

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

LARS VON TRIER

LUCIE STAHL

TERRY ADKINS AND
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IN CONVERSATION



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Amy Sillman

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Matt Saunders

SO, IT TURNS OUT that Amy Sillman is indispensable. This expansive traveling survey, “one lump or two,” makes a pretty good case for her garrulous vision of painting as an elastic and ambitious pursuit. As a model of persistent picture-based engagement, it is something to account for.

But if you’re not going to buy it, that’s OK, too. Sillman can take the lumps. In fact, she happily invites them. Her work’s willingness to expose its unguarded flank is enshrined by her and others as a serious virtue. In some ways it is one. Personally, I’m not often won over by the charm of the sad sack, nor blown away by the gumption

of self-deprecation, but Sillman’s vulnerability is operational as much as it is confessional: It keeps her work goofy, fluid, and inventive. There are both flinch-worthy moments and moments of grace, and neither feels more true than the other. What comes across most strongly here is the artist’s willingness to turn things over, by hand or in her mind, and see where they point, which often ends up being two directions at once.

The most obvious turn of this weather vane is the frequent, deft traversal between figuration and abstraction. In *The Elephant in the Room*, 2006, for instance, our only clear giveaway is a trunk, while in *Shade*, 2010, an undeniable hand invites us to see a figure (is that a crotch?) in the rest of the simple geometry. To overemphasize this bifurcation, however, may be damning through dull categorization. Perhaps it’s simply a failure of our imagination and language, our inability to articulate the simple, brave multivalence of a mark, as Sillman’s paintings unhesitatingly flip and whirl between passages of robust gesture and flashes of figurative recognition: Parts of bodies poke up from the soup, or reach across the frame with emphatic if unknowable purpose. Figuration and formlessness are not stitched together, but rather emerge from the same material. The syntactic fluidity—the seeming naturalness and inevitability of these varied utterances—is matter-of-fact, and that’s what matters.

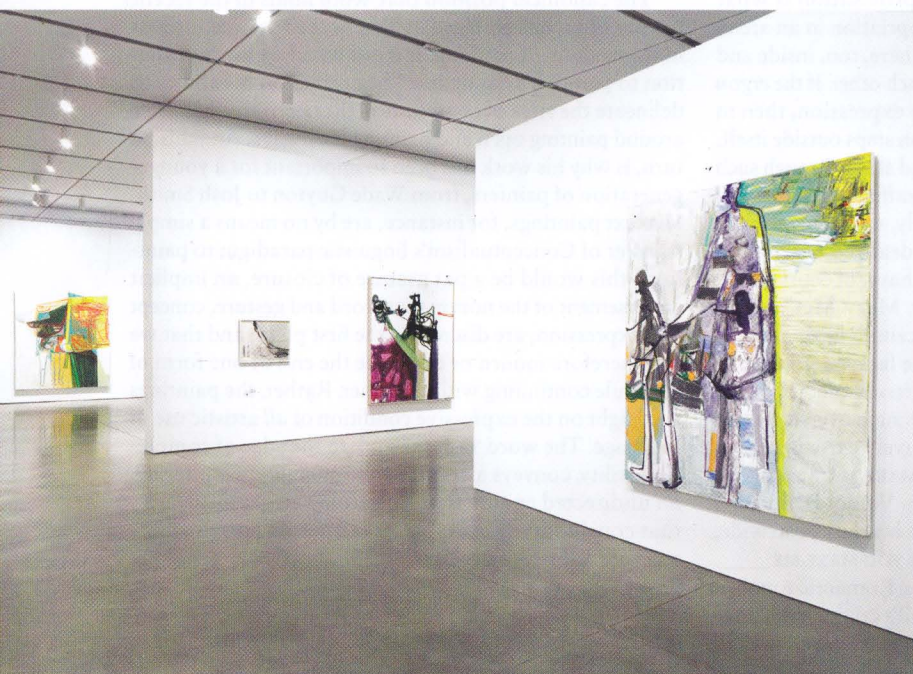
Some retrospectives are powerful for the inclusion of early works, which foretell future developments or lay bare concerns that will later be embroidered or concealed. The first rooms of “one lump or two,” while holding some

lambent gems—for example, the totemic *Shield*, 1997–98, and demonstratively self-critical *Good Grief*, 1998—felt afterward like passing time. Akin to cartoons, which are a recurring influence on and component of Sillman’s work, the figures stay self-contained, wandering across wide-open grounds. Powered by the miraculous luminosity of pasty color, these are lovely pictures, but the formal narrative picked up speed a little later in the show, as the early compositions—dominated by piling up, the logic of the

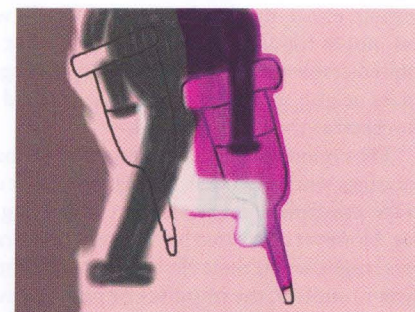
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heap—give way to broader gestures. Now, diagonals hinge off against squarish canvases. Heavy limbs droop under their own weight, and lines jut at elbows. Paint that was once liquid and loopy is scumbled, dragged, and abraded. Two small paintings from 2007, *C* and *S*, pit line against plane, blocking and opening up into depth. In *Flashlight*, 2010, the paint, at once scratchy and buttery, seems to swing around, propelled by an arm that wields the titular device.

If this vectored mark-making lends the paintings an implicit animation, Sillman soon makes it explicit. *Flashlight* links directly to *Untitled*, 2010, an unframed suite of drawings hung edge to edge, in which a formal slipstream carries us from bodies to lightbulbs to flashlights to tongues—which in turn took us to a series of actual animations. *Triscuits*, 2011–12, activates ink-on-paper



From left: View of “Amy Sillman: one lump or two,” 2013–14. From left: *Psychology Today*, 2006; *Untitled*, 1999; *A Bird in the Hand*, 2006; *Them*, 2006. Photo: Charles Mayer. Amy Sillman, *Flashlight*, 2010, oil on canvas, 51 x 45”. Two stills from Amy Sillman’s *PS*, 2013, digital video, color, sound, 2 minutes 18 seconds.



drawings in stop motion, captured simply with the camera on Sillman's phone, while later animated works were created with an iPad drawing app. The former gives duration to classic Sillman cartooning—a hearty stew of self-inspection and awkward moments interspersed with confessional and sage asides—as the purely digital drawing of the newer works comes closer to the paintings, with figures and forms jostling for the stage and following each other in loose association, but with a fresh vocabulary of layering, color, and quick transitions. Though not alone in picking up these contemporary tools, Sillman has a voraciousness that is suited to them. Words can run continuously through a work, such as *Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video Loop*, 2012 (featuring a poem of the same name by Lisa Robertson), and so can revisions and reversals—marks like propositions and amendments. Like the broom and the hairball on crutches that move through *PS*, 2013, the most recent work in the show, Sillman's digital painting can pile up but also sweep itself clean.

Missing here were the small digital prints from these sessions, shown in several of Sillman's recent gallery exhibitions (they will be on view in subsequent venues), but present was a clear argument by curator Helen Molesworth about the influence of digital devices on the painter's practice. There is something different in the cutaways, blunt edges, and flat colors of recent drawings, such as *A Shape That Stands Up and Listens*, 2012. The piling up of fat and flat forms is in many ways analogous to the cropping, cutting, pasting, and fill functions of a drawing app—and indeed to digital mark-making in general. More didactic,

but perhaps more telling, was the side-by-side hanging of a large digital print, #841 (*print from still from animated drawing*), and a similarly sized painting, #841 (*painting from print from animated drawing*), both 2012, derived from it. In certain ways, the painting improves on the print, overcoming some of its flatness with the subtle thickness of thin paint—a kind of depth that is not illusionistic but palpably material—even as the painting opts for blunt, emphatic outlines that are perhaps too magisterial and staid alongside the wavering, translucent edges of the digital original. Neither prevails, and perhaps each makes a case for the properties of the other.

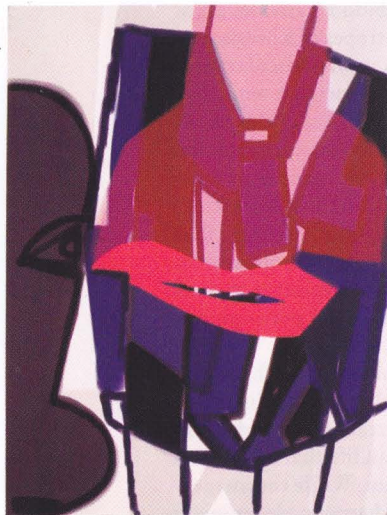
In this comparison, we see Sillman working specifically with materials and flexibly with means. She persists in using painting and drawing to whip up problems unconfined to those media. The small hand-drawn poster *some problems in philosophy*, 2010, is a wise-ass crib sheet on the pros and cons of various male philosophers; it contains as much wry joshing as *Amy Sillman: Visiting Artist*, 2004, a satirical, picaresque cartoon travelogue through the university circuit. Such ephemera—including her zine, *The O.G.*, first published in 2009 and now in its seventh issue, and her invented diagrammatic seating charts that submit art-world dinners to wicked common casting—had an important place in the show as emblems of a lively mind rolling with the world. It's a tragicomic world in which, according to a 2006 *Seating Chart*, FREQUENT FANTASIES OF DOOM might get placed between SENSE OF PERSONAL FRAUDULENCE and NO SENSE OF BOUNDARIES. Such works invoke the social, a dimension

also emphasized in this show by the inclusion of two suites of drawn portraits: an early catalogue depicting Sillman's compatriots in the young Williamsburg scene of 1991 and '92 and, later, in 2008, a kind of Facebook for the denizens and orbiters of the New York venue Orchard.

The interrelations of a scene interest the artist, as do the workings of one's mind and one's body. A 2006 painting is called *The Plumbing*, and on the day I visited, even the ICA's building couldn't resist participating with glee. An ominous spot on the gallery ceiling quickly became a drip, and the room was cordoned off after we were hustled out of it to another, where an eager guard took the chance to distract us, gushing, "I love this artist! She's put in the time!" It was a perfect experience of the work, bumptiously unspooling the entire visit and highlighting the oeuvre's off-kilter poise. This survey revealed Sillman's discursive bent, working on faith that painting can function as a language and a tool, now more than ever. Its particular relevance may be the vision of a personal, even medium-specific practice, swinging in widening arcs without losing the plot. The excitement is how it gains steam at the end. To quote one of the recent animations: "Meanwhile quick question: While the transitional object transitions, or stops being what it was, what's that like?" Exactly. It's a rare takeaway for such a retrospective. □

"Amy Sillman: one lump or two" is on view at the Aspen Art Museum through May 18; travels to the Hessel Museum of Art and CCS Galleries at Bard College, June 28–Sept. 21.

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From left: Amy Sillman, #841 (*print from still from animated drawing*), 2012, ink-jet print on paper, 57 x 44". Amy Sillman, #841 (*painting from print from animated drawing*), 2012, oil on canvas, 51 x 49". Amy Sillman, *Umbrian Line*, 1999–2000, gouache on paper, framed. Installation view. Photo: Charles Mayer.

