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By Ted Loos

Blobs and Slashes, Interrupted by Forms

Some painters are on a quest for truth and beauty. But not Amy Sillman.

In a conversation in her paint-splattered studio in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn on a scorching summer day, Ms. Sillman used unusual terms of affection in talking about artworks, both her own and by other hands: “dirty,” “backward” “not pleasant” and “amateurish.”

“I don’t care about beauty at all,” said Ms. Sillman, who is forthright and friendly, offering some cool watermelon chunks to a visitor. “Not one tiny bit. In fact, I don’t like it. I’m interested more in ugliness.”



“S” (2007), one of the works in “Amy Sillman: one lump or two,” the artist’s first big museum retrospective, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

Her goal is not to shock the viewer, in the way of some contemporary art provocateurs. Ms. Sillman’s medium could be said to be comic awkwardness as much as it is oil or ink. “I’ve always been interested in jokes and humor,” she said.

The title of her first big museum retrospective, which opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston on Thursday, is a typically wry one for Ms. Sillman: “[Amy Sillman: one lump or two](#).” It’s possibly a sly reference to the play between figuration and abstraction in her work.

“It’s a nice edge,” the show’s curator, Helen Molesworth, said. “People realize they don’t have to choose.”

In a typical Sillman painting, blobs and slashes of paint are interrupted by a form that could be a hand or a foot, which then beats a hasty retreat back into abstraction. The colors she chooses are formerly pretty hues that have somehow fallen on hard times. The resulting tension in her works has led some critics to credit Ms. Sillman, 57, for giving a boost to the medium of painting, which has often been the subject of premature obituaries in recent years.

“There’s often something off balance about the paintings,” said her friend David Joselit, a Yale professor of modern art and a critic, “It goes back to physical comedy. It’s a sight gag.”

Ms. Sillman said that she thrives on doubt about the whole tradition of painting. “There’s a skepticism embedded in all my work,” she said — and that includes a healthy skepticism about her own ability to contribute something.

“You have to have a doubt sandwich,” she said of her process. “If you have the doubt at the front, you won’t do it, and if you have doubt at the end you’re probably going to kill yourself.”

The Boston show is a prime example of an artist getting her due after being an insider, art world favorite for years, but the variety of styles on display in “one lump or two” don’t necessarily make it easy for newcomers to get a handle on her work.

Alongside more abstract pieces like “S” (2007), with its broad neon strokes, there are several ink and gouache drawings in which Ms. Sillman takes a loosely drawn, cartoonlike approach to figures, including captions and even quote bubbles.

She has lately been experimenting with producing a zine, examples of which are in the exhibition, and her work can often take on what she called a “funky” style.

Asked whether she was a figurative or abstract painter, Ms. Sillman said, “I think of myself as liking two things that are friends and antagonists.”

Ann Temkin, the chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, said Ms. Sillman was “a visible example of someone who’s championed the relevance of painting, as opposed to its being some kind of nostalgic enterprise.”

Ms. Temkin added: “She’s a connector between previous generations and artists who are younger. She has led by example, saying, ‘I can make my own rules.’ ”

Ms. Sillman chooses her own job description carefully.

“I think the core of my practice is completely drawing — I don’t even think I am a painter,” she said. “I’m just pulling one over on everyone, because they’re big and they have color.”

She conceded, “They have one thing that’s like true painting, which is that they’re made in a lot of layers, an extremely slow way of constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing a space.”

Ms. Sillman, who lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with her dog, Omar, said that she would spend between two days and a year on a work — “and often more toward the year.” But for her, the drawn-out process is not exactly about perfecting a piece in the traditional way.

“I’ll go over something that looks perfectly good — it looks beautiful, there’s nothing wrong with it, and I completely wreck it,” she said, adding that Ms. Molesworth has nicknamed her the Wrecking Ball. “People who have seen the work always say, ‘Why didn’t you stop there?’ ”

“I never think I’m done,” she added. “That’s the huge problem with an abstract painting. When are you done? You’re done when you don’t want to do it anymore.”



Ms. Sillman in her studio, in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn.

Despite a professed lack of techno-savvy, Ms. Sillman recently stumbled on a relatively new method for exploring her interest in avoiding endings.

For this spring’s “Blues for Smoke” show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, she created an animated work on an iPhone to pair with her painting “Duel.”

“There’s this big serious painting, and then you see on the iPhone 13 possible futures for it,” she said of “Cartoon for a Painting.” “The work is allowed to go off and do something else. And it does sound a kind of comic register. I wanted these things going haywire.”

The Boston show includes a similar iPad piece called “P.S.” (2013). The roughly animated piece is the electronic equivalent of an old-fashioned flip book, and it is paired with her painting “Shade” (1997-98). “It’s made as a postscript for something done years ago,” Ms. Sillman said. “I’ve done a lot of collaborating in my career, but here I’m sort of collaborating with myself.”

Her friend Mr. Joselit called the approach “the painting of duration,” adding, “It’s almost a new medium. There’s a perpetual revision going on, and the work continues to morph.”

Electronic forays aside, Ms. Sillman’s career has had an old-school arc. Raised in Chicago, she moved to New York in 1975 to study Japanese, and ended up attending the School for Visual Arts. After graduating, she worked for more than a decade without showing her work.

“It’s the older model,” Ms. Molesworth said. “You went to school and then you worked alone, hard, until you got good.”

During the 1980s, Ms. Sillman said, “I had no strategy in a strategic decade,” adding that her work did not fit the dominant artistic modes of the day. “It led to some sort of wisdom of the outlier.” In the 1990s, things picked up after Ms. Sillman got an M.F.A. from Bard College, and she received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2001.

Ms. Sillman said that, apart from a recent pang of envy when she encountered some much larger and more deluxe artist studios, she felt like she was in a good work groove in Bushwick.

“I can do stuff here,” she said, gesturing to some paintings in progress. “I’m happy here.”

Slideshow: <http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2013/09/29/arts/design/20130929-SILLMAN.html>