

# Inside the Painter's Studio

Joe Fig







AMY SILLMAN: JANUARY 6, 2006  
2006, Mixed media, 11 x 11 x 9.5 inches

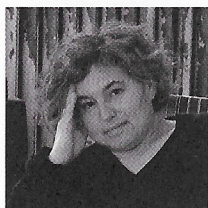




# Amy Sillman

Williamsburg, Brooklyn

January 6, 2006



## **When did you consider yourself a professional artist, and when were you able to dedicate yourself full-time to that pursuit?**

In about 1990 I had had this job at a magazine for eleven years doing production work. That job became computerized, and I didn't really want to make the shift from this old-world craft of the x-acto knife and press-type. So I called my friend Rochelle Feinstein<sup>1</sup> and asked, "Would teaching be an option?" She was very helpful; talking to her was great. She recommended me for a one-year replacement gig at Bennington [College].

I wasn't selling enough work to live on [at the time]. I probably sold enough work to live on beginning in the years that I had solo shows in New York, from around 1994. Then I probably could have eked out a living, but I just didn't want to take my foot out of the [teaching] door. You know how it is—every time you have a show, if you do well, you sort of feel suspicious, like, "I'm not going to quit my job *now*, because what if that doesn't happen again?" So then you become more involved in the place where you teach, and you get invested. I've been talking about this lately because I was asked recently about my politics, and I said that my politics are in teaching. Teaching has nothing to do with not being successful enough to quit—it's more like an ethical act. So, I'm still doing that.

## **How long have you been in this studio?**

Twenty-one years.

## **Has the location of this studio influenced your work?**

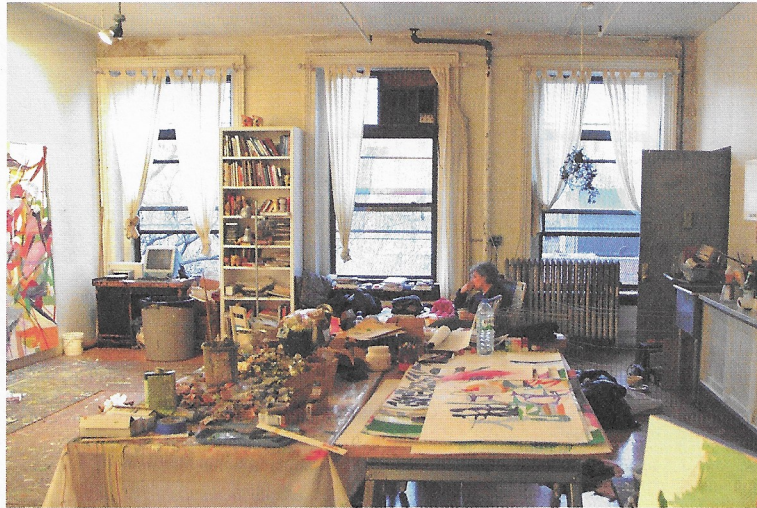
I don't know. Who knows what would have happened if I weren't here? This has been where everything has happened.

## **Can you describe a typical day in the studio?**

I get up late. I'm lazy. My friends say that I'm not lazy, but I think that I am. I rarely get up before nine or nine thirty. Then I putter around, check email and drink coffee, and I walk my dog, call friends, and kind of wake up. I probably get over to the studio around noon. Then I putter around some more, drink more

1. Rochelle Feinstein (b. 1946), American. Artist and professor of painting and printmaking at Yale University.





coffee, look at things, change my clothes, move things around, waste time and do other procrastinating kinds of activities. Then I start working. Then I work pretty hard until, I don't know, until I run out of steam. Not until nighttime.

**Do you listen to music or have the TV on or something like that?**

I don't watch TV *ever*. I go through periods with music. I usually listen to the radio 'cause then I don't have to change it. Sometimes I get involved with CDs and stuff, but I just don't want to bother with it, so I usually just listen to NPR. I'll just turn it on, and it's on. But lately I've been finding that I need to work in silence. So I actually work with nothing on until I figure something out what's really important to me, and then I put on really loud dance music. *[laughs]* Probably the upstairs neighbor doesn't know this. What he doesn't know is that when the dance music comes on, it means that I did something really good in the studio. *[laughs]* And then I dance around!

**How long have you had your painting table?**

Since [last] September. I just went out and got a few of those doors and a couple sets of those metal things [sawhorses]. I just decided to set up the studio in zones. *[points around studio]* There's the painting zone, there's the look-at-drawings-plus-put-the-mail zone, and then there's the actual drawing zone back there. So all the tables are zones. I wish I had a wheeling table, but I'm a bad carpenter, and I don't know anyone—if I could get an assistant to do everything that I wanted to do, that would be great. The problem is, I don't really like having people here because they don't know where anything goes, and it's all in my head, so to explain all that would be too much trouble. But if in theory some carpenter would show up and build me one of those wheelie [table] things with glass and I could wheel it around—that would be great.

**Do you work on one painting at a time or several?**

I work on them all at once. And there's usually—I'm sure this is really common—there's one painting that's just starting out, that's kind of fresh. And one horrible midstream one that doesn't know what it's trying to do. Then there's







2. Amy Sillman,  
Sikkema Jenkins &  
Co., New York,  
New York, April 8–  
May 6, 2006.

one that might be done that's sort of sitting there, soaking up the vibe. A lot of times I will work on one until I think it's done, then I'll put it where it's peripherally in view. Usually I change it a little bit as I go along. I'll just sort of see it out of the corner of my eye for so long that finally one day I'll go, "Oh right, I have to move that green thing."

**How often do you clean your studio, and does that affect your work?**

I never clean my studio; I'm sure that my work would be better if I would. Again, I wish that somebody could come over and help me, but I would have to tell them where everything is, every single thing. I can't explain it to anyone. You know what I do... I tidy up. Because you were coming, I tidied up. I moved everything over on that table and made a little pile. Once in awhile I go around with a huge garbage bag and pretty much throw everything away. Probably after my next show<sup>2</sup> I'll sweep through and throw everything away so that when I start new work again there won't be this sort of visual noise.

**Do you have any special devices or tools that are unique to your painting process?**

I don't think so, except for my devotion to the Bondo putty scraper, I really like it.

**Like a palette knife?**

It's like a soft rubber spreader. It's flexible. Those spackle knives are too hard—the edges dig in and they can tear the canvas, so I've discovered these nice putty things that I like. They're big and wide like squeegees, but squeegees don't give you as much control. These things are great because you manipulate them with your hand so you can really feel what you're doing. And I use a lot of palette knives—I'll go through these [palette knives] right until they break off. I have to go get new ones all the time. So the palette knives and scrapers—I guess those are what I really love.

**So you're using oil paint and oil sticks? Why are you using some Williamsburg and some R&F [Handmade Paints]?**

Well sometimes it's because of the color. If there is a certain color that I like in a brand, I get that. I'm pretty brand loyal. I always get R&F paint sticks because R&F is this factory up in Kingston [New York] near Bard [College], and I started going up there with my Bard students and buying paint sticks there. They also sell other brands too, like Williamsburg paint. But when you're upstate, you know, it's really amazing to have a really good paint store right nearby. I go through these paint sticks like... I told the guy at R&F, Richard Frumess, that I wouldn't be able to make my work if it wasn't for him. He always tries to get me to send him slides [of my work], and I keep forgetting. But I can tell you that those are the best colors in the world mushed up into a stick. There's a lot of drawing involved in my work, and these paint sticks are just great for that.

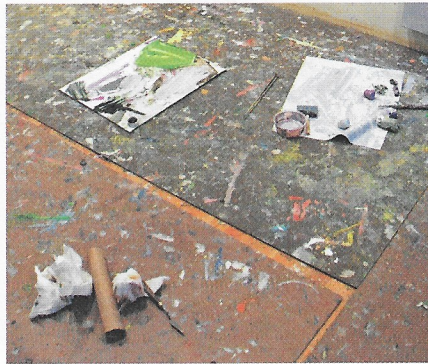
**When did you start using those [oil sticks]?**

I don't know, maybe five or six years ago.

**So you get the oil sticks up in Kingston?**

Well yes, I get them there because the factory is near my house upstate. Those guys are the bomb! They make special sticks for famous artists who need special





things. I saw this big huge one once that was *this* [the size of a soda can] big—a dark, tarry brown/black—and they said, “We make that special for Richard Serra.”<sup>3</sup> Then I went to DIA [Dia:Beacon]<sup>4</sup> and realized that there’s that big wall [Serra] painted half black there, and he must have made it with that stick!... Did you know that impressionism arose partly because putting paint in tubes was invented?

**No, I didn’t know that.**

Think about it, it makes total sense. After years of artists mixing their own paints, grinding them, etcetera... they could finally just put paint *tubes* in a knapsack and carry the materials outside wherever they wanted to, all day long.

**I didn’t realize that—that does make sense. When you’re contemplating your work, where and how do you sit or stand?**

Everywhere. I stand in front of it, then I sit down, and then I take a lot of naps. I’ll have all my clothes on—my shoes on, the lights on, the radio on—and I’ll be overcome with exhaustion and fall asleep. Then I’ll wake up and try to surprise myself [with what I see]. Also a lot of eating, standing by the fridge, or talking on the phone [*laughs*]... but I’ll really be contemplating the work the whole time.

**How do you come up with titles?**

You know that’s a really good question. Titles just come into my head, and sometimes I don’t have a good title because nothing came into my head.

**Have you ever worked for another artist?**

Yes. I worked for Pat Steir<sup>5</sup> in 1979 or 1980, maybe ’81.

**Did that have any influence on the way you work or how you set up your studio?**

Not how I set up my studio—but she was a very interesting person to work for. She was the only artist I worked for. I was young and wide-eyed. I was totally fascinated by her life. Like, “She reads Wittgenstein?” You know, everything with a question mark. “She does this? She has that? She calls so-and-so in the afternoon?” I was this little, you know, kind of tomboy. And I thought of her as

3. See page 42 of interview with Chuck Close.

4. Dia:Beacon is an art museum located next to the Hudson River in Beacon, New York, operated by the Dia Art Foundation.

5. Pat Steir (b. 1940), American. Painter and printmaker best recognized for her dripped and splashed “water-fall” paintings.



a *grand dame*. I didn't want to *be* like her—I couldn't have been like her, I'm just not like her—but she was interesting as a point of reference. I lived in a tiny apartment in the East Village, and she lived in a loft on Mulberry Street at that time. I still don't have a loft on Mulberry Street! I'll never be as good as her! [laughs]

**Do you have any assistants?**

No.

**Do you have a motto or creed that as an artist you live by?**

You're going to die! [laughs] I think I live by that in the keen sense you have to make the most of it. You should keep growing. If you just settle in and start making the same old shit, everybody will say, "Oh, these paintings are just like all the other ones she has made." That would scare me.

**What advice would you give to a young artist who is just starting out?**

Just starting out? Well, I'd tell them to move to New York or L.A. It's always a little bit of a question because it's so expensive here and in L.A. Should they really come here and kill themselves at a job so they can share a loft in Bushwick [Brooklyn] with five other people? I still think that they should because I think they should go to museums and see work in the flesh rather than in magazines. It's about not looking at art in reproduction. And I would tell them to hang out with each other, you know, to create a group and go to each other's studios and have a dialogue and make their own kind of discourse and really hang on to those friends.

And I'd tell them to go to grad school, but to wait for like five years and not to go right away. And I'd tell them to do whatever they want and not to do what they're told. I try to tell students to do the things that come the most naturally, but at the same time do the very thing that you don't know how to do and that you're afraid to do. You should do two things at once: what you do and what you don't do. I think what you do instinctually proceeds from your heart. And what you don't do is what you need to learn with your head. So you need to do both. And that's what I'd tell them.