Shifting Contexts, Psychodrama and Meta-Works

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ART REVIEW

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — Abstract painting is on the move in "Amy Sillman: one lump or two," a spirited midcareer survey at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies. It jumps around from paper to canvas to phone and tablet screens, as if to say, "Catch me if you can."

Organized by Helen Molesworth, formerly the chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and now the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the show debuted there last fall and is completing its tour at the Boston institute. It really ought to have been picked up by a New York City museum, although it looks fantastic in the airy galleries at Bard (where glimpses of rolling green lawns bring out the landscapelike attributes of Ms. Sillman's roving forms).

In almost every gallery of the exhibition, robust gestural canvases of the New York School variety mingle with diaristic musings and diagrammatic drawings. Big, muscular paintings that nod to Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston and Richard Diebenkorn are peppered by lists, charts, sketches and cartoons (some of them published in Ms. Sillman's personal zine, The O-G). It's a challenge (an entertaining one) to keep up with these frequent contextual shifts, not to mention the constant, antic to-ing and fro-ing between abstraction and figuration. The show begins, pointedly, with "Fatso," a rigorously linear, green-gray composition interrupted by a frowning, one-eyed face.

"Amy Sillman: one lump or two" runs through Sept. 21 at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; 845-758-7598, bard.edu/ccs.

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From left, "Psychology Today" (2006), "Fund for the 21st Century" (2007) and "P&H" (2007), all by Amy Sillman.

Later on, a group of black-and-white drawings of cuddling couples is revealed to be the unlikely source of a series of colorful, entirely geometric paintings. You can spend a lot of time in this room, figuring out how Ms. Sillman got from one body of work to the other. (It has to do with the negative space between the figures.)

Also in the mix are abstract animations on phone and tablet screens, some of which eventually migrate to canvases and paper; see, for instance, the large oil-on-canvas work from 2012 titled "No. 841 (painting from print from animated drawing)."

Ms. Sillman, based in New York, is in some ways a natural animator, having made serial drawings since the late 1990s. In an outstanding group of gouache-and-charcoal works on paper from 2010, a flashlight becomes an instrument of self-discovery for a curious, cartoonish figure.

The show, over all, is similarly inquisitive. It pokes around beneath the restless surfaces of Ms. Sillman's paintings and drawings, finding an undercurrent of psychodrama. It goes back to early paintings like "Me & Ugly Mountain," which shows a small figure dragging what Ms. Molesworth calls "an enormous bundle of neurotic energy" and continues in newer, uncharacteristically muted collage-drawings inspired by memories of rooms where Ms. Sillman felt ashamed.

It's there, too, in the zine material: the "phrase guides" to passive-aggressive artspeak or the dinner-party seating charts that mock guests you'll easily recognize, the "frustrated art historian who wonders if she should quit the field" and the "drunk curator who keeps shouting questions that make no sense." They are refreshingly candid (to the point of oversharing) about the social anxieties of being an artist, the sucking up to collectors, and the adjunct jobs and the undermining peers.

Amy Sillman
one lump or two
Bard College

For Ms. Molesworth, Ms. Sillman's art also evokes other anxieties specific to female artists. She writes, in a wry and personal catalog essay, that Ms. Sillman's pictures "summon what it feels like to be looked at and more precisely what it feels like to be a girl." She interprets her gestures of self-consciousness and awkwardness as a kind of strategic resistance to the objectification of women. It's an interesting reading, if a bit narrow.

The exhibition, however, is full of big ideas. One of them is that abstract painting is less pure than we tend to think; it's corrupted by our gender politics, our social cues and miscues. "The shapes that I am interested in looking at and drawing always turn into forms that have some kind of psychological narrative," Ms. Sillman has said. "Even if it's in the sense of a formal predicament, that a shape is at the edge of another or teetering into a different color."

"Amy Sillman: one lump or two" also posits that a painting need not be a static object; it can be an evolving story, a set of possibilities. One of the show's newest projects, and strongest statements, is "13 Possible Futures for a Painting," making its debut here, a large gallery papered with stills from a digital animation. Here, Ms. Sillman confidently embraces new technology while ruminating on a classic painter's quandary: How do you know when a work is finished?