

UGLY FEELINGS

A Dialogue with AMY SILLMAN by Ian Berry

Amy Sillman is an uncompromising painter. Her widely influential body of work has built on traditional formats—such as landscape, portraiture, abstraction, and caricature—only to move past them, pushing these known ways of working into new places. With a fierceness and generosity of spirit, Sillman makes paintings that explore psychological concerns while combining colors, forms, and ideas in ways that are both joyful and uncomfortable. Her artistic investigations spring from a belief in the possibilities of painting and a dedication to delving into personal thoughts and emotions, no matter how anxious or awkward they may be. Fascinated by the act of coupling, Sillman's most recent series of work begins by drawing couples that she knows, translating her experiences with them into a range of visual interpretations that become increasingly abstract.

IAN BERRY: Your newest works start with drawing couples. How did this project develop?

AMY SILLMAN: It began when I was making a large painting two summers ago, a painting of a couple lying in bed with a third form hovering above them. The arm of the third was reaching down between them or onto them, as if an intrusive, ghost-like form was piercing them.

IB: Was there a conceptual reason for the third form or was it subconscious?

AS: It was a subconscious structure.

IB: Not by design?

(page 2)
*Peggy Ahwesh and
Keith Sanborn, 2006*
Pencil on paper
15 x 22 1/2"
Courtesy of the artist

(facing)
Bed, 2006
Oil on canvas
91 x 84"
The Saatchi Gallery, London

L&M (1st version from life),
2007
Pencil and watercolor on paper
25 x 39"
Courtesy of the artist

AS: Right, it was a subconscious structure that was coming up again and again—three-part color harmonies, third figures, a figure between figures. So I was making this big painting and I couldn't quite get it right. At the time I was only drawing figures out of my head in a sort of cartoonish way.

IB: Maybe you were thinking about someone real while drawing, or maybe not.

AS: Exactly. I've always used cartoons in that way. Anyway, I couldn't get their arms right. I couldn't get their hands right. It looked terrible. So I called up my friends Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn because I knew that I could get them to lie in bed and pose for me. I rushed over with pen and ink, and they got into a pose and I drew them.



IB: Did you talk to each other while drawing?

AS: We were chit-chatting as I was arranging them in a few different poses. It wasn't at all what I imagined it looked like. I had gotten it all wrong. But the drawings came out beautifully and I liked the experience of drawing them.

L&M (3rd version from memory), 2007

Ink on paper
22 3/4 x 30"

Courtesy of the artist and
Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York

IB: Drawing them, or being with them, or both?

AS: Both. Drawing gave me license to stare at them. I also realized later that looking at them makes me the "other," which is an interesting position. My psychiatrist gets a gleeful look on her face when I talk about it.

IB: So when you start to draw do you ask your subjects to sit in a certain way, or lie a certain way, like that first time?



AS: No, I don't care what they do; I'll draw them however they choose to pose. Everybody does something different. The great thing about couples is that they arrange themselves in these weird positions. For a couple of years I had been painting what I thought were sculptural forms, so this project provided a rich area of shapes to use.

IB: Have you ever drawn a couple who were clearly uncomfortable sitting with each other?

AS: No, but I've drawn people who were sitting on the couch next to each other and feeling uncomfortable about being drawn.

IB: Or being watched.

AS: Yes, they didn't want to be seen that much. A few people emphatically refused when I asked them to pose for me. Then I've drawn other people who immediately got into some romantic pretzel shape, or people who said, "Can we take off our clothes?" I have to say, "Please don't! I'm not here to draw your sex life, I'm just here because you *have* a sex life!" Couples usually sit in more complicated ways if they have already been intimate with each other. It opens up the field of shapes I'm going to get.

IB: Whom do you choose to draw?

AS: It's totally random. So far I've drawn seventeen couples, which has taken me a year and a half. Once I finish that initial drawing there is a whole other procedure that involves going home and re-drawing them from memory.

IB: Memory of the time together, or memory of the drawing?

AS: Memory of the people, of what they look like. As soon as I draw them from life, I go home and draw them from memory.

IB: You put the first drawing away?

AS: I put it away, I don't look at it, and I try to test my memory. I got better and better at it as I went along. The first memory drawings were pretty scratchy attempts.

IB: Were you thinking of this as an assignment for yourself to help you move toward abstraction, or did you not know that would be the outcome?

AS: I didn't know anything. I just kept figuring stuff out as I went.

IB: When do you know that you've got the system right? Because now we can see this body of work and it all has a clear flow.

AS: I don't think I knew it until now! Valerie Wade at Crown Point Press in San Francisco came to my studio recently and said something really helpful: she pointed out that Richard Diebenkorn had made prints that shared similarities with my work—he used abstracted elements or aspects of things from life drawings. I had never really thought much about Diebenkorn, or making work in this very traditional way. Valerie invited me to Crown Point to make prints that focused specifically on that area between observed figuration and abstraction. I hated printmaking before I went out there, and, to be honest, half the time there I was tearing my hair out, but later I thought what I had done there was great. I brought all these memory drawings, and the first day I made ink wash drawings of those memory drawings so that I would have some kind of template or platform to begin making some sugar-lifts, which are etchings made with a brush and a sugar solution. One etching started as a drawing of Nicole Eisenman and Victoria Robinson and became this psychedelic peppermint swirl. After that I began to let all the figures totally go.

IB: And the process doesn't necessarily have a set order, right? You're not making a drawing and then transposing that drawing to

Untitled, 2007

Gouache and pencil on etching
Each work 26 x 20"

Courtesy of the artist

a canvas or a plate. You are making a drawing as a way to exercise your thinking about shapes and form and then making a painting.

AS: Right, it's often all mixed up. This all sounds logical and chronological but it really isn't. In fact, I've made a lot of drawings after I made the paintings, and now even some of the paintings are generating themselves without any physical connection to the couples. But the way I could open up an area of structural space in the paintings was to start by making drawings of drawings of drawings.

IB: How many layers do you put on each painting?

AS: Hundreds.

IB: Do you scrape them away?

AS: Again and again.

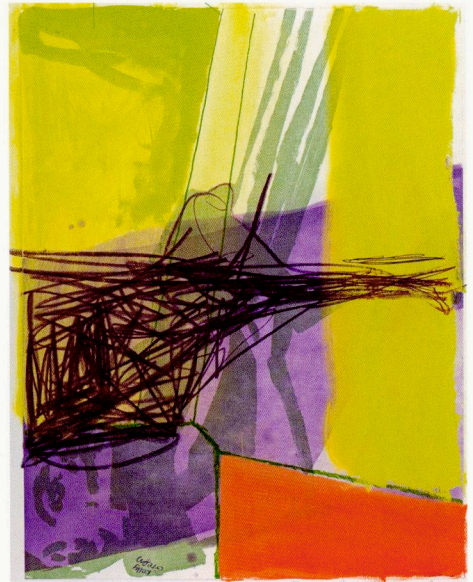


IB: Do you change the colors?

AS: Every day.

IB: Do you ever miss parts that you've painted over?

AS: Yes. Sometimes when I am getting into a painting I try to paint around what I think is the great part. Then the great part becomes this ugly little tumor that has nothing to do with anything else in the painting, and finally I just have to paint it out. In writing it's called "killing your darlings." Sometimes there are beautiful places that you have to keep, but there are definitely always struggles between one state and another. The paintings are the results of those struggles. Other times I try to go back to the original impulse for a painting after it has become unrecognizable. I'll take out the original drawing that I was looking at and use it like a compass because the first thing I was doing might have been the best thing.



IB: Does a painting you've made quickly feel different to you from a painting you've worked on for a year that has hundreds of layers? Is there something that improves over those layers that makes it more valuable to you or the experience more important to you, or does it just represent more work?

AS: Well, I love it when they're fast. I wish all paintings could be that easy. But some paintings just take more time to finish.

IB: Is there value in the labor?

AS: It's not in the labor *per se*. There is value in trying to find something that feels surprising. It's not that I'm interested in endless, tedious work; it just might take a while to find the surprise.

IB: You dive into moments of ugliness, awkwardness—feeling like you don't really like it so much, that those colors shouldn't go together, or that view looks weird—those kind of uncomfortable or off-putting things. You've been wading around in that your whole life. What's the charge you get from investigating those places?

AS: Well, I guess I just love the idea of awkwardness. It's like rooting for the underdog. Last summer I read a book of literary criticism by Sianne Ngai called *Ugly Feelings*. In the book she investigates what she calls "the minor affects"—irritation, boredom, disgust, stupidity, things that aren't noble or grand like beauty, power, violence, strength, majesty, not any of that stuff. It is about turning away, or something you turn away from rather than desiring it. She aligns this to the time that we live in and the current political climate. That book really puts its finger on something for me. Its ideas parallel my interest in visual ugliness and awkwardness.

IB: You had been interested in these kinds of emotion for a while, even before reading that book.

AS: I think I always was interested in the thing that you weren't supposed to be interested in. But isn't everyone?

IB: I don't think so. I think a lot of people are driven by trying to reach some kind of suburban ideal, or the desire to be like their own image of success. Some people want precisely not to be against. They would rather their lawn looked just like their neighbor's, or that they had the same shoes as their friend.

AS: I suppose I am fueled by that too—everybody wants not to look ugly. We want to wear shoes that somebody else says are cool or have a good haircut that looks sexy or whatever. But then at the same time, everyone is always trying to be subversive. The only thing that makes an artist different is that an artist has an object that stands in for her and speaks to that subversion articulately.

IB: Have you always known that those things are what you want to make? Or that this is the space you want to make work in?

AS: I've always been extremely drawn to things that seemed problematic. I liked painting because supposedly painting was dead, and I liked the idea of being a female and painting because everyone was saying that painting was a male language. Or I like the idea of formalism, which seemed verboten when I went to art school.

IB: You didn't necessarily like them because you wanted to resuscitate them, you just wanted to figure out why they were in the place they were.

AS: Yes, because difficulty is interesting.

IB: You are a contrarian.

AS: Not a contrarian, a scrapper.

IB: What turns you on about that?

AS: To go into the middle of a knot is a form of integrity to me—and to investigate the area that seems like the worst thing you could do is kind of exciting.

IB: When did art become part of your life? In high school?

AS: No, it was after I decided I was going to be a linguist. I didn't want to be an artist in high school. I had a series of adventures around that time—I went on quite a trip. I went to college for a year and dropped out. I went to Kodiak, Alaska. I went to Japan. I came back to Chicago. At the end of 1975 I went to New York.

IB: You went to New York for art school?

AS: I went to study Japanese at New York University's Asian Language Department. I wanted to become a translator. But I took an art class, *Drawing I*, and that was it for me.

IB: That changed everything?

AS: Totally changed everything. I wanted to be an artist. Instinctually I had a good hand and at the end of the class I said to the professor, "I want to go to Cooper Union and be an art student." And he said, "Ah, you'll just be a waitress."

IB: Because you were a girl?

AS: Because I was a girl. I asked him, "What should I do then?" He said I should go to the School of Visual Arts and study commercial art so I could make a living. I said okay and just did what I was told—I was very naïve.

IB: You got a BFA?

AS: Yes, but I transferred to the painting department after about an hour in commercial art. I realized that a lot of the kids in SVA's

design department were metalheads from Queens, you know, guys who looked like they were straight out of Daniel Clowes' comic *Art School Confidential*, sweaty guys with bad acne who wanted to draw like Frank Frazzetta. Those were all the wrong coordinates.

IB: When did you move to Brooklyn?

AS: 1984. I came back from a trip to India in 1981 and moved to Hoboken first. I had a job doing magazine production, which I kept until 1990. I worked at *Vogue* and *US* for one week a month. All the artists, filmmakers and rock musicians I knew then worked in the art departments of magazines. It was a great job at that time, you only worked one week a month.

That whole time I was making paintings—first these big paintings with biomorphic shapes on flat grounds and later small, complicated, drawing-type paintings on wooden panels. I had gone to school during the 1970s, so most of my friends studied post-structuralist and conceptual art. I was into that, too, but then I went as far away as I could think of and looked at Indian art.

IB: How many years did it take for you to feel like you were making work that you wanted to show?

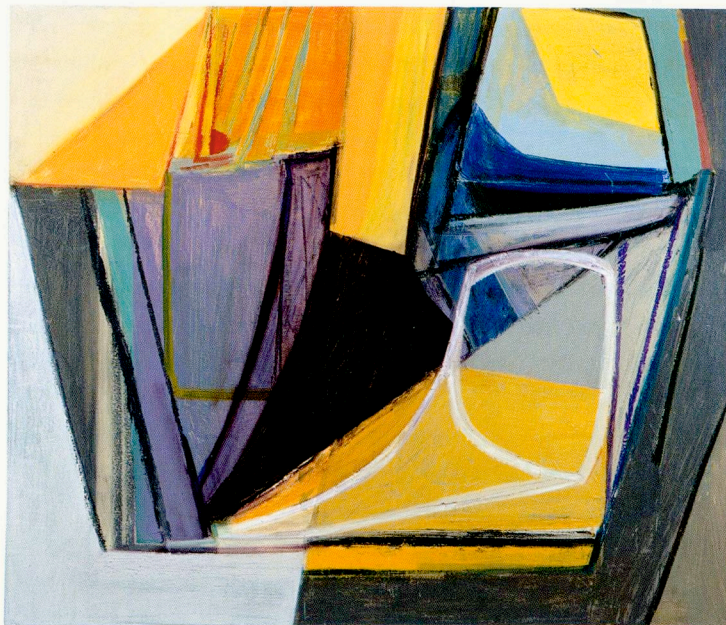
AS: I got my undergraduate degree in 1979 and I started making work that I actually liked around 1994, so I guess it took me about fifteen years.

IB: What did your early paintings look like?

AS: Ugly!

IB: Figurative or abstract?

AS: It was always both. I was always interested in the idea that you could make something that was both things, and I still am. I've approached conflictual space practically every which way you can.



Untitled (complex space),
2007
Oil on canvas
39 x 45"
Private Collection, Belgium

I think that's why I couldn't be a good conceptual art student. I liked the kind of people who would be into conceptual art but I couldn't think clearly enough to be a conceptual artist.

IB: You liked that conversation?

AS: I have an analytical mind, but only after the fact, as a critic. As a maker of paintings, I wanted to hold on to the idea of an instinctual way of making art. I just didn't know how to think without the pencil in my hand.

IB: You think it through as process.

AS: I couldn't conceptualize the object in advance that was going to hit the note that I wanted. I was interested in the idea of saying one thing and doing another, or making one thing and claiming another. I was always interested in the idea of a multi-part approach. You can't really plan that kind of argument out in advance.

IB: Did you always have a sense that there wasn't much difference between your drawing and painting practices? You have said in the past that everything is drawing for you.

AS: I knew that I wasn't very good at making paintings. No one taught me about painting space. If I had gone to a proper painting school, I probably would have known how to make paintings that built space through color and good formal stuff like that. But I only really knew how to build a painting like a drawing, a rectangle with marks on it, or through accidents, ignorance, and mistakes.

IB: If you didn't understand painting, how did you get to understand the language around it?

AS: I still don't understand it. I'm still learning about painting. It's still opening up for me. I'm just starting to understand color now, and I have been looking at Abstract Expressionism for many years. The new paintings are partly gestural. That doesn't mean they are any easier to make, but it does mean they are built out of moments and fragments.

IB: Which artists did you like when you were younger?

AS: I liked all kinds of artists. I loved Philip Guston and a lot of 1940s and '50s American painting, although I didn't really understand Pollock at all. I loved early Sienese painting, especially Sassetta. I also liked parody and humor, like in the early William Wegman videos. I liked the *Bad Painting* show at the New Museum. I loved Richard Foreman plays, I loved Rauschenberg and the dance performances at Judson Church. Now I still like all kinds of things. I love Howard Hodgkin.

IB: Which artists did you not like?

AS: I didn't understand hardcore minimalism like Donald Judd and Dan Flavin. It's funny because I could understand work by

Adrian Piper because it was about language, persona, and performativity. But I just didn't understand a lot of American minimalism, even though I loved Mondrian. I admitted to my friend Rachel when we drove out to Marfa a few years ago that I didn't really *like* hard-edge metal sculpture. She was appalled.

IB: When were you involved in the journal *Heresies*?

AS: When I was a student, one of my teachers was May Stevens and I offered to help at the magazine she was working on. This was around 1977.

IB: Was that your first introduction to feminism?

AS: No, my first introduction to feminism was in high school in the early 1970s. All the cool girls were feminists. There were these two girls in my high school—these girls were the coolest girls I'd ever seen in my life—Nancy Lawton and Susan Nussbaum. My friend Donna Mandel and I wanted to get in with those girls. They were all "sisterhood is powerful."

IB: *Roe v. Wade* was in 1973—were they talking about that issue then?

AS: Who knows? I didn't even have sex then. I was just interested in hanging out with Nancy and Susan.

IB: Tell me more about *Heresies*.

AS: At SVA May Stevens taught this class called *Women in Art*. She told us she was starting a feminist magazine, and I volunteered and brought my girlfriend Su. That's how I learned to do paste-up, which is how I made a living for all those years. She brought us into the *Heresies* collective with Joan Snyder, Pat Steir, Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond—all women who were very interesting and way ahead of us in terms of art making.

IB: So were the *Heresies* artists examples for you in terms of how to live a life in art?

AS: It was interesting to see how they set up their studios. I was Pat Steir's studio assistant, and I remember secretly studying the layout, like how she had her kitchen in one room, and her painting space in another room. I didn't know anything. I didn't have a loft. I had a small apartment in the East Village, so I didn't even know where I was supposed to make the art.

IB: Is having a political side to your art life critical to you?

AS: Yes, definitely.

IB: Is artwork a good place for those agendas?

AS: It's good if you're good at it.

IB: Do you think that is part of your work?

AS: I think it is part of my work because I am interested in problems and resistances. It interests me to focus on something that appears to have been the province of men more than of women. It interests me to enter that province with the wrong resumé and then to see how those politics get even more complicated on the inside. It's that same kind of perverse interest in doing what you are not supposed to do. I'm still interested in the assumption that if you're a feminist you're not supposed to be making paintings that are based on your love of a time in art history when so few women were represented. Is a good feminist really supposed to be making paintings coming out of Picasso?

IB: So I guess you're saying you're a bad activist.

AS: I guess I'm not an artist-activist. I don't really think that my work functions as activism, but it certainly functions as some kind



Untitled (ship in a bottle), 2006
Oil on canvas
39 x 45"
Collection Carlier Gebauer,
Berlin

of resistant activity. I think activism is different from resistance. Painting for me is about the practice of negotiating between those two states—being both tremendously analytic and at the same time being lost or at least a bit naïve. Naïveté allows for levity and a kind of goofiness and confusion.

IB: It allows you to keep a sense of humor.

AS: Yes, because you're thinking, "Oh well, I'll probably screw it up." That may be a good thing. That kind of approach is a way of emptying something of its content and refilling it with what is new but may be wrong, something that you've gotten from the wrong place with the wrong equipment and faulty understanding.

IB: How do you keep in touch with that naïve aspect?

AS: I've tried to make work that consciously looks kind of different from the last work.

IB: You make yourself go there, to that difficult place.

AS: I've always happily gone. I had a show at Casey Kaplan that was about my bad understanding of minimalism. Then I had another show at Sikkema with paintings about my wrong-headed idea about landscape space. Then I removed the horizon to look at the idea of shape, even though I'm such a backwards formalist. If you don't just keep making the same thing, then you're not an "expert." In some weird way you are resisting the marketplace.

IB: Which is a bit of politics creeping in.

AS: Absolutely.

IB: You just described the differences between some of your bodies of work, but one consistent thread in all of them is a constant negotiation between representation and abstraction. What else would you say is consistent throughout?

AS: My work is always psychological whether I want it to be or not. The shapes that I am interested in looking at and drawing always turn into forms that have some kind of psychological narrative. 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, or something is just the wrong color in general. There is some kind of discomfort or complexity that makes the object troubled in a way. The object is endangered, its stability is imperiled in some way, it's tipping over, or you can see through it. Or it is abject. That's the way I read my work.

IB: What if problem issues don't arise? Do you need to figure out how to be against something in order to be active? I guess what I'm asking is if being against something, if being contrarian is

useful to you as a subject of your work, or as a way to understand your position.

AS: It's more about the idea of making things difficult. There are simple ways to talk about the work—you like it, I hate it, it's pretty, I like ugly—but things in the paintings are really complicated, and often ridiculous. Working becomes ridiculous in a good way when you realize that you may not want to make art about feelings but there isn't anything else.

IB: That makes me think of taking a position as an artist. You are encouraging us to practice that in a way that will spill over into other parts of our lives.

AS: Yeah, I want everyone to stand up for difficulty! And rupture! It's about presenting a challenging space that can't be footnoted or captioned precisely. It exceeds description alone. I love how difficult work partly throws the weight of interpretation onto the viewer's shoulders, and moves beyond nicely mannered, captioned presentation.

IB: You have said that teaching is one of the places in your life that you feel is most ethical.

AS: At some point I started to think that teaching was a political act. Teaching was encouraging people one-on-one, one after the other, directly and personally, to go ahead and do what they needed to do and to do it as they wished. It's very powerful to have a teacher who encourages you to hold on to your eccentricity.

IB: When you say that to your students, does it help to remind you to do that yourself?

AS: I hope so. Sometimes I see a student make a breakthrough and really follow his or her own weirdness to a place that's so great you just have to trust it. That's inspiring.

IB: I want to ask you about humor, which has been such a big part of your work over the years. What gets released in the funny parts of an artwork?

Horse, 2006
Oil on canvas
80 x 69¹/₄"
Treacy and Todd Gaffney,
New York

AS: The irrational. It's an anxious state. That's what I like in paintings. I wish there was more funny art. There isn't enough funny art.

IB: Why do you think there isn't?

AS: I don't know. Not enough Jews?

