Signs of Intelligent Life

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Painting for Amy Sillman is more than just a medium; it is a condition. In the postmodern era, this condition is not one that is clearly defined and easily settled into. Marked by doubt and skepticism toward the validity of the enterprise, the status of painting still remains rather elusive, and requires constant rethinking and redefinition on the part of the artist. Sillman belongs to a generation of painters who came of age during the medium's greatest moment of anxiety, and who—despite resistance and derision from an art world in thrall to anything but painting—have reclaimed the medium for themselves. Without resorting to conceptual bracketing, photographic mediation, or ironic detachment, they paved the way for a new generation of young painters to flourish in today's atmosphere of newfound appreciation.

Sillman's works possess a rare quality in that they openly and proudly invoke myriad forms of painting, ranging from historic to contemporary, western to eastern, and high to low art, only to freely and confidently blend them into a new painterly language that is decidedly

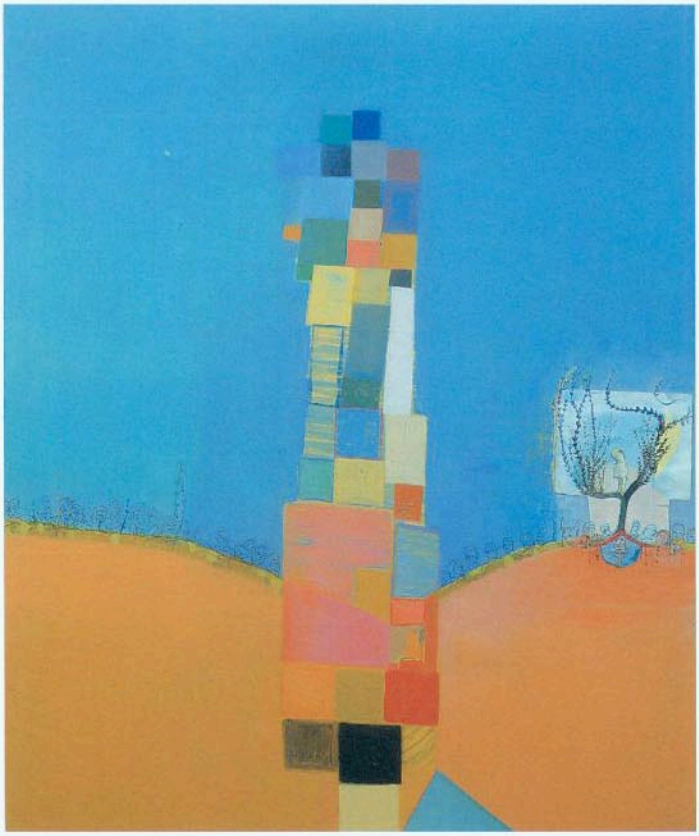

Fig. 1 **Freudian Slip**, 2000. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50¼ inches (152.4 x 127.6 cm). Collection Gregory R. Miller, New York

Fig. 2 **Nose Gay**, 2001. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm). Private Collection

contemporary and personal. Unlike most of her peers, Sillman unabashedly professes her love for the modernist trajectory: for the formal push toward abstraction as well as for the emotional pull of the illogical manifestations of the unconscious revealed by the then new science of psychoanalysis.

Having been told in art school that she had to settle on one mode of painting, Sillman decided, with Philip Guston as her intellectual guide, to work in the very gap between representation and abstraction, and to mine the riches of a philosophical divide now long since overcome. From cubism to surrealism, from the New York to the Chicago School, from Japanese calligraphy to Indian miniatures, from the arts and crafts to the pattern and decorations movement, from folk to comic art, her inclusive embrace of a phalanx of genres and styles over the years has been driven by one desire: to render "intelligent life as lived through the tissues and organs of your own interior body,"[1] giving form to something that is both physical and psychological.

The considerable evolution of her work over the past decades indicates that there is no easy solution to the problem she has set out to solve, and that the path to success is marked by many trials and errors. "I want to pose doubt as a subject," says Sillman. She is the first to admit that her painting takes a long time to develop. This is particularly true for a practice imbued with doubt and ambivalence. "That's what's great about painting—you can see the hesitation and uncertainty. Painting is a performative record of not knowing where you are going."[2] Sillman works intuitively, her process a slow sequence of actions and reactions, carefully weighed and examined, confirmed or rejected, until she arrives at a result that withstands second-guessing.

Fig. 3 **Pink Spring**, 2001. Oil on canvas,
48 x 36 inches (121.9 x 91.4 cm). Private Collection

In painting her own doubt, she has made deconstruction in the form of un-painting—or as Linda Norden has aptly called it, "constructive erasure"[3]—as much a part of the process as its positive counterpart.

Sillman employs a broad variety of mark-making tactics. In each painting, short, deft strokes alternate with sketchy lines that butt up against passages of bold, gestural brushwork or areas of blended or solid colors. Rather than settling on a specific image or any one narrative, they establish complex and multifaceted relationships that can be read formally as well as emotionally, physically as well as psychologically. Figures and shapes always seem to be in various states of becoming or changing, projecting temporariness and fragility. They tell stories that are equally fragmentary and provisional, in a state of emergence or approximation rather than conclusion.

Sillman likes to compare her process to the mechanism of talk therapy, a form of psychoanalysis that pits the free, associative flow of thoughts against analytical critique. This is an apt metaphor for a practice that is both intuitive and critical, relying on insistent questioning of each decision to such a degree that the correction of one gesture potentially eclipses what came before to the point of eradication. In her practice she assumes the roles of both patient and doctor. While painting, Sillman is both on the couch and in the analyst's chair or behind the desk, all the while allowing the professional opinion of other experts, her friends and colleagues, to bear on the successful conclusion of the treatment. As a result, one of the most powerful narratives implied in Sillman's paintings is that of their own making.

The much commented upon awkwardness of Sillman's compositions is a result of an oppositional dynamic at work in each canvas: her deployment of contrasting painterly strategies, and her choice of motif and mode of address make her paintings appear "slightly wrong, or off, versions of things at the same time that they are those things."[4] Each painting is, in her words, "an attempt to make oppositional forces come together" in order to "portray the dialectic between interior and exterior, to mix up the idea of feeling and thinking and remembering and knowing, really being there or not at all."[5] Although she defines her enterprise in terms of a struggle to render visible something as intangible as consciousness, it is a struggle rendered with admirable ease and a healthy dose of humor, grounded in, and engaged with, everyday existence.

This dialectical impulse is most overtly played out in her combination of representational and abstract imagery, whether they grow out of each other or are pitted against one another, merge into each other or imply one another. Nonetheless, they remain distinctly different. Sillman's representational figures are often drawn last (after her abstract forms), and she makes a conscious effort to distinguish them stylistically. The persistence of representational imagery, mostly of body parts and animals, gives pause to the temptation to read the elements of abstraction as expressive metaphors, and instead invites the viewer's projection of meaning onto them.[6]

The title of this exhibition encapsulates this complex pictorial relationship between representational and abstract imagery. In Sillman's paintings, abstraction and representation are both suitor and stranger, united through desire but separated by idiosyncrasy. Their courtship,

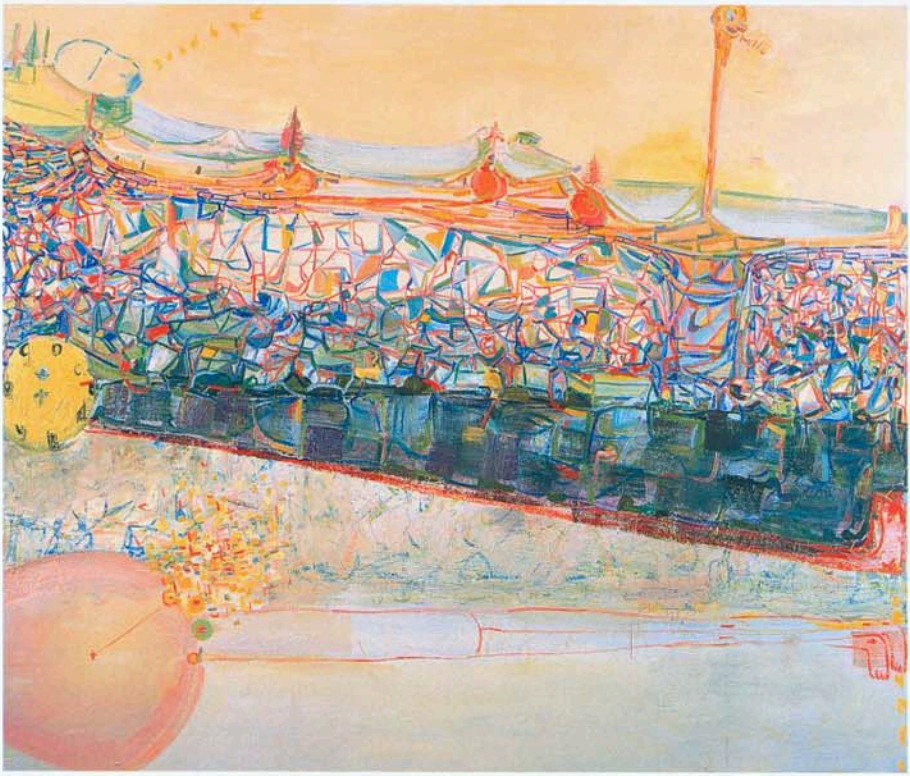

Fig. 4 **Hamlet**, 2001–2002. Oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches (182.9 x 213.4 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee 2003

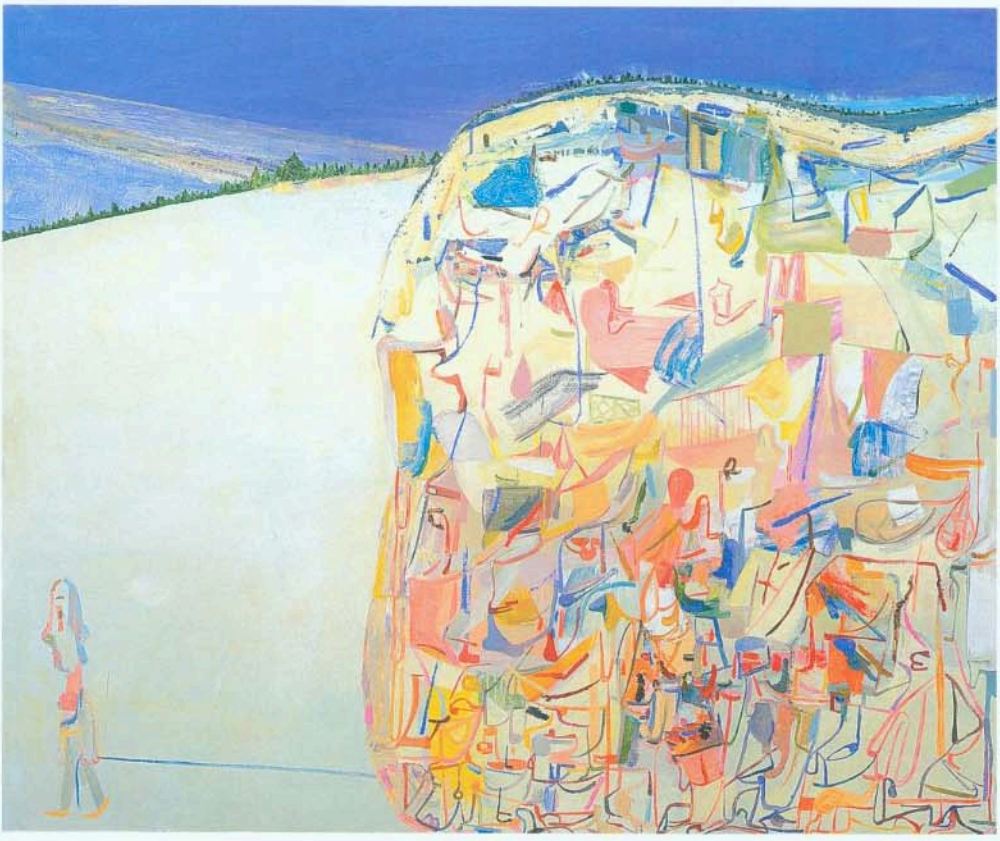

Fig. 5 **Me and Ugly Mountain**, 2003. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches (152.4 x 182.9 cm). Collection Jerome and Ellen Stern

passionately played out over time by the artist, is one marked by awareness of difference, and their union, as tentative or vigorous as it may be, also always implies risk, vulnerability, and transitoriness. In their otherness they confirm each other's difference, and yet they form meaningful, if open-ended wholes that, rather than state what they are, ask what they might be.

The relationship between these oppositional forces has evolved in her work over the past two decades from an easy, yet distinct coexistence to something more interactive and dynamic. This is largely due to the changing relationship within her pictures between drawing and painting, figure and ground. The delicate linear and floral motifs inspired by William Morris and his arts and crafts designs from the late nineteenth century, which Sillman explored in the late 1980s and early 1990s in conscious opposition to the naysayers of painting's decorative impulse, were soon replaced by letters and words. As an intellectual outgrowth of the cursive ornamental gestures, they covered Sillman's paintings with a "forest of language"[7] that reflected an interest in the spoken and written word that still persists today. By the mid to late-1990s, cartoonish figures and animals or, even more often, parts thereof, began with wry mischief to populate her canvases.

Until the early 2000s, Sillman's paintings were built from the ground up through a repeated process of application and erasure that yielded a multilayered image embedded in colored grounds with differing textures; images were stacked on top of each other, arranged side by side, or inscribed into each other. The loosely painted or drawn figures or things, the casually aligned or carefully stacked shapes, and the tender or nervous lines tended to cling to the

Fig. 6 **Unearth**, 2003. Oil on canvas, 66 x 78 inches (167.6 x 198.1 cm). Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins Co., New York

edges of the fields, expanding and growing from there to varying degrees, but mostly staying within the determined confines of layer, slice, or bubble. Although one can chart different moods, from the lyrical and introverted atmospheres of paintings such as *Freudian Slip* (2000, fig. 1), *Nose Gay* (2001, fig. 2), or *Pink Spring* (2001, fig. 3), to the urgent character of *Hamlet* (2001–2002, fig. 4), as well as the humorous and prophetic nature of *Me and Ugly Mountain* (fig. 5), or *Unearth* (fig. 6) (both 2003), the structural principle remains largely the same.

The past few years have seen a shift in approach, with the figure, abstract or representational, becoming less anecdotal and more prominent as a structurally integral part of the overall composition. Sillman herself has attributed this change to a heightened interest in sculpture, fueled by a desire for more tangibility and concreteness within her work. This doesn't mean that the ground recedes in pictorial importance. Rather, figure and ground exist on a more even footing, and assume equal importance in the overall constructive tissue and compositional balance of her paintings, resulting in a new order of imagery in which the formal and chromatic minutiae and intricacy give way to a fresh grandeur of gesture and simplicity of execution.

Trawler (2004, plate 1), one of the earliest paintings in this exhibition, anticipates this directness and physicality while establishing a compositional tension between figure and ground. The painting is roughly divided into three areas with a group of densely stacked but loosely painted oval patches, in varying hues of gray and the occasional pink, green, and red, on the right side of the canvas, set against an open field of yellows and green. Both butt up against a predominantly white triangular area in the lower third of the canvas, which is

animated by singular strokes of color and occupied by what appears to be a series of roughly sketched seated figures. Lines jut from one area into the next as if to establish spatial divisions and connections. A brown bird and a yellow figure in the bottom left introduce just enough anecdotal information to allow a reading of the abstract shapes in terms of the title. With the increase in scale within the picture comes a quantitative reduction of narrative in favor of "nameable elemental things"[8] and stories.

Paintings such as *The New Land* (fig. 7) and *Cliff II* (fig. 8) (both 2005) define Sillman's journey in terms of conquest as well as a leap into the unknown. The figure in *The New Land* gingerly steps into the lush terrain, using a walking stick to navigate its way through the dense, uneven territory marked by broad, tightly packed strokes and giant geometric flowers. In *Cliff II* two pairs of long legs carefully walk the edge of a large orange shape, grounded by densely worked areas alternating between recognizable botanical motifs and abstract marks, that evokes the landmass of the title with surprising formal simplicity. Both images serve as an apt metaphor for the artist exploring a new direction.

A Bird in Hand (plate 7) and *Elephant in the Room* (plate 8) (both 2006) are examples of an unusual economy of means where mostly monochromatic shapes and loosely drawn animals or figures unfold on the canvas. The openness and simplicity of such gestural compositions relate more to Sillman's experiments in drawing and their extension into small paintings such as *Shecky Green* (plate 3) and *Untitled (little elephant)* (plate 4) (both 2005). *Regarding Saturna* (2005, plate 5) and *Conjurer* (2006, plate 9) mark the opposite end of the spectrum,

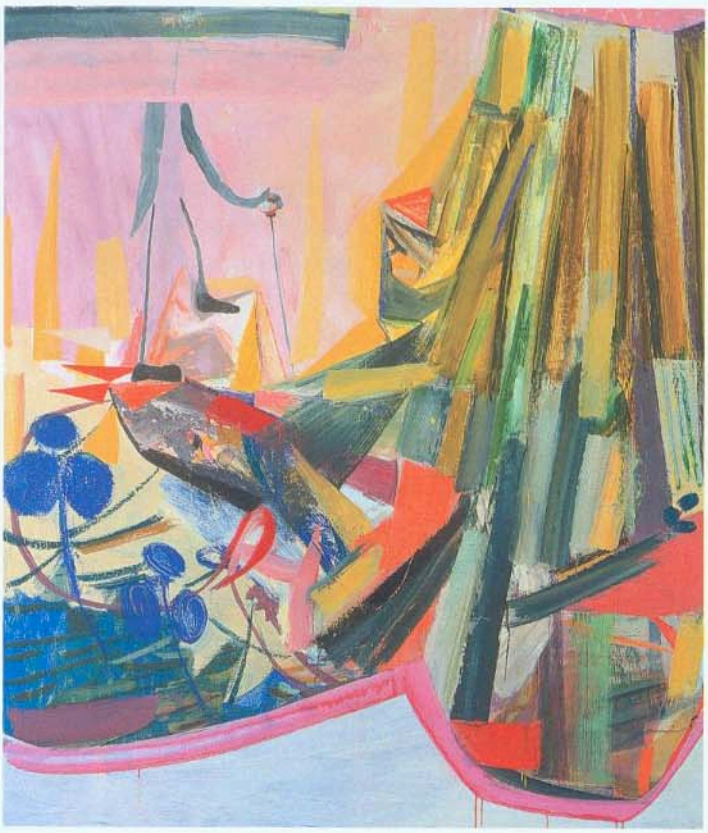

Fig. 7 **The New Land**, 2005. Oil on canvas, 78 x 66 inches (198.1 x 167.6 cm). The Saatchi Gallery, London

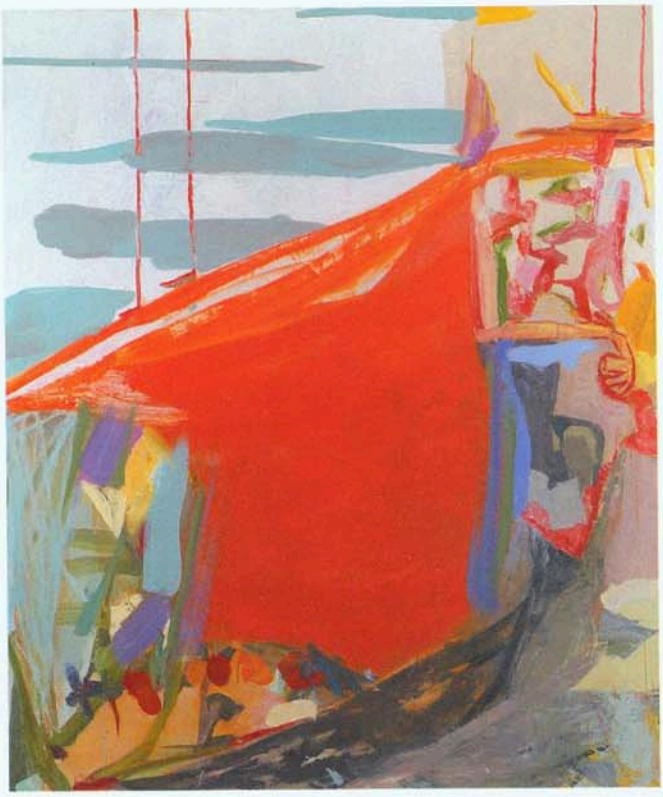

Fig. 8 **Cliff II**, 2005. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches (182.9 x 152.4 cm). The Saatchi Gallery, London

where a densely layered, heavily textured, and chromatically complex area occupies two-thirds of the canvas, lending the composition a solemn weight that stands in stark contrast to the joyous lightness of *A Bird in Hand* or *Elephant in the Room*. *Regarding Saturna* is exceptional in its cohesiveness of form and content. The figures looking out into the distance are mostly outlines with solid heads and translucent bodies. Thus pervaded by their environment, they speak of the immersive quality of contemplation, but also of their groundedness in the terrain they occupy. In *Conjurer* a forceful, heavily busted female figure seems to reach into, or cast a net toward, the heavy mass of horizontally slathered paint hovering above her head as if to suck life out of jumbles of paint. Representational images are embedded throughout: a couple of cartoon dogs peek out of the top right corner, barely visible at first but then an undeniably sneering presence, and a flock of birds grows out of vertical lines running side by side as they descend into the reaching claw of the artist conjurer. The related *Get the Moon* (2006, plate 6) proposes a different dynamic and orientation. Here an arm reaches through a curtain or forest of densely woven vertical lines as if trying to grasp something beyond its reach, pulling things into, as opposed to pulling them out of, the maze of abstract marks.

Elephant in the Room proposes a bluish green supine shape that evokes a leaning or reclining figure as much as an elephant's trunk or limbs. It is uncomfortably inscribed into a yellow field, with limbs extending and unfolding onto the orange ground and against a wall of green that separates it from what appears to be the ghost of another figure tentatively emerging on the other side. Compared to Sillman's comic and tender rendering of the animal in *Elephant*

Fig. 9 **Bed**, 2006. Oil on canvas, 91 x 84 inches (231.1 x 213.4 cm). The Saatchi Gallery, London

(2005, plate 2), this slumped figure alludes to a feeling more than a fact, invoking the uncomfortable presence of an unspoken point of contention as opposed to the animal proper, whose mere existence instills wonder and delight. *A Bird in Hand* functions along the same lines. The extended arms reach with urgency and alertness as if anticipating and, by doing so, trying to defeat frustration. The bird of the title and its companion animals exist mainly as drawings on white ground, their animated outlines hovering in thin air. They are anchored in an amorphous grayness and a vaguely rectangular purple shape with a patterned life of its own, but still a certain sense of imbalance remains that points to the elusiveness of their capture as we chase our dreams or try to recapture the past.

Sillman's current body of work, begun in the summer of 2006, grew out of the desire to formally better understand the reach of embracing arms and interlocking hands. Sillman asked friends to pose for her in bed, creating a situation of intimacy that would provide her with many variant poses involving touching body parts. The series has evolved as a progression

from drawings done directly from life, to memory drawings executed shortly thereafter, to paintings completed later on.

The earliest in this series is *Bed* (2006, fig. 9), in many ways the most representational and disturbing. Not only do the spooning figures appear skeletal, but their intimacy is overshadowed by an ambiguous, ghostlike figure hovering above and reaching around them in an attempt to participate in, or take away, their togetherness. *M&Y* (plate 14) and *O&N* (plate 16) (both 2007) are far more abstract renderings of these encounters. The temporal and physical distance registers on a formal as well as a psychological level. In *M&Y* the bodies of the posing couple, referred to only by the initials of the title, become roughly hewn abstract shapes in complementary colors, with bulbous forms for heads, elongated ovals for bodies, and long, angular narrow shapes and broad lines as limbs that connect and collide with each other. In *O&N* nothing but a few lightly drawn fingers betray a human presence in an otherwise powerfully abstract composition. Whereas *M&Y* is likely to be read in terms of landscape, *O&N* appears more architectural in character. The vertical format and upward striving dynamic of the composition with its jolting shapes and lines contribute to its constructivist appeal. In these paintings Sillman's abstract shapes assume an unprecedented volume and authority. This is particularly apparent when they are compared to *Psychology Today* (2006, plate 12), where the dominant motif, a cube-like shape, is literally messed and opened up with swirls and patches of color. These highly dynamic compositions of intersecting and rotating planes and lines, and of oppositional color relationships are closer to early modern abstraction than anything Sillman has ever done.

The poised beauty of the couple paintings speaks of the comfort level of the modeling pairs and their self-assumed poses, but it also points to the artist's remove from the intimacy she set out to depict. As portraits of other people, albeit close friends and colleagues, the couple paintings are images of emotional distance. In their solidity and earnestness, they also speak to the weight of Sillman's experience as a woman and an artist whose practice now spans several decades. This doesn't mean that Sillman won't strike a light tone or make jokes anymore; she does both willingly and often, as can be seen in contemporary non-couple paintings such as *Untitled (yellow w/ bird)* (2007, plate 15). Just as *The Plumbing* (2006, fig. 10) marked an exceptional moment of quiet lyricism among its painterly peers, *Untitled (yellow w/ bird)* serves as a reminder that Sillman's modus operandi is one of inclusiveness, plenitude, and variety. One of Sillman's greatest qualities is her adaptability and openness to change, and a new phase of life is likely to bring about a new development in her art. As a self-described "Romantic Modern Postmodern Aesthetic Sensualist,"[9] Sillman is always one to relate art to life, and she paints the way she lives: driven by passion and desire, full of doubt but also courage, never at an end but always at a beginning and likely to take us by surprise.

1. Phong Bui, "In Conversation: Amy Sillman with Phong Biu," *Brooklyn Rail* (April 2006), available at http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006/4/art/amy-sillman-with-phong-bui (accessed November 30, 2006).
2. Amy Sillman, quoted in Faye Hirsch, "Crude Oils," *World Art* (1996): p. 74.
3. Linda Norden, "Amy Sillman: The Elephant in the Painting," *Artforum* (February 2007): p. 242.
4. Amy Sillman and Gregg Bordowitz, *Between Artists* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2007), pp. 7–8.
5. Ibid., p. 39.
6. Norden, p. 245.
7. "We live in a forest of language," she says. "I like the idea that I might be making up a foreign language, that to visit my work you have to come to a foreign country." Amy Sillman, quoted in Gail Gregg, "Streams of Consciousness," *Art News* (April 2001): p. 122.
8. Phong Bui.
9. Sillman and Bordowitz, p. 21.