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Art

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Sillman with Phong Bui

by Phong Bui


Photo of artist in her studio, photograph by Thi Tam Tran.

In the midst of her preparation for the upcoming solo exhibit at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. from April 8 to May 6, and the late April publication of her first book, *Amy Sillman—Works on Paper* (which includes drawings from the past ten years and is being published by Gregory R. Miller, New York, NY), the painter Amy Sillman welcomes *Rail* Publisher Phong Bui at her Williamsburg studio to talk about her life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): You were an active member in the heyday of the Williamsburg art scene, a member of the artist collective Four Walls, with Adam Simon, Michele Araujo, Mike Ballou and Claire Pentecoste, and there was a long interval between 1979 when you graduated from the School of Visual Arts and 1995 when you earned your MFA from Bard College. Did all of those experiences have an effect on your early artistic formation?

Amy Sillman: Well. First of all. Adam Simon and his partner, Michele Araujo were the original force behind Four Walls, which initially was based in Hoboken, and after it ended there I introduced them to Mike Ballou. So to some extent that was my first and fundamental involvement with Four Walls—when it got restarted again in Brooklyn. Sure, all of that activity informed me a great deal and my friendships with Adam, Michelle, Mike, Claire, Fred Tomaselli, Laura Miller, James Siena, and many others like Laura Newman and Kurt Hoffman, were very important to me, because they were some of the first practicing artists that I knew out of art school, and a bunch of them were living and working in Williamsburg. I've shared the same studio in Williamsburg for twenty-two years with Laura Newman! We didn't really run around the art world as it was back then. We all had part-time jobs, at magazines, and we were making art in the off time. I certainly was very unsure of what I was doing during that time. Then at one birthday party, a friend, the filmmaker Michael Gitlin said to me, "I'm going to go to Bard for grad school." Adam was already going to Bard, and it was monkey see, monkey

do for me. I said, " I want to go there as well." At Bard I became more conscientious about how to be in the studio working all the time. My work habits were pretty terrible before that. I didn't really know what to do in a so-called "studio practice," exactly, in between naps and snacks. It was a real struggle but exciting at the same time, because I became more serious about the prospect of being a painter.

Rail: What was your painting like in those years?

Sillman: I'm sure you remember the ideas of the eighties, with everyone railing against painting. Anyone at school in the seventies and eighties was subject to this. We all had to invent an alibi for what we were doing as painters politically. I didn't even know many painters then, because most of the people I went to school with weren't painting by the time they left school. In any case they said painting was decorative so I was thinking about decoration as a possibly positive gesture. So the work was, for the most part, a calligraphic, decorative, and ornate kind of drawing or gouache on paper painted with a sable brush.

Rail: Does it have any thing to do with the pattern and decoration movement, which includes such artists like Miriam Shapiro or Joyce Kozloff?

Sillman: No, if anything I was more interested in William Morris, his wallpapers and fabrics and his ideas about the decorative as pleasurable in terms of its mechanization. Actually the real connection here was my study of Japanese calligraphy. I came out of the love of a calligraphic language where the tenuous line that can be drawn with ink, pen, and brush would have the same relationship as that of a letter-writing situation— more about intimacy than anything else. I feel very influenced and inspired by language study. I realized much later that what I was actually looking for in linguistics was something like a study of post-structuralism, but I didn't really find that at the time. In linguistics, I mostly ended up learning about glottal stops and other technical stuff like that. Had I been well educated I would have gone in a completely different direction. So being an ill-equipped student who tried to understand things in a more visceral and instinctual way, I ended up as a painter.

Rail: Congratulations for not turning out in any other way . One of the compelling aspects of your work is that it seems to maintain this precarious balance between, on the one hand, your openness to a variety of issues in contemporary culture such as psychology, mass media, language, and humor, and on the other hand a deep invested interest in the formal language of abstraction. It's like the interplay between the illustrative, post-Freudian dream space and the free association of automatism. You're among a few artists who actually deal with such polarities and do it with the traditional and most challenging medium of oil paint. Have you always been aware of that?

Sillman: I can simply say that I've always thrived on free association and other psychoanalytic ideas.

In theory, free association explains it better than anything else that I've been able to come up with. It's inclusive: you lie there and say whatever comes to mind, and maybe what comes to mind is a combination of the personal and the abstract, and the political, and the humorous. Free association is also a description of a linguistic process that is opened to randomness: dissociative junctures, accidents, overlaps, coincidences, mistakes, and things that leave you in a zigzag path. I totally embrace this process even more now than before. I heard Kenneth Anger speak the other week at the Whitney and he noted that psychoanalysis seems to be kind of gone now, sort of dated. But it's alive for me.

Rail: That's true. The last time we saw each other we spoke about a common favorite philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, largely because of his work in perception, bodily movement, ambiguity, habit, especially in the volume of phenomenology of perception. In spite of the fact that you do both—engaging contemporary vernaculars and fast-paced and active appropriative possibilities, and at the same time, keeping in tune with Merleau-Ponty's idea of "creative receptivity" which implies the acknowledgment of your creative influences in the manner in which they are perceived—you were never shy about letting that be known and seen in your paintings, which is very cool. Could you talk about some of the artists or painters whose work has had some impact on your formative years and whether that intake process still has strong resonance in your way of negotiating with all of those sources?

Sillman: I think that there is not any painter that I am not influenced by to some extent, but I would certainly say that the most important painter that I've looked at in my life who seems to always inform me is Philip Guston. His painting had a profound affect on my work as early as when I was in art school in the late seventies. Guston's way of drawing has some strange connection to the kind of drawing that was popular in Chicago, where I'm from–though their work was totally stylized, artists like Barbara Rossi, Jim Nutt and Ray Yoshida, and the prevalence at that time of underground comics and Robert Crumb. If you take all that and you move to New York as a teenager the first thing you're going to do is look for the thing that reminds you of what you already know. For me, Guston's work is deeply anxiety driven in a comic, goofy, clunky way, and I could easily identify with it, while I couldn't relate at that time to painters whose work was more abstract and reductive. I remember being very puzzled when I saw Brice Marden's show at the Guggenheim in 1975. Some of the paintings were absolutely beautiful monochrome panels with very simple colors and deliberately shown splattered drips at the bottom. I remember them clearly and that was more than thirty years ago. But I didn't understand them at all and found them frustrating. The next time I stood in the same museum having a crucial experience with reductive abstraction, I was looking at Ellsworth Kelly's famous five color spectrum piece in the 1996 show called, "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline," and all of a sudden I was totally getting it, realizing for the first time how to internalize this kind of reductive painting as a sophisticated, witty statement. I just understood it all of a sudden in a bodily reaction of absorption. It was cool.

Rail: Merleau-Ponty, in his brilliant analysis of the "Ontology of the Flesh," talks of the relationship between the body and the world. As you were describing your experience of seeing Kelly's work as a bodily reaction, there's also the other factor, as de Kooning once declared, "Flesh is the reason why oil painting was invented," which he demonstrated in the "Woman" series of the mid sixties. One can think the same with Guston's late figurative paintings.

Sillman: Yeah. That's one way of describing flesh, as an exterior or surface, but what I'm thinking is more of a psychological situation—the intelligent life as lived through the tissues and organs of your own interior body. The word "flesh" is about the exterior, like "sagging flesh." But I am thinking from the inside out.

Rail: Well, Merleau-Ponty describes this as "double sensation." For instance, when I press my two hands together, it's not only about the two sensations felt all at once as I perceive two objects placed side by side, but rather about the ambiguous set-up in which both hands can exchange the roles of "touching" and "being touched." As in your painting, the body, or the figure usually gets outlined in parts—it's never quite whole—while other body fragments get scattered or metamorphisized into sometimes abstract shapes, often floating in the field. How do you see the relationship of your own body and the one painted on the canvas?

Sillman: The idea of fragmentary representation goes hand-in-hand with psychoanalytic theory. It's all over the place in the writings of Freud, and Lacan. If you're going to be a painter and you're not going to make something that feels informed by both mind and body, it might not be interesting because painting is such a visceral thing. I suppose that you could use oil paint as a substitution for flesh. However, it doesn't seem interesting to me not to get inside the oil paint in a very analogous way to being inside your body. To scrape it, move it, to push it around, and water it down and wipe it off because it has got such a good procedural durability. I don't think oil painting would be all that interesting if you weren't going to essentially use its materiality as one of your tools. This is not just fragmentary imagery but also fragmentary process and fragmentary consciousness, building a painting through its parts. The one who paints is both the same and not the same as the one who looks at the painting.

Rail: There is also the psychology of a child's toy and the old man's reason, in other words, the strong acknowledgement of the seriousness of child's play in pointing to the latent infantility in mature reason. Both the adult and the child seek to channel the complexities of the external world into a manageable order. In Italo Calvino's playful construction of a folklore/fable motif he often infuses multiple layers of images, and sequences of events in the same narrative. There are constantly shifting, oblique monologues describing experiences and human conditions in terms of a city, its streets, people, maps, and gardens in their alternation. This was eloquently written by David Humphrey about

your work for *Bomb* Magazine a few years ago. Similarly, your painting, *Unearth,* reminds me of Calvino's book *Invisible Cities*. There's a mirroring image of the city below and its cloud-like form hovering above as if it was barely held together by the sun's rays. Even though they have such a physical presence, like two bellies propped up against each other, at the same time they're about to dissipate into vapor. Is it fair to think of your work as having both the concrete and the ephemeral, fragile form?

Sillman: I haven't read much of Calvino's work. What is present in my paintings is never based on a strategy or a plan. I suppose that's the difference between writing and painting. I don't know. I just have this perpetual faith that if I make these paintings they will be about something. I think they are now about struggling more than about play. The struggle is more evident. The images that end up showing are very simple: legs, a bird, a tree, a structure, some plumbing. The nameable things in the painting are elemental things, as if a child were trying to recognize the nomenclature and the tangible properties of the world that surrounds them, for sure. But in these new paintings I began to think of them in terms of sex. It's also about sculpture because I don't know how to make sculpture; maybe I don't know how to have sex either. *(Laughs.)* Anyway, there's this arm that keeps reaching out, the arm seems to come from the genital part of the body, there's a hand that comes out of the groin area and does something, it holds or touches something or enters something or someone, like what you're talking about with Merleau-Ponty. When you're holding your left hand with your right hand and then seeing that with your eye, you're making this crazy loop with your body of feeling, auto-feeling, seeing and auto-seeing and not quite knowing where a thing or a body ends and begins. I think that's how it's about sex.

Rail: Like having sex in the dark?

Sillman: You mean like having sex as a dork? . Reaching into another person but not knowing where you are going to end up.

Rail: *(Laughs.)* Let's shift the subject to this new change in these paintings. And I don't mean just the increase of the painterly application or the freedom of the gesture in the brushstroke, the scale got bigger and the form became more frontal and close-up than ever before. When did this occur? You're not reacting to the new and larger space of the gallery?

Sillman: Not at all. I was irritated by the idea of a bigger gallery at first because I'm so against the idea of cranking out big painting just to fill up the big white walls. No, it has to do with other things. First of all, a bunch of people in my family died in a fairly short period of time, followed by the death of my dog Felix. This was shattering. That very specifically made me think more about sculpture because it is so pleasurable that it's really in front of you as a physical thing.

Rail: Perhaps a substitution for the losses.

Sillman: Yes, it's about being drawn to something that was hunky, tactile and really embodied a material present. The beginning of my obsession with sculpture was seeing Franz West's shows both at Gagosian and Mass Moca, because I was bowled over by the conceptual and physical audacity of his work and the really interesting relationship to the body that his work represents, and the ugliness, and the lumpiness. They are outlandish. They are touching and absurd at the same time. Secondly, two years ago, I was invited by Ingrid Schaffner at the ICA in Philadelphia to do a big mural there—their Ramp Project. You work in this slanted transit space that's about 30 feet high and 100 feet long or something like that, and has a switchback in the middle, a very challenging space. It literally forced me to deal with an immense scale. As you know, I don't make preparatory sketches or studies for my painting. I just basically got a bunch of house paint and spray paint, and took a deep breath and executed the whole thing in 10 days straight, 14 hours a day on a three-story scaffold that scared the shit out of me. When I got scared up there, I thought of surfers who are on a wall that big but it's moving liquid, and I thought about what a wuss I was. Everything got magnified in a hurry. It turned out well and I was surprised by it. Third, I don't have to teach as much as I used to, so I have more time to paint and be less worried about making some giant mistakes. So all of those things kind of came together and altered the work, and I'd say that they're more sculptural and expressive than my previous paintings. Then I made so much work this spring that I realized I am really not always such a slow painter as I thought I was, and I could fill the big gallery.

Rail: I notice that as the image gets bigger and more frontal, it also becomes part of the structural whole of the canvas. There is the subtle use of a horizontal and vertical grid, which does make sense since they help to prop up the images against the front plane. What else can you say about other formal changes?

Sillman: I'd say that they're more oriented toward the figure in a figure/ground relationship whereas before there was more attention given to the ground itself, through erasure and building up a field, it would then yield the image. But now I'm kind of putting something down very boldly. It still changes and alters, but I kind of think I push or rearrange it as a *thing,* rather than, necessarily as a ground that contains the thing. I actually pretend to be a sculptor, with a bad set of skills, thinking of paint marks as 2×4s that I'm cobbling in. The paintings are now doing pretty much what the last few years' worth of drawings have been doing. In the show there'll be a lot of drawings and you'll be able to make that connection that really the paintings are just giant drawings. And in turn, the drawings are like little sculptures, because the drawings are cut, collaged, and formed in a very material process. The show I had of collages at Sikkema in the fall of 2004 was the beginning of it. That collage process was also kind of the first step toward making these more abstract, physical, sculptural things, and in that sense, collage is sculptural. So I'm basically trying to make this connection between the sculpturalness, the objecthood of the drawings, and the primacy of the drawing in the paintings.

Rail: That's high ambition driven by chance operation.

Sillman: Maybe. All I know is that what I do is old-fashioned. I hold on to the idea of making something the same unscripted way that I have a conversation. It comes from a combination of memory and story-telling, anecdote and self-feeling, urge and things that I hear on the radio, pretty much like if we got on the phone and just said, "How's it going," and started to describe what's going on. It's the faith of the everyday, combined with having some experience working with oil paint and knowing how to take it apart formally. A conversation at first, until it comes to be about undoing it and trying to redo it and making it get to something that has meaning that wasn't the original meaning, and then I'm stumped and surprised. That's the whole game right there—to be surprised.

Rail: Otherwise it'd be quite tortured, although the level and measure of surprises are relative according to each of the artists' temperaments. In any case, I certainly am surprised by the aggressiveness and presence of these new paintings.

Sillman: I'm just letting my aggression out. It has been a couple of intense years for me. So of course, psychologically the paintings are merely a conduit to all of those complicated feelings. As far as the works are concerned, we'll have to see what happens once they leave the studio. If they're strong, they'll survive and stand on their own. In some ways I do want them to be strong and expressive because we're going through terrible times right now, and I definitely don't want to make something that seems like candy-box beauty.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phong Bui is the publisher of The Brooklyn Rail.

COMMENTS

There are no comments yet.