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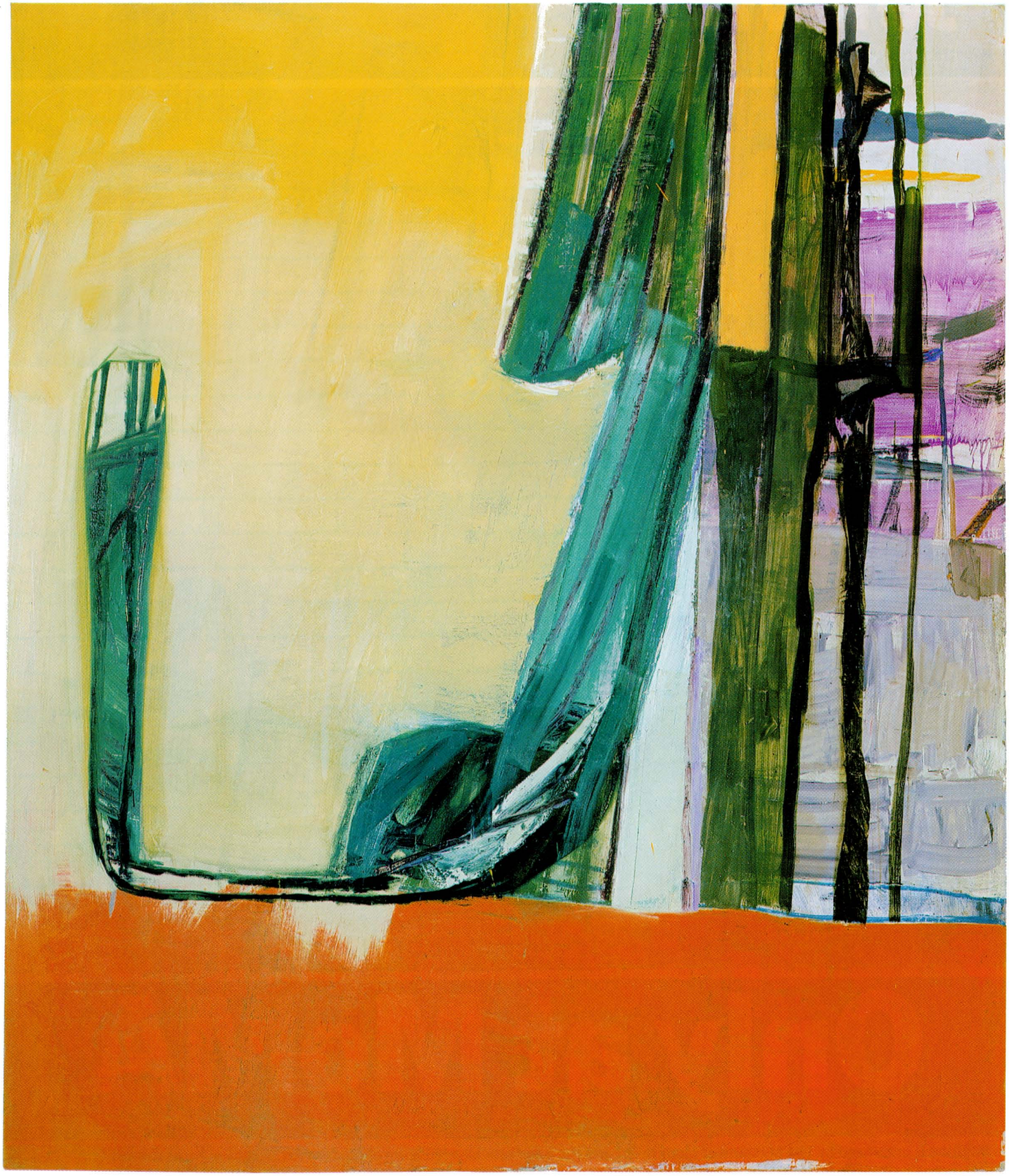


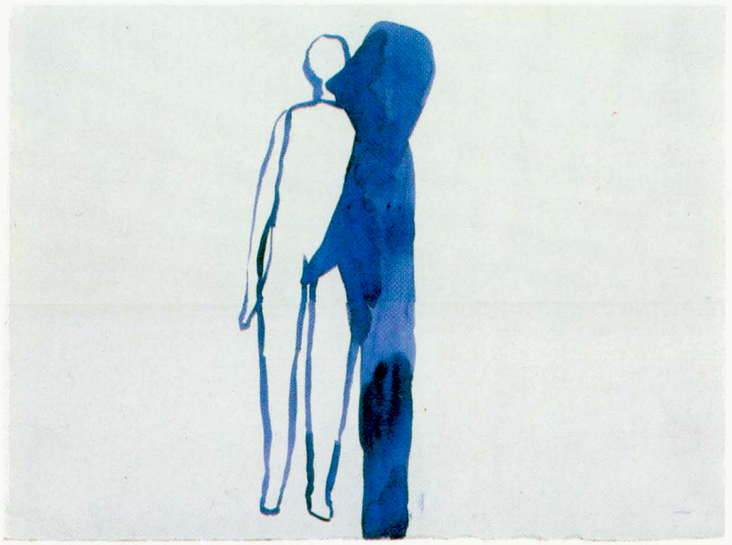
Amy Sillman:
The Elephant in the Painting

LINDA NORDEN

The elephant in the room: a phrase that means something is present but invisible, determinative but denied. In painter Amy Sillman's groundbreaking exhibition at New York's Sikkema Jenkins & Co. gallery last spring, the idiom served as the loaded title of what is in retrospect one of her key works—a large and, for Sillman, uncharacteristically empty painting. Densely layered but sparingly drawn, the canvas features two perpendicular blocks of color—opaque apricot in the canvas's lower portion and, atop that, a rectangle of gradated yellow—that describe a space containing little more than what seems a slumping, implausibly green elephant trunk. In the manner of Cy Twombly's graffitied penis-breast notations, however, this appendage also reads alternately as a female nude (seen in profile) and as something tumescently phallic. Significantly, this figure casts a shadow that partially but ominously occludes a sliver of translucent, pale purple and gray landscape, barely visible on the right.

"The elephant in the room," Sillman insists when I ask her about the picture, "is sex." The reply is perhaps not surprising, given her public statements elsewhere that the Sikkema Jenkins show was, in fact, entirely "about sex" and, further, given that Sillman, like many of her cohorts, frequently seizes in her imagery on the sometimes tantalizing, always obdurate *there*-ness of sex in contemporary culture. But unlike most of her cohorts, she seizes not so much on the use and abuse of sex or on its fetishized power. Rather, her subject is usually something more personal, unwieldy, elusive, and also disarmingly silly—something that rarely stands still. And so while we might be willing to acknowledge that the elephant in the *room* is sex, we must also reflect on whether the elephant in the *painting* is something else. As writer and critic Wayne Koestenbaum recently observed, Sillman is someone who "redefines awkwardness—retools it, so it resembles authentic occasion." Koestenbaum, correctly I think, homes in on the fact that in this

Opposite page: **Amy Sillman, *The Elephant in the Room*, 2006,** oil on canvas, 80 x 69".



Opposite page: **Amy Sillman, *Down & Out*, 2006**, oil on canvas, 72 x 84".
This page: **Amy Sillman, *Untitled 11*, 2006**, gouache on paper, 11 x 15".

artist's work, awkwardness, sexual or otherwise, is the imperative subject, the unchanging given. Without discounting Sillman's own statements about *Elephant*, one might, in this light, posit the elephant as awkwardness itself—and Sillman seems to know that this elephant is here to stay.

It is worth noting that Koestenbaum's words on Sillman's art appeared in a volume devoted to her works on paper, since drawing—both in and of itself and, often, as a precursor to painting—is a vital and revealing part of her practice. While the artist has said that her work in the medium comprises "handwriting in a language that isn't language yet," it is also where she allows herself a straighter, more overt rendering of her themes. Take, for instance, an untitled 2006 drawing (one of my personal favorites) that seems a darkly comic riff on the old vaudeville standard "Me and My Shadow." The work shows an androgynous, faceless figure, rendered only as a blue outline and nearly engulfed by a second figure, this one solid blue, bigger than the first, and standing in an attitude somewhere between lewd solicitousness (its arm is extended toward the first figure's crotch) and menace. The image pushes the contrast between painted shape and liminal line about as far as an image can, depicting an embrace that is at once violating and palpably, powerfully affectionate. At the same time, the shadow's near eclipsing of the figure hints at—and prefigures—the interaction and opposition between drawing and painting that Sillman has created in her work more generally. For example, among the canvases made around the same time as *The Elephant in the Room*, *Untitled (Little Elephant)*, 2005, proposes a dynamic equivalence between drawing and painting, featuring large-scale sketches that surprise the viewer by their very appearance on paint. In conversation, Sillman has described the drawing here as "cute," contrasting the ease with which she inserted the drawing into the painting with the painful slowness of the painting proper. Pertinent to our understanding of her "awkwardness," she has also said she relishes "the way the drawing makes you embarrassed, seeming like a Calder toy invading a murky, gnarly ground—the way the drawing, that is, makes a joke of the painting." Or the way it doesn't, we might answer. If the shadow can be thought of as a sign of Sillman's awkwardness—as it intimates, with the figure, a state of being oneself and not oneself, and even a kind of psychic dissociation—then the laughter it causes is essential to the seriousness of the experience conveyed in her painting, and to our grasping it.

It is as if, to paraphrase Mallarmé, everything depends on Sillman's ability to convey not experience but its shadow—and the shadow of experience in her most recent work runs long, at least to the beginning of this decade. Between 2000 and 2002, Sillman executed two series of drawings of particular importance to her evolution, "Long Drawing," 2000, and "Letters from Texas," 2002. In both, she systematically broke down her drawn and painted imagery in order to better understand her process. Yet the drawings—with their battery of psychological imagery and figurative explorations of twinning or coupling, as well as of what Sillman calls "illogical" body parts—seem to amount to a self-analysis that is about much more than the parsing of motifs. In a clear sense, these works comprised parallel efforts to sort out both art-life and drawing-painting divides, and this doubled endeavor has been evident in Sillman's practice since.

Indeed, Sillman has said that she "aspire[s] to the condition of painting," a statement whose real significance has become clear only gradually, through her efforts to rethink critical matrices—of form versus content, abstraction versus representation, and expression versus reaction—by impressing personal experience on the site of painting, without the mediation of photography, irony, or any conceptual bracketing. In this vein, it might be said that Sillman has served for some years now as the canary in the New York painting mine, sniffing out spaces and painterly options on behalf of those who would keep at a safe remove. Her fearless, tenacious pursuit of a painting that might accurately register the discomfort, incoherence, and absurdity that can characterize painterly experience—and experience in general—has long made her a local hero, beloved by colleagues. But such readiness to dirty her hands and her palette, to dive into the wreck and continually come up painting, also goes some way toward explaining her increasingly influential place among younger painters in both New York and Los Angeles, where she regularly shows, and her growing currency even among contingents of European painters. (Looking to other disciplines for explanation, it is tempting to see a correlation between the appeal of her work and the resurgence of interest in documentary film.) Simply put, Sillman is obviously avoiding the no-man's-land of collegial disinterest in which "midcareer" painters often find themselves.

Nevertheless, the artist's recent exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins merits special consideration within this narrative. For while the show was widely recognized as a turning point for Sillman—and, beyond garnering "best of" status on numerous year-end polls, was even considered by many to mark a sea change in painting today—this recognition seems merely to have amplified what artist David Humphrey (writing for *Bomb* in 2000) succinctly described as the "peculiar challenge" posed by Sillman's "hybrid," "idiosyncratic" imagery. In other words, one unanticipated development in the show's wake has been a gap revealed between Sillman's "breakthrough" paintings and the critical terms enlisted to describe her achievement—suggesting that a reconsideration of the exhibition might be valuable not only for our assessment of Sillman's

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practice but also for our understanding of the contemporary context for painting more generally.

Seeking to define the sea change intimated by Sillman's work, or just to elucidate the paintings' impact, critics worked hard. They credited her greater confidence and clarity of brushwork, "optical aggressiveness," balance between "unbridled gesture and restraint," and ability to "leaven 'pure paint' with fragments of content." However apt, such phrasings indicate the degree to which Sillman's work is read in past-tense terms—as if her practice amounts to a lovably messy retrieval of strategies gleaned from Guston, Diebenkorn, or Bacon, from Mitchell or de Kooning. (All of these precedents are relevant, like the critical approbations cited above, but they are merely part of the picture.) Other critics gravitated to Sillman's use of color—perhaps a more promising object of consideration, since it has historically been her painting's most salient affective attribute. (As Helen Molesworth observed in the catalogue accompanying the artist's 2002 show at Dartmouth College's Hopkins Center, "The first thing one notices about Amy Sillman's paintings is their palette.") Certainly, the attention was warranted here, because her implementation of color had obviously undergone a major shift. At the beginning of this decade, Sillman was known for light, cheery, vaguely acidic tones, which were aptly described by Molesworth as conveying "an uneasy confluence of nature, domesticity, and the language of kitsch"—colors, in other words, that should have been rebarbative but, in Sillman's hands, somehow were not. At Sikkema Jenkins, color had become more intense, less tentative—but also seemed more arbitrary, in the sense that "palette" no longer appeared to index any one set of associations (e.g., nature, domesticity, kitsch). Like everything else in the recent work—for example, the trunklike yet not trunklike form in *The Elephant in the Room*—color serves less as signifier than as one more arena within which Sillman's painterly actions unfold, and one more device with which she structures imagery.

Yet dwelling on palette still seems symptomatic of that larger critical impasse, attributable, I think, to a lingering anthropomorphizing urge among her critics. (Recall that writers contemplating her earlier work have said that Sillman's colors are "complex," that they "befriend us" and "*mean* themselves.") Precisely the same kinds of associations have led critics to their overuse of the rhetoric of expressionism in general, and Abstract Expressionism in particular. Call it the Abstract Expressionist juggernaut: the inability to read the aggressive brushwork, intensified color, and psychosexual charge so conspicuous in Sillman's new paintings as anything but some AbEx vestige, with the subsequent implication that the artist's figuration and use of representational elements (the stray arms, fingers, and phallic projections that push their way out of varied shapes and planes of color) are somehow vestigial, incidental to the main formal event. Sillman's example (I think also of such other painting "canaries" as Cecily Brown and Brice Marden) only reminds us just how far afield we have to go these days to find terms that apply to any artistic practice that's clearly *not* postmodern, except perhaps in the most general, default sense of the word. This casting about typically points backward. Sillman critics, at any rate, have tended to follow a recursive path, abetted by her work's assertion of a deeply subjective quality that reads as something closer to a modernist notion of the self than a postmodern performance of the self; by its earnest, though savvy, skirting of irony and the easy distancing that comes with it; and by Sillman's unabashed appreciation of modernist painting—a corpus she seems to have internalized like some higher-order species recapitulating its ontogeny. These critical red herrings have served as sticking points for Sillman skeptics, while encouraging the mostly belletristic appreciations that dominate writing on her art. In short, while there is a growing sense that Sillman is an avatar of a new order of painting, the language needed to describe this new order has yet to be formulated.

However, if we are so faced with a problem of absence, a lacuna, then one of Sillman's own statements implies that our way out of this impasse may actually lie in embracing such "negative space." Explaining why she insists on making paintings entirely by herself, without the aid of assistants, Sillman says, "You can ask someone else to paint something, but you can't ask them to unpaint it. Painting your own painting allows you to paint your doubt." This telling elaboration casts a different light on her working process: on how she insistently retains some semblance of representation via drawing, but only while continually playing her painting over, around, and against that drawing—erasing, occluding, and eclipsing, almost but never entirely, the things she depicts. For all their action and expressivity, in other words, the paintings are not Abstract Expressionist, or even precisely expressionist (if anything, they constitute a kind of negation of expressionism or an expressionism in reverse); neither are they about capturing any emanations of the unconscious. Rather, her canvases comprise constructive erasure, becoming as much about "unpainting" as painting. And they register Sillman's "doubt" not only about feelings, the personal and subjective, but about the conventions of painting—a doubt evidenced by her jettisoning of isolated affective components and narrative incidents

Amy Sillman, *Untitled*, 2005, gouache and collage on paper, 22 x 30".

and by her assertion of first-hand experience in a manner that finesses the abstraction-representation divide.

To better grasp both the nature of Sillman's doubt and how it figures into her practice, it might make sense first to go back to the source—that is, to the works on paper that play such a significant role in the realization of her works on canvas. Some months after the Sikkema exhibition, I looked at a number of collages at the gallery, most of them made from the remains of a group of "dirty drawings" Sillman produced in 2005 for artists Nicole Eisenman and A. L. Steiner's one-off magazine *Ridykeulous*. They were terrific: sexy, smart, sad, and bitterly hilarious. Sillman's birds, boats, and nests—all cannibalized from her earlier drawings—were joined here by bunnies and boobs. In one collage, a brown-haired girl's ballistic nipples echo the shape of what seems a pyre (in which she sits like Joan of Arc), as well as that of the clump of sticklike grasses growing up around a Pinocchio-nosed, long-armed male nearby. In another work, featuring two "love birds," there is a remarkable rhyme of triangles: A bodacious white one in the upper right corner mimics the one formed by a penciled pair of bare legs sprouting out from under the love nest. Yet all these elements also made physical—as in, matter-of-factly material—the dynamic relationship between painting and drawing I have alluded to above. In fact, everything about these collages seemed newly concrete. The drawing, for all its richly metamorphic animation, was pointedly precise, more caricatural than blithely cartoonish (which is to say, apparently as rooted in fact as in fantasy); interacting with this figuration were sharp-edged fragments of meticulously placed paper and isolated strokes of pure pigment. The degree of control packed into these modestly scaled collages impressed me on a purely formal level. It also forced a certain distance—but, importantly, not an ironic one. This distance was, rather, emotional, as well as cerebral. I recalled Sillman's anecdote about fellow painter Terry Winters: Asked whether he thought irony important to his art, he answered, "I prefer the absurd." But my urge to laugh and cry as I viewed Sillman's imagery also reminded me of the response that Eisenman's excruciatingly personal and caustic imagery arouses and, less predictably, of my own response to Nan Goldin's earliest color pictures, in which the exquisiteness of the color made the audacity of the voyeurism, and the pain of Goldin's detachment from the intimacy she so closely observed, almost unbearable. Looking at the collages, I found that I wanted to contrast Goldin's photographic "I'll be your mirror" with Sillman's painterly "invitation." Or rather, I wanted to pursue further the character of Sillman's remove.

My sense that the material nature of the collages was somehow enmeshed in this mysterious detachment seemed to find confirmation during a recent studio visit with Sillman. Speaking plainly of recent endeavors to make her painting more concrete, the artist explained that she is interested in painting "nouns" right now: "people, places, and things." By way of example, she showed me a continuing series of untitled works, begun last summer, that might be collectively referred to as "couples drawings": For this Goldin-esque project, the artist asks friends if she might draw them lying in bed with their partners. Since Sillman started the series, the works have unfolded as both "direct" drawings and "memory" drawings (each made shortly after a posing session), although in either case there is an empirical directness: They are observed, "from life." (Indeed, she says that the series evolved from a desire to hone her rendering of intertwined hands.) Sillman, however, points to a more pivotal development, saying that in continuing the drawings, she has realized she is excluded from the intimacy of the posing couples, a comment underscoring the fact that to conceptualize something as a "noun" is, after all, to distance oneself from it, removing it from the flux of the world and placing it in the category of linguistic abstraction.

For all their action and expressivity, Sillman's paintings are not precisely expressionist. If anything, they constitute a kind of expressionism in reverse, comprising constructive erasure and becoming as much about "unpainting" as painting.

Curiously, Donald Judd's efforts to account for the impact of Claes Oldenburg's "specific objects," in particular his hamburger sculpture—an impact Judd insisted had nothing to do with what the object appeared to represent—come closer than anything I've read to a description of how Sillman's recent collages and paintings operate affectively. "The real or usual anthropomorphism," says Judd,

> is the appearance of human feelings in things that are inanimate or not human, usually as if those feelings are the essential nature of the thing described. Oldenburg's pieces have nothing to do with the objects they're like. . . . The pieces have only the emotion read into the objects. . . . Anyone particularly interested in objects in the past, Chardin, Cézanne or later Morandi, believed that the things themselves had a reality that could be understood and shown. This belief came from rationalistic philosophy and through that from religion.*

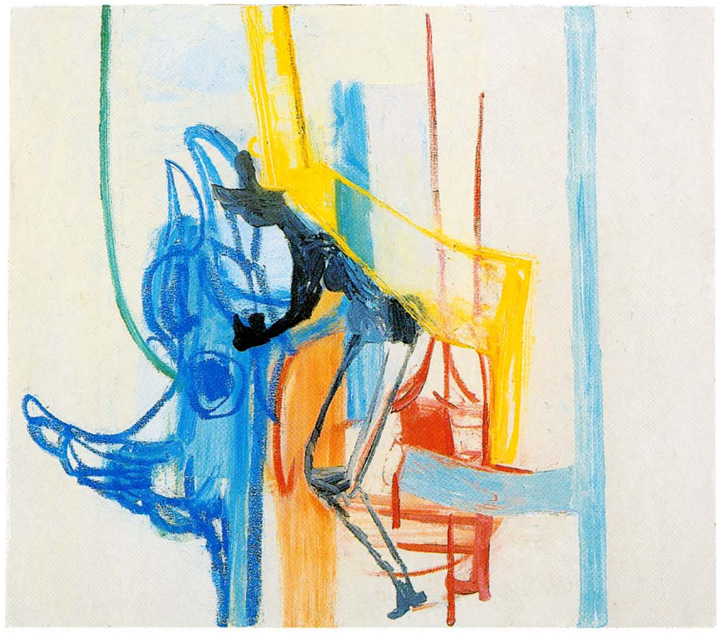
Putting aside Judd's readiness to dismiss rationalism and religion in one sentence, what is applicable here is his distinction between an object that aims to embody some essential set of traits or emotions and one that invites engagement analogically, or via projection.

In discussing her work, Sillman does not touch on anything quite like the openness to projection that Judd observes in Oldenburg's evocative objects. But she often invokes the concept of talk therapy—i.e., of the freely associative flow of words on which psychoanalysis depends and from which a story, set of tropes, or pattern emerges—as analogous to the process by which she arrives at the nonsymbolic abstraction she is after. The painterly "free association" this might suggest is not entirely free: Hers is not a new variation on non-composition. The talk-therapy analogy, however, does point intriguingly to a process that builds a certain analytic distance into affective reflection, that foregrounds or privileges the temporal, and that makes both doubt and re-thinking, or changing one's mind, concrete and constructive.

Like a kind of "talk therapy" that is somehow prior to language, Sillman's new paintings are oblique, interactive, broad-brush aggressive, and relentlessly labor-intensive. The process from which they emerge depends on potent imagery—both representational and abstract—but resists resolution in or as image. As such, there's a new equivalence established between representation and abstraction. In her painting *Psychology Today*, 2006, a pair of legs protrudes implausibly from the bottom of the dominant, orthogonally torqued greenish-yellow cube, whose surface is marred by mostly red, crayonlike marks. Sillman began the work with an awkward, off-angle, off-yellow polygon. In the finished painting, this shape forms one plane of the cube, setting up an action not unrelated to Malevich's white plane in his *White on White*, 1918, where color, movement, and resistance are likewise simultaneously introduced to the picture plane. All of this is very formal, something Sillman is quick to admit. The dangling legs, so conspicuously out of sync, were added at the end of her process; they don't so much humanize the cube as make it absurd.

As the painting evolved, in other words, Sillman not only continued to construct her abstract volumes and shapes; she also quite literally attacked and effaced the surfaces of the peculiar, nonreferential objects she had built

Opposite page: **Amy Sillman, *Psychology Today*, 2006,** oil on canvas, 84 x 72".
This page: **Amy Sillman, *Untitled*, 2006,** oil on canvas, 39 x 45".



in paint, finally establishing the extreme dissonance between painted polygon and drawn legs. The effect of the whole, as Judd said of Oldenburg's oversize objects, is neither expressive nor anthropomorphic; it's analogical and active, inciting an emotional response empathetically. We project *onto* Sillman's figures, rather than reading them as expressive, because, unlike Morandi's bottles—which Judd hated—Sillman's weird volumes and planes are shown to be physically vulnerable to attack, to rupture, to change and instability. To refer back to the quote above: If there is any essential reality here that can be "understood and shown," it lies not in "things themselves" but in this very mutability and openness to contingent response.

Another new work, *Down & Out*, 2006, further crystallizes Sillman's complications of the action-painting paradigm. The painting began with one of the drawings in the "couples" series, and on the canvas we do indeed find two human figures. But their supine, side-by-side idyll is pitted against geometric abstract elements: Their arms create an angular parallelogram, a frame within the picture plane, that sets up an abrasive plane-against-plane rotational movement similar to that found in *Psychology Today* and interacts with other nested polygonal forms. Sillman amplifies the opposition between erotic representation and almost architectural abstraction by staging an equivalent opposition in color: The clear, cold complementaries of Howard Johnson's orange and blue dominate. Far from a case of "direct" expression, à la Pollock's thrown paint, *Down & Out* seems both to extol and to exorcise—again, from a certain remove—the intimacy from which Sillman felt excluded from when she made the source drawing.

The literalness Sillman strives for in these new paintings, and the pulling apart of procedures, have, for me, yet another surprising resonance with Judd. Sillman uses workman's tools, such as a putty knife and rough sponge brushes, to lay on and cut into the paint. The idea that anger and emotion can be literally or materially enacted on an "optically" rendered object is not exactly new: One thinks of the Viennese Actionists or of Artaud. But Sillman's drawn figures and painted forms are not, as I said, symbolic. They are more closely related to Judd's macho, Malevich-inspired predilection for one thing at a time—i.e., color as color, texture as texture. For Judd, only this approach could result in what was, for him, the all-important quality: credibility. And here we find an analogue to what Sillman calls "honesty." Her works, their complexity notwithstanding, also unfold one painterly move at a time. And although Sillman is less invested in clarity for its own sake, she in a sense is also creating "stacks"—she just collapses hers into painted layers. Of course, Sillman's layers comprise a sequence of actions, choices, doubts, and second-guessing.

Sillman compares her understanding of talk therapy to another sculptural mode, namely carving, a comparison that allows her to push past Judd's predilection for material, dimensional, singular objects and treat painting as erasure. Here is where expressivity becomes "expressionism in reverse," via a process—closer to "acting out" than to the heroic actions and singular gestures identified with classic Abstract Expressionism—in which an arbitrary form is posited in paint and subsequently attacked. The sequence of additions and occlusions coalesces as a kind of palimpsest that registers the temporality of painting. Sillman points to the fact that in talk therapy, as in carving—and significantly, as in film or video—a new story or new action or new image or form invariably eclipses a prior action. She identifies with Cézanne's much-remarked doubt and reads his building and dissembling of layered taches and painted "passages" as aggressive acts. This implosive expression perhaps illuminates Sillman's insistence on drawing *against* her abstract forms, as well as the ways in which her body parts and birds—which "often come *last*," she points out—are brought into being through an entirely distinct mode of rendering. Complicating image and action, undermining resolution, and willfully imposing weird equivalences between successive stages of the painting, her representational figures paradoxically ensure that her painted forms can never be anthropomorphic. The oppositions and layering work to convey a nonnarrative temporality and allow a single painting to register an event and a response, a choice and then the doubt and reconsidering. It is a way of *painting*, not picturing, real time. All of this suggests something radically other than the expressionist "correlative" gesture.

As a kind of parable on this radical difference, one could recount two anecdotes that both resonate, in different ways, with a practice like Sillman's. The first is a great though possibly apocryphal AbEx anecdote. De Kooning, when asked to define the word *abstract*, replied with an example instead of a definition: He cited the look on a workman's face. Sillman's description of her own expressive painting as wrestling suggests a similarly oblique comment I heard recently, this one from a young wrestler (a schoolmate of my son's). When asked how he worked his way out of the seemingly unbreakable holds that his sport entails, he said, "I just look for a leg." Sillman does, too, and in her recent work, we see her painting herself out of the holds that painting has gotten itself into. □

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*Quoted in Philip Leider, "Perfect Unlikeness," *Artforum*, February 2000, p. 99.