



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Amy Sillman's Breakthrough Moment Is Here

A walk through the artist's new show offers a master class in how abstraction can capture the fraught spirit of 2020.

Did any artist have a more productive quarantine than Amy Sillman? The New York painter poured out new work this year, and her current show at Gladstone Gallery proves how abstract art can speak to our time. Calla Kessler for The New York Times

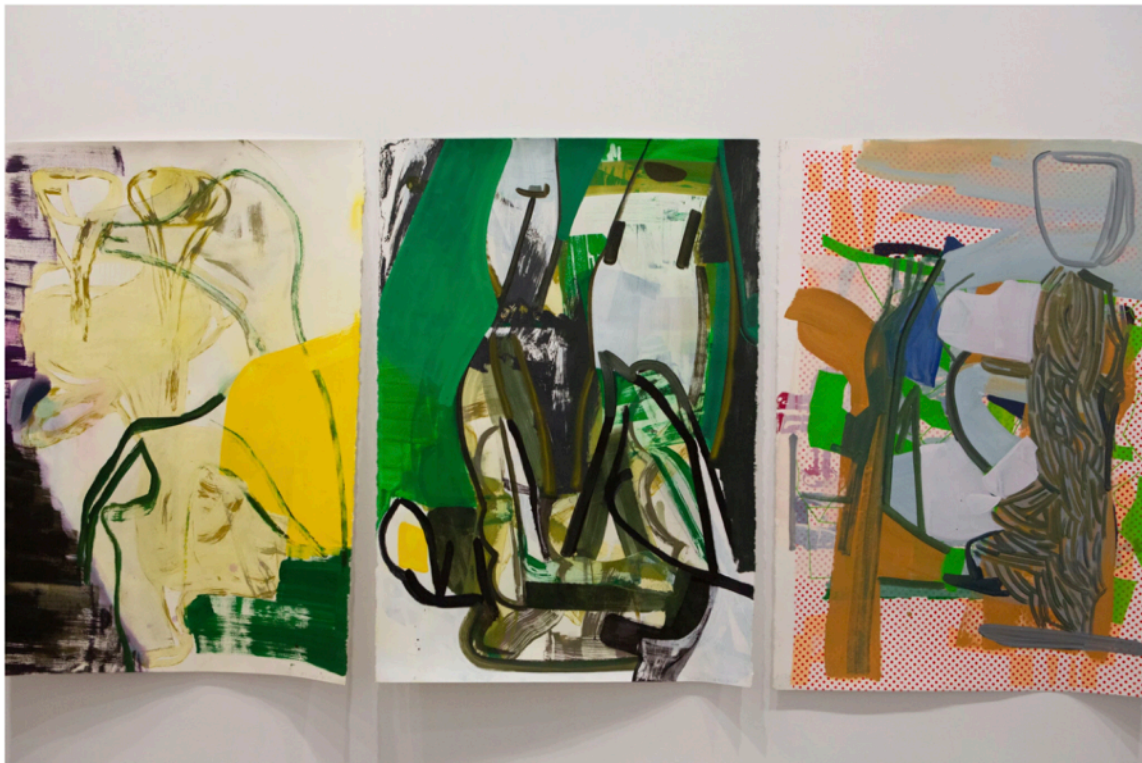
By Jason Farago

Oct. 8, 2020



These pandemic months have been so full and fraught, so lacking the silence we foresaw with the initial shelter-in-place orders, that one of its first clichés has fallen into obscurity. Do you remember, mid-March, when everyone kept recalling that Shakespeare [wrote “King Lear” while in quarantine](#)? As an inducement to write that novel or learn that new language, it felt hollow as early as April.

Well, not everyone lost their focus in the discord and inundation of 2020. Amy Sillman did not. The New York painter — who’d already scored a big hit last year with [“The Shape of Shape,”](#) a [show she curated](#) at the reopened Museum of Modern Art — has had a year of unparalleled productivity, even as the coronavirus outbreak kept her from her usual studio. What’s up now in her new show [“Twice Removed,”](#) which opened last week at Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, is just a fraction of the hundreds of abstract paintings she produced over the last 12 months: layered, supercharged compositions of purple, green and goldenrod, overlaid or interrupted by thick contours, daubed stripes, peeking hints of a cup or leg.



Works from “Twice Removed” at Gladstone Gallery in Manhattan. From left: “XL19,” “XL18” and “XL12,” all from 2020. Calla Kessler for The New York Times

These dynamic, agitated improvisations, on both canvas and paper, reaffirm her leading role in reviving the fortunes of gestural abstract painting, though here they’re punctuated throughout by — this was a surprise — small, finely turned still lifes of flowers. Definitely not “King Lear,” then. But the show is as fresh, as ardent, as masterly as a cycle of sonnets, brimming with old anxieties and new life.



"I made, literally, a titanic amount of work during the Covid period," Ms. Sillman tells me when we meet up at the gallery. A blue surgical mask sets off her shoulder-length gray hair; she's biked over from Brooklyn, and she's brimming with the eagerness of rediscovery after months in isolation. "I went to live in Long Island, the North Fork. I found this little normcore house in town, and I found a studio to rent for the summer, but for the first part I couldn't make paintings. So I just drew flowers at my kitchen table. And I wrote." She could only find "cheapo canvases," and painted instead on sheets of paper. One gallery here has a cycle of 18, but she had 10 times more than that to choose from.

Ms. Sillman, 65, has had a long road to this high point of her career. Born in Detroit, raised in Chicago, she came to New York in 1975 and did not show her art for long years afterward. (She spent more than a decade working a day job in paste-up at Vogue and Rolling Stone, before teaching at Bennington College, Bard College, and the Städelschule art academy in Frankfurt.) She fell in with the downtown counterculture, worked as an assistant to Pat Steir, and also published one of the first bibliographies of lesbian artists, for a 1977 issue of the feminist journal [Heresies](#).



Ms. Sillman's paintings (left to right) include "XL27," "XL32," "XL14," "XL33," from 2020. Layered, supercharged compositions of purple, green and goldenrod, are overlaid or interrupted by thick contours, daubed stripes, peeking hints of a cup or leg. Calla Kessler for The New York Times

Her career as a painter began just when critics were regularly proclaiming painting's death. Now she has helped lead the charge over the last decade for a reinvigorated mode of abstraction, alongside colleagues like Laura Owens, Julie Mehretu, Joanne Greenbaum or Jacqueline Humphries. These painters, mostly women, have reclaimed the potency of active brushwork and visible gestures, which for so long had felt played out. Their work is smart as hell, but not afraid to laugh at itself. Conversant with digital media — [iPhone animation](#), in Ms. Sillman's case — yet committed to the facticity of paint.

Yet the rolling crises of the last few years have brought along a shift in art galleries toward easy-to-read, politically forthright imagery, some of it righteous, some just agitprop. It's a time more prone to the certainties of rage than the ambiguities of art. So I wanted to see how, or even whether, these miserable months would be reflected in Ms. Sillman's painting, and how she understood her place in an art world that seems to be growing ill at ease with the fundamentals of shape, color and line. What I found, at Gladstone, was more than just a confirmation that Ms. Sillman is at the top of her game, but a master class in how abstract art can be as alive with the inflamed spirit of 2020 as any portrait or photograph.

"I wanted to make a show that would draw somebody in really close, and then a show that would push you way out," she tells me as we look at a sequence of large, unframed paintings on paper. Off-kilter stains of gray and purple made with a wide brush, and in some cases silk-screened passages of polka dots, mesh with calligraphic black swoops that might form an arc, a wall, a goose's beak. The relationship between foreground and background stays unsettled, and everything seems to be on the edge of tottering over.



Ms. Sillman's "XL12," from 2020. Silk-screened passages of polka dots, mesh with calligraphic swoops. Things seems to be on the edge of tottering over; looming is the operative word. Calla Kessler for The New York Times



"I was thinking about looming," she tells me. "Because that's another emotion that we have now. There's a looming election. A slow-motion car crash. I wanted the scale of the show to enhance bigness and littleness because of the way that certain things loom."

"In the past, I've always made these things where the figure changes. Where the figure is kind of animated. And I had this revelation, kind of dumb and flat-footed, this summer: The ground has changed. This was after the George Floyd murder and the subsequent uprising — I was like, *the ground itself has shifted*. I was trying to make paintings that contained the shifting ground and the motion in them."

Many of the new paintings seem moderately askew, arranged around an axis maybe 10 degrees off-center. That's a form of painterly organization she's used in the past, though here the slant feels more like wobbling, careening. "I really believe in the politics of improvisation," she says. "On its good side, it's about contingency, emotions. Tightrope walking."



Amy Sillman, in Manhattan. A willingness to fail brought her to this moment but young artists are "scared not to succeed," she said. "The political and social and economic environment that they find themselves in is so unconducive to failure. To any kind of experimentation." Calla Kessler for The New York Times

When I tell her that the slightly comic anxiety put me in mind of [Paul Klee](#), especially the late drawings shown at Zwirner last year, she lights up. “I saved so many pictures of that show in my phone!” she says with a laugh, though she also mentions [Ernst Ludwig Kirchner](#), whose art grew more frantic as totalitarianism closed in. There are debts paid, too, to the clammy fields of Mark Rothko, the delirious vulgarity of Chicago’s Hairy Who, and, especially, the troubled, tragicomic figures of Philip Guston; Ms. Sillman wrote a short essay on his art for the catalog of “Philip Guston Now,” the postponed retrospective organized by four museums. (She also signed an open letter, along with 100 other artists, curators and art historians, [demanding the show’s reinstatement](#).)

There’s a line in her statement on Guston’s painting that applies just as much to her own improvisations: “The marks feel like they’re coming equally from within and without, from some source both internal and alien.” And indeed Ms. Sillman is in a thin crowd (with, let’s say, Andrea Fraser, Hito Steyerl, Matias Faldbakken, David Salle) of artists who can *really* write. The evidence is in [“Faux Pas,”](#) a just-published collection — her fourth — of her writings that display the same good humor and intelligence of her best paintings. It also offers some great new coronavirus-themed cartoons, in which Ms. Sillman depicts herself strung out and wire-haired, worrying equally about quarantine weight gain and planetary self-destruction.



These floral still lifes, all untitled, from 2020, were painted at her Long Island retreat during lockdown. “We were all thinking we were going to die,” she said, “and spring was just carrying on.” Calla Kessler for The New York Times



There are essays on her fellow contemporary painters, as well as on Eugène Delacroix, whose art, she writes, “heaves you around in an imaginary bellows that compresses, squeezes and then releases you.” My favorite Sillman essay remains a mordant and [very personal reflection](#) on contemporary painting’s inheritances from Abstract Expressionism, which a whole generation of young artists now reflexively dismiss (too expensive, too egoistic, too male, too C.I.A.-compromised).

That simplistic dismissal smacks of “the worst kind of gender essentialism,” she wrote, and erases what was campy and transgressive in AbEx — qualities that she and many other women and queer painters would later embrace. “The fear and loathing that AbEx arouses reminds me of that ’70s punk button DISCO SUCKS,” she wrote in that essay. “But disco *didn’t* suck, and the injunction against it was perhaps more about homophobia and racism than musical taste. What do you think they were listening to over at the Stonewall, anyway?”

But forming your own taste against the grain has gotten harder than ever in the era of algorithmic sorting, and for younger artists — like the students Ms. Sillman teaches at Bard — just one inept opinion can be fatal.

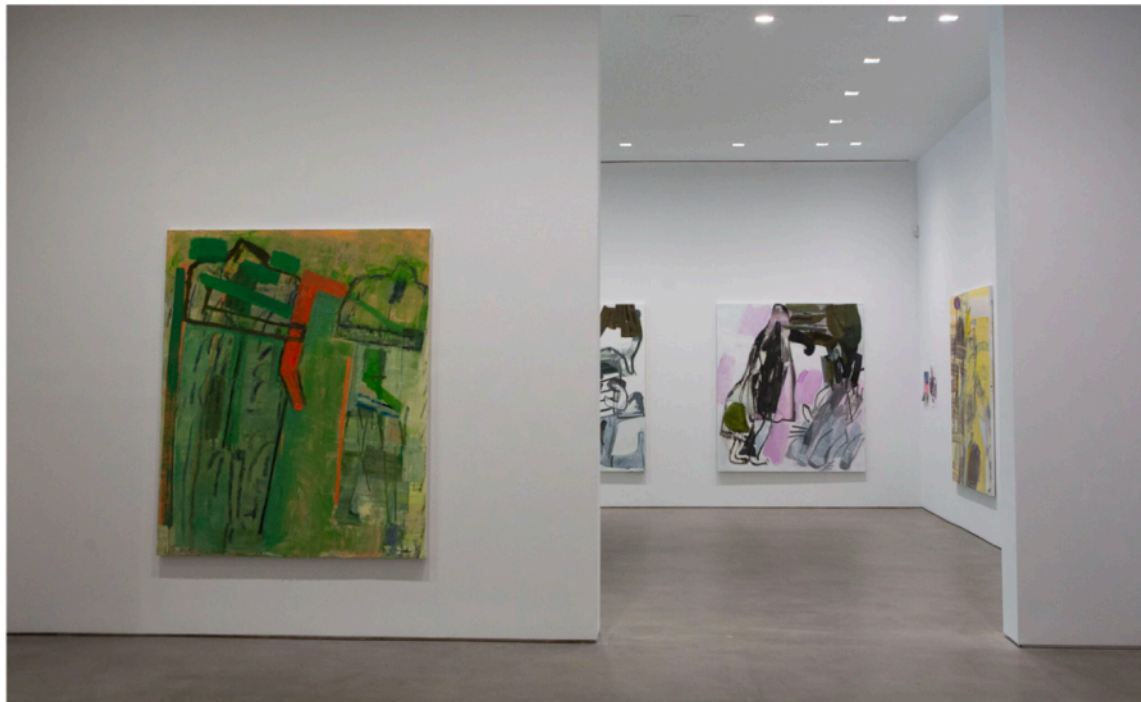


Untitled works. The small flowers are the “great shock” of the Gladstone show, says Jason Farago, “petals rendered as splotches, dense as a bowling ball.” Calla Kessler for The New York Times

“They have pressures that weren’t the pressures of a person in the ’70s,” she notes. “They’re going to be branded, subject to commodification, slotted into definitive categories. They’re scared not to succeed but they don’t trust the art world. So there’s a lot of prohibition — but I can understand that. The political and social and economic environment that they find themselves in is so unconducive to failure. To any kind of experimentation.”

It’s that willingness to fail, though, that brought Ms. Sillman to this breakthrough moment. Which is the great value of her work, and the lesson she imparts to young artists especially: that the future has to be got at through the mind *and* the body, through thinking *and* feeling, through flesh *and* through ones and zeros. It’s a push-and-pull form of discovery that these paintings execute and dramatize, always on the verge of collapse but going forward anyhow.

And then, in the midst of all this motion, still life. The great shock of the Gladstone show are the smallest works here: the flowers she painted every morning, all alone in her humble North Fork rental as the virus spread and the temperatures rose. A posy of peonies, their petals rendered as splotches, dense as a bowling ball. A single drooping sunflower, and then a bouquet of them, in a simple jug.



At Gladstone Gallery, from left, “Split 4,” “20206,” “20204,” “Untitled,” “Untitled,” and “Split,” all from 2020.  
Calla Kessler for The New York Times

She’s pinned 18 of these floral still lifes all together on a single wall. Others are placed, like punctuation marks, between the larger abstractions. “I wanted to place flowers around in the same spirit that you place flowers at a grave site,” she explains. “It’s an act of having a living thing that’s a memento mori.”



Ms. Sillman breathes 20th-century art history, but these tender, brushy still lifes were the first time I'd thought of her art in relation to the big boys of 19th-century French painting. Sunflowers? Irises? All this talk about an AbEx inheritance ... was a van Gogh groupie hiding in there all along?

She smiles. "It was the first time I cried at a museum," she says, remembering the irises at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. "Because he was so tortured. The flowers were flowers of misery. Tears of dejection and tears of joy, which is what I was feeling, what all of us were feeling." She added, "And so I felt like the experience of looking at the show had to be a little wider than usual."

Even in graveyards there are blossoms. "We were all completely thinking we were going to die," she says of those first confined days in March. "Never see our friends again, never see our families. We didn't know what was going to happen. And spring was just carrying on!" She tempers her optimism; nothing with Ms. Sillman is as simple as springtime. "I mean, even though there's global warming and an eco-crisis, the flowers kept coming up. And the flowers were both funerary and joyous."

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**Amy Sillman: Twice Removed**

Through Nov. 14 at Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-206-9300, [gladstonegallery.com](http://gladstonegallery.com). Appointments recommended.

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Jason Farago is an art critic. He reviews exhibitions in New York and abroad, with a focus on global approaches to art history. Previously he edited *Even*, an art magazine he co-founded. In 2017 he was awarded the inaugural Rabkin Prize for art criticism. [@jsf](https://twitter.com/jsf)