, he said—

RQ —“I want to be a master.”

AS Yes! He told the slave auctioneer to ask, “Who wants to buy a master?”

RQ It's bizarre that we both are reading Diogenes now. Come on, that's weird.

AS I'm always interested in a tragic clown.

RQ But it is dangerous with humor to get cheerful.

AS What's the danger?

RQ Um, the danger is dislocation from the world.

AS That you look like an idiot.

RQ Or like a naïve.

AS Naïve, right. That could be a problem with my work—though there is a freedom in being naïve. You can learn a lot from being naïve. But I guess then you wake up from that naïveté, and you're like, “Get with the program.”