

IN CONVERSATION
AMY SILLMAN with Toby Kamps

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(LONDON)



Amy Sillman (born 1956, Detroit) is a painter, drawer, writer and maker of zines and animated videos. Her work in all media is characterized by a playful, incisive humor and a direct, exuberant engagement with materials and ideas. Drawing on all spheres of learning, ancient and contemporary, as well as her own experiments with paint, paper, and other technologies in the studio for inspiration, she creates a restless, rollicking, panoply of ever-evolving images.

Sillman has lived in New York since 1975. Before graduating from the School of Visual Arts in 1979, she studied Japanese language with the goal of becoming a translator at the UN. She received an MFA from Bard College in 1995 and has been a professor at Städelschule in Frankfurt, Germany, since 2015. Award and fellowships include a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship in 1995, a Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellowship in 2000, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2012. Sillman was a resident at the American Academy in Berlin in 2009 and at the American Academy in Rome in 2014.

She has had solo exhibitions at the Drawing Center, New York (2017); Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (2016); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2013); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2012); the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington (2008), and galleries around the world.

In this interview, the artist discusses her first UK museum exhibition at London's Camden Arts Centre Amy Sillman: Landline, (on view through January 6, 2019), her response to Trump's election, and her interests in philosophy and comedy.



Portrait of Amy Sillman, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Toby Kamps (Rail): Your show at the Camden Arts Center is an intoxicating mixture of recent paintings, drawings, videos, and zines. It even includes a little ceramic figurine, which sits on the edge of a table and accepts coin payments for your publications in its open mouth, which it immediately poops out into a bucket below. As the method and madness of this playful, free-ranging, and loopily gorgeous show hit me, I had a vision of you as a kind of intellectual cowperson freely ranging across the territories of art, philosophy, mythology, and comic humor. What were you trying to achieve with this exhibition?

Amy Sillman: I guess kind of a funny combination of nothing and everything. On the “nothing” side, I had no preconception in mind when Martin Clark, Camden’s director, invited me to do a show. We first discussed showing a huge cycle of printed canvases that I did the year before, but we ended up not even showing that original piece because I had made other things. So the show kept shifting.

On the “everything” side, I haven’t had a big institutional show in England ever, and I thought it would be really exciting to be able to activate the Camden Arts Centre’s entire second-story exhibition floor with a whole syntax of different forms interacting. And that was it! I was trying to figure out how to make a show that felt broader than simply a selection of some paintings.

Rail: Can you tell me where the title *Landline* came from?

Sillman: Well, I had all kinds of different names: *Note to Self*, *Twice Removed*, *Miss Shapen*. At one point, it was called *Chunk of Change*. Then one day I was talking to someone on the phone and I said, “Oh can you please call me on my landline? I really prefer it.” My landline is mounted in a ridiculous place in my apartment, so to talk on it, you have to kind of crouch in a corner near the bookshelf—you can’t get a snack, you can’t check your email, you can’t go anywhere because of the short cord and the inconvenient location. But I like the sound of it better, and I don’t like holding a glass plate to my ear. And it hit me: a landline is an old technology, just like painting! None of my students have these phones, they don’t even know why you’d want one. All of a sudden it just struck me: LANDLINES and PAINTING are the same. It’s not entertaining or informative; it’s actually uncomfortable; you can’t eat while you’re doing it, but it’s good during emergencies. And young people don’t understand it.



Rail: I have a funny image of you stuck in a corner with your phone. Could it be that by committing to a landline and to your old-fashioned medium, you've painted yourself into a corner? Or could your decision to stick with the phone cord and the paintbrush also be stakes in the ground, fixed points from which to connect with the world?

Sillman: Yes, you're always getting stuck being a painter. You're all by yourself. There's no easy way out. Also, "line" fit for Camden because I'd already decided to make a long piece that is strung up on a line.

Rail: Tell me about the series of works on paper, "Dub Stamp," (2018) which is shown hanging on what appears to a clothesline stretching diagonally across one of the large galleries.

Sillman: It's actually hung from a pole with photo clips.

Rail: The title makes me think of a dance move, but the subject matter is vomiting figures.

Sillman: I'd like to see you do the dub-stamp! [Laughter] Well actually, I made a lot of charcoal drawings of people on their hands and knees puking in the days after Trump was elected. But then I put them in a drawer and didn't look at them again, even though I always thought they were pretty poignant. While I was making paintings for the show over the year, I noticed that similar images of people lying in bed—huddled figures—started appearing in my paintings. I remembered this drawer of charcoal drawings, and I brought them out and noticed a circuitry or circularity between the election images and the people in the newer paintings, which made me really happy. This loop between the figures in the drawings and painting made me think, "Ok these must be the people in this show, and I've got to take hold of that."

Rail: Please also talk about the circuitry involved in the actual making of the *Dub Stamp* works. There's duplication and printing in them too, right?

Sillman: I didn't want to show the original drawings from the drawer because the room is so dramatic, so tall and grand and beautiful and flooded with light. I thought they were too small for the space, that they'd get lost. So I went to this silkscreen factory in Brooklyn called Kingsland to reproduce the drawings in an enlarged format. At first, I was going to design a wall for the room and wheat-paste the prints to the wall, but when every Saturday you're going to a march and shouting "No wall!" you sort of realize, "Oh, right! No wall!" So I thought, ok, how could I install them in the room without a wall? All of a sudden, bingo! Everything fell into place when I realized that I could hang them, and if I hung them, they would have backs, and I'd have this perfectly ambivalent format where one side was figurative and the other was abstract. I was really excited with that. That was another sort of circuitry loop. As an artist, I feel the greatest euphoria when all of a sudden an earlier thing explodes open and makes tons of sense. It's like a door opening. You didn't know what you were doing, but suddenly you see the answer and an even greater problem. The two-way street or two-part system of the "Dub Stamp" pieces were perfect for me. So I set about to make these works that were abstract on one side and figurative on the other. It took about a year to figure that out.

Rail: Let's talk about the vomiting figures. Have you seen the barfing scene in Trey Parker's great puppet animation film, *Team America: World Police*? I play that scene on YouTube when I need a laugh.

Sillman: I didn't see that, but it is something I want to see.



Clockwise from top left: Amy Sillman, *Dub Stamp (1A back)*, 2018, *Dubstamp (1A)*, 2018, *Dubstamp (7A)*, 2018, *Dubstamp (7A back)*, 2018. Acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper, 60 x 40 inches each. © Amy Sillman. Courtesy the artist. Photo: John Berens.

Rail: Your figures are really funny but also completely abject. Might they have a personal connection, as in a work like Bruce Nauman’s video *Clown Torture*, which describes the awful expectation that the artist always be ready to entertain or to cough up something profound?

Sillman: You know, it wasn’t really about that. Those figures were just gut reactions to the days after Trump was elected, which were really shocking. People were walking around with their jaws dropped. We didn’t know what was going to happen, and it actually came out just as bad as we could’ve imagined. The only way I could even think of going to the studio was in order to express those feelings, which in my case took the form of these down-and-out figures. I don’t usually start with figures, but no other response was even possible for me. What were you going to do—stay in your studio and draw a square or a squiggle? You can’t do that stuff when you’re dealing with a crisis like that.

Rail: I do feel like your paintings have a wonderful, fresh sense of urgency. They come at you fast with hot images and great titles. In this sense they pack punches like rollicking physical comedy.

Sillman: Yes, I agree. It’s funny because comedy is a passion of mine. I mean, I really watch it a lot and go to comedy clubs and stuff, but I’m not very interested in physical comedy or slapstick. It never makes me laugh. I find it dull. But in this case, comedy methods came into the picture in terms of the timing, the immediacy of comedy, the Eureka moments when you’re making a painting and *get it* all of a sudden; or at least the way I get ideas. I sometimes have a sort of giddy feeling when I get something to work in a painting. It could be euphoric, it could be incredibly sad. It’s out of control in a way because it comes out of you like a blurt. It’s like the way consciousness works.

I think you may be right about the physical comedy element of painting. If you paint in a big hurry, in a crazy impulsive rush, like I do, it can be very emotional and very unconscious and pretty gainly.

A couple years ago, I became really interested in realizing the relationship between psychoanalysis and painting, reading a lot of Freud. And it’s no coincidence that Freud also wrote a book on jokes. There also are really funny quotes in Adorno, who unwittingly, trying to critique comedy, wrote some of the best quotes about humor: “In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness.” And “Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe.” And “There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about.” [*Laughter*] And actually Adorno says, “Laughter, whether

reconcilable or terrible, always accompanies the moment when a fear has ended. It indicates a release.” All that stuff is in painting, I think.



Rail: Do you think that your humor translated to the U.K.? There are a lot of similarities between Trump’s America and Brexit Britain.

Sillman: I read a really funny analysis in the paper the other day about how Brexit gives the Brits what they always wanted: a plan in which *everyone* is made miserable. [Laughter]

Rail: The exhibition begins with your short, animated video *After Metamorphoses*. It’s based on Ovid’s ninth-century epic poem *Metamorphoses*, a creation story filled with shape-shifting and violence. In a goofy and gorgeous amalgamation of figurative drawing and abstract painting—the latter of which you often use in silhouette forms to create landscapes and backgrounds that interpenetrate the drawings—you capture the violence and shape-shifting, and gender-bending pervading the story: Zeus transforming his lover Io into a heifer, men becoming dolphins. Is this work a preamble, a clue, to the ways figuration and abstraction seem to be locked in a heroic pro-wrestling match in your work?

Sillman: You know, we did not intend to start with that as the topic sentence of the exhibition. We were going to have that video playing in a beautiful little library room off to the side, which is ordinarily where videos are screened. But there were several moments during the installation where I went nuts and wanted to change everything around. After the show was basically hung, I was frustrated and wanted to make it feel like it had more friction in it—more contradiction, more anxiety. One way we got that feeling was by moving things to places where they weren’t supposed to be. We took the video out of the video room and put the other video on a box next to the paintings. So that’s why it’s there. We just wanted to establish the idea of motion and the logic of movies, so when you entered the room with the *Dub Stamp* you’d understand it as a walk-by animation.



Amy Sillman, *SK37, SK38*, 2017.

Acrylic, ink and silkscreen on paper, 40 1/8 x 26 inches each. ©Amy Sillman, courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Rail: Could you talk about what I would call a kind of drawing in the paintings? In many of the large canvases, you build a lattice of black, slashing lines with paint that sometimes seem to contain your colors, and other times to be independent of them.

Sillman: You know, as I think about it, maybe a better answer to your very first question about what I was trying to achieve with this show would be that I wanted to make my relationship to film clear by embedding time-based stuff within painting. I finish work really slowly because I keep destroying layers. But at the same time, because I make these fast, over-lain, obliterative layers, I always have a lot of things going that are really quick and immediate, so I can see what's going on in real time. It's not like it takes me a long time to develop something; it's that it takes me forever to not cross it out. There's always a lot of things that just appear and disappear really fast in my studio, and in this particular group of work there was also this strange combination of miserableness—like the puking figures—pitted weirdly against these very light, easy-to-make grids. These lyrical, sort of strange bent grids and weird shapes were floating around on these canvases. I had all this fast and beautiful and abstract work going at the same time as I had all that fucked-up figural stuff going in the other direction. It was like two trains, one going from west to east and the other from east to west, and when they collide in the middle, these two forces got all tangled up. I wasn't planning that. That's just what happened in these paintings. I was very open to immediate shapes and colors and build-ups and thicketts and lines and horizontals and verticals and directional areas—just the idea of a division of the canvas, its intervals. They weren't intended as grids, but they were divided into horizontal sections that I thought of as almost like music in the sense of being sequences, intervals, timing, beats, that kind of thing. This is strange because I don't listen to music very much, I'm not musical at all, but I got into thinking about the potential in just rhythmic areas in paintings and it was the opposite of thinking about terribly dread-filled figures. Maybe a release from that dread. So I found energies that allowed two opposite things at the same time. Painting became a very complicated process of balancing these two visual impulses, pure abstract time-based ones opposed to linguistic or semiotic or narrative ones.

Rail: It's like you're a drummer, playing a different beat with each hand.

Sillman: I think that's right. That's what I was trying to explain, too—this sense that you have two different pulses in your head, and your whole work is about finding this space. A lot of the time when I'm doing a show I feel like I have to choose between figure and ground. I can spend the whole year making grounds—just making complicated thicketts of strokes, you

know, and then all of a sudden all of that will clear away, and I'll just draw an image of a guy's foot, and that'll be the thing that is clear and representational. That's what was really exciting me about silkscreens. It's a process in which I could destroy things without prediction. Painting and silkscreen give you completely opposite results and you can go both ways in time, so each material starts to become super surprising again because you literally don't know what's going to happen next or what you could salvage from yesterday. That's really exciting to me.



Amy Sillman, *The Dark Space of Speech*, 2018. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 75 × 66 inches. © Amy Sillman. Courtesy the artist Photo: John Berens.

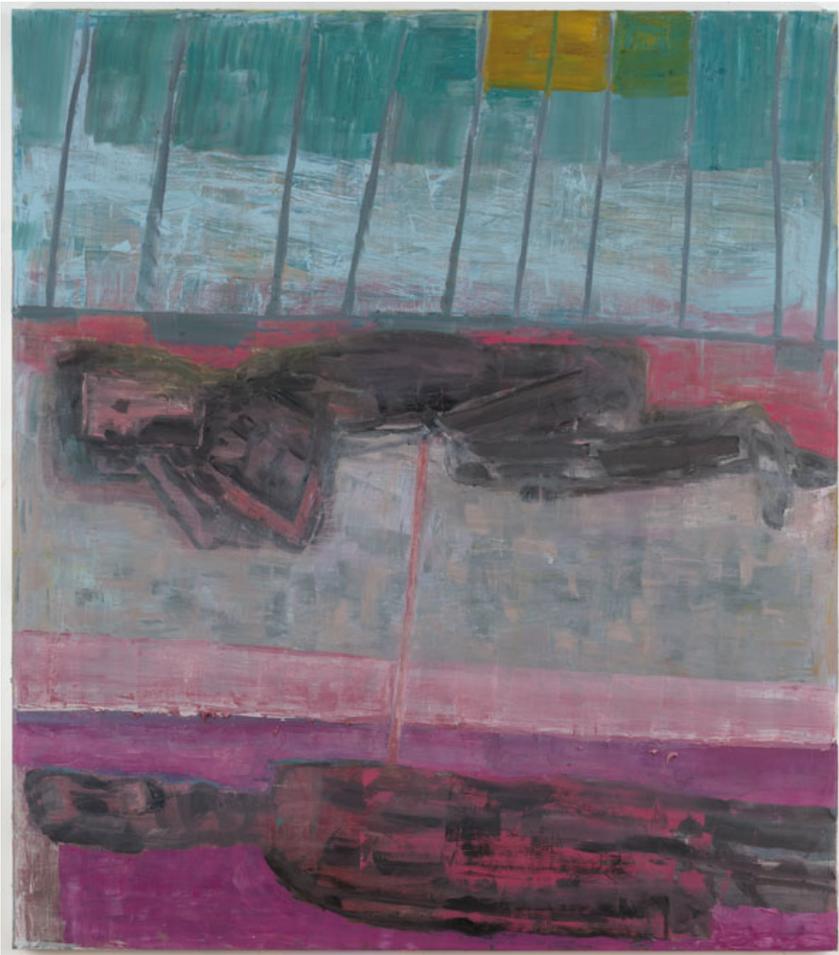
Rail: Yeah. Tell me about your colors. I thought they were really terrific—punchy and buoyant, but spooky and gritty too. How do you develop them?

Sillman: I don't think I have a scheme, but I have a method which is pretty straightforward which is just that all of that ruination that I'm talking about, where you keep scraping shit down and erasing it and redoing it.

Rail: Ruination or rumination?

Sillman: Ruination. I have slop-buckets in my studio with paint that I've scraped off or mused out or got rid of from the paintings. That makes gray, basically, or brown. Sometimes they get thrown away, but a lot of times I like to mix those colors into bright colors. One moment a color will be a beautiful emerald green that I just bought at the store, and then next to it will be this hideous brown-grey shadow that I can't even imagine how to re-make. I really love working with those two kinds of registers because it's another of those double situations that I'm drawn to—two different formats that are meeting in

the middle. I really love it when those luminous beautiful store-bought, super-saturated, simple clear colors, are inflected or shadowed with this murk.



Amy Sillman, *In Illinois*, 2017–18. Oil on canvas, 75 × 66 inches. © Amy Sillman. Courtesy the artist. Photo: John Berens.

Rail: Speaking of two registers, what about your titles? They're wonderfully oblique, both hinting at dramatic action remaining poetic and abstract in themselves. How do you come up with things like *In Illinois*, *TV in Bed*, or *Splitsville*, and how do you want them to function for the viewer?

Sillman: That's such a good question. You know what my favorite one is in the whole show? *Lift & Separate*. Do you remember when that was the slogan in the ad for women's bras?

Rail: Oh, of course!

Sillman: It's such an unbelievably palpable thing to say that your underwear should do.

Rail: Imagine being little boy and hearing that!

Sillman: I can't even imagine what you got out of that. [Laughter] I got a title out of it. I was going to call that painting *Crane*, because it seemed to be about one form lifting away from the others. But I thought of *Lift & Separate* in the shower one day.

Rail: We got a lot of mileage out of that tagline on the playground, I remember.

Sillman: But a lot of those paintings, frankly, they're about death. Or they're about me processing the endings of certain relationships and also about the despair I felt politically. So maybe that's where those titles come from sometimes: *Lift & Separate*, *Splitsville*, *TV in Bed*. A lot of times, when you're feeling despair, it reopens other kinds of feelings. The winter when I was making that show, I was dealing with despair, and it was coming out in my paintings all over the place. It was

funny because in the spring and summer, when I was finishing the show, that's when the figures got out of bed and started walking around; they became vertical figures.



Amy Sillman, *Lift & Separate*, 2017–18. Oil on canvas, 75 × 66 inches. © Amy Sillman
Courtesy the artist. Photo: John Berens

Rail: I know you studied Japanese literature and are also very interested in philosophy, especially the ways it can be applied to art and life and jokes. Can you talk about your formal and informal studies and how they feed into your work?

Sillman: I didn't understand philosophy when I was young at all. I remember taking philosophy when I was a sophomore in college and thinking, "Well, I never have to take *that* subject again! I hate it." But then I refused that refusal. When I started teaching in 1990, I thought, "I have to read a lot more stuff now that I'm a professor," which is ridiculous, but I took it very seriously, and I started reading theory and philosophy and taking classes at the New School. I'm taking a Frankfurt School course right now at the Brooklyn Institute.

Rail: That sounds terrific—separate yet complementary field that can open your mind up in new ways and flow back into your work in surprising fashion.

Sillman: That's why I can quote Adorno, because my homework is next to me.

Rail: A bunch of funny, funky illustrated zines accompany your show. They're called *The OG*, which stands for *Objet Gegenstand* (*Object Object* in French and German), part of the title refers to a short-lived magazine published by artist El Lissitzky and writer Ilya Ehrenburg in 1922, and "Original Gangster," a hip-hop honorific. They feel like documents of the best egghead party you've ever been to—full of humor, smarts, and goofiness. You call them a "flavor packet for the show," which I thought was a great image—like pimping your ramen, if your ramen was already an extremely tasty show. *[Laughter]*

Sillman: I like all the things you like. You like abjection, ramen, and a weird dance form!



Rail: I find the zines incredibly inspirational. I know you say you're a worker bee and spend a lot of time in the studio, but you seem like somebody who appreciates the value of having friends and playmates in other disciplines. I love the way you and the other contributors cite authors or diagram ideas that excite you. They seem like little primers on how to lead a fun, engaged life.

Sillman: Yeah, and thank you so much for saying that. That's how I want them to be. The philosophy poster that's in the show was something I made instead of writing a paper at the end of a class. It summarizes key ideas for all the great philosophers in a sentence or two. I gave it to the professor, and I don't think he liked it. It was too amusing. Years later, though, I met Adrian Piper who told me she had my philosophy poster and that I got everything right!

Rail: I imagine funk dancing lessons were out of the question.

Sillman: I do not need a lesson in funk dancing.

Rail: No, because you've got the dub stamp.

Sillman: I can do the dub stamp. I was born in Detroit city

Rail: One final question that also pertains to the mysteries of life. I spent about half an hour looking at the new cycle of works on paper that cover an entire wall in your show, *Rebus for Camden*, and I . . .

Sillman: That's my favorite thing in the show.

Rail: And I confess that I could not . . .

Sillman: Read it?

Rail: Yes, Is there a secret message?

Sillman: No. It doesn't say anything. You were correct. I only called it *Rebus for Camden* because I was going to show another body of work on that wall that was completely organized and nice and clear, but on the last day of installation, I had a fit and felt I needed to make the show feel way more anxious and activated. So I took out the nice neat grid that was supposed to be on that wall, and sort of clumsily placed all these mismatched drawings there instead. If a line went off the edge of a drawing at one place, I would pick up with a drawing that started on that exact axis. I tried to make a new thing with old work. Now I love that idea so much that I'm going re-do it in Chicago for my next show. I'm really interested in this Brecht line about "clumsy thinking"—*plumpes Denken* in German.

Rail: I was being too literal and should've suspected a trick.

Sillman: I think I just made a terrible mistake and you discovered it. [*Laughter*]