

# Amy Sillman: *Twice Removed*

By **Phyllis Tuchman**



Amy Sillman, *Untitled (green)*, 2020. Acrylic, ink, and oil on canvas, 51 x 49 inches. © Amy Sillman. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Every so often, both established and emergent painters, sculptors, and photographers mount solo shows that stop you in your tracks. Some of these exhibitions even acquire legendary status. Need I mention Barnett Newman's abstractions at French & Company, Philip Guston's Klan imagery at Marlborough, or Susan Rothenberg's horses at Willard? This fall, which already boasts a rare blue moon, Amy Sillman is holding her own landmark exhibition at Gladstone. For starters, it's multifaceted. Four types of works are on view: paintings Sillman planned to include in a show that was postponed last May due to COVID-19; canvases she subsequently executed during the lockdown; 60 by 40 inch unframed drawings that are displayed in an alcove-like space as if they were a frieze; and a generous sampling of flower studies she made while sequestered without a studio on the North Shore of Long Island.

Sillman is an inventive abstractionist. She melds formal properties so skillfully you're never sure whether she's more interested in color, line, or shape, the subject of a memorable exhibition she curated from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art when its new building opened last year. She often includes fragments of bodies like legs, torsos, and heads to her otherwise nonfigurative canvases. They provide scale and add an emotional wallop. As for her palette, she favors lavenders and greens—colors other artists avoid.



Left: Amy Sillman, *Split 4*, 2020. Right: *Split 3*, 2020. Acrylic and oil on linen, 72 x 60 inches each. © Amy Sillman. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Then, too, Sillman is comfortable working with oil paints as well as acrylics. Sometimes, she uses both mediums on the same canvas. Depending on what she needs, she'll exploit their inherent qualities, ranging from tactility to fluidity. In a few works at Gladstone, Sillman commingles a number of different processes as if she were illustrating a how-to-make-a-painting manual. With brushes, spatulas, and other application tools, she dabbed, scrapped, covered over, dripped, poured, scumbled, caked, layered, and stroked every which way. If you're familiar with Richard Serra's *Verblist* (1967–68), which is associated with ways to make sculpture, you can picture Sillman putting together her own compilation based on how to apply paint to canvas or linen.

Within the show are two disparate groups of paintings: works with color and works drained of color. The former have quirky shapes, vigorous black lines, and pigments that blanket the entire picture. Within this group, the surface of *Split 4* (2020) incorporates such a range of textures, you could look at it endlessly and never think it's the same painting. *Split 3* (2020), meanwhile, has multiple dark, dash-like marks that literally hover in front of passages of yellow. None of the three with verdant tones suggest landscapes. Being somewhat clunky and awkward, yet emphatically bold and sui generis, these works with color mostly extend concerns Sillman has previously addressed.



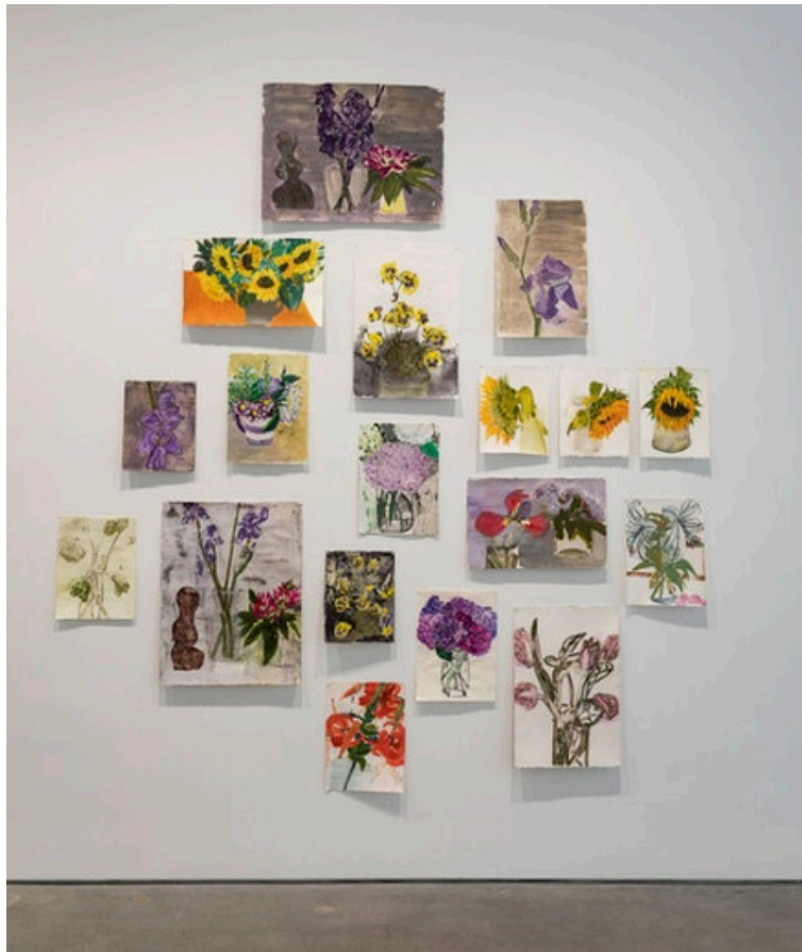


Installation view: Amy Sillman: *Twice Removed*, Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

Not so the quintet of paintings installed on the longest wall in the front room. When was the last time you saw a Sillman with a white ground that wasn't a work on paper? Moreover, these are predominantly composed from blacks, grays, and browns. An exception is *Split 2* (2020), a study in pink, another "color" Valerie Smith suggests in her recent book on Sillman, "most painters, if not fashionistas, would avoid." Her other set of works is subdued and assertive at the same time. The whites are reticent; the blacks, forceful. Abundant curves, especially the dark, elongated ones that ring the perimeters of the canvases, animate them. Regarding *20207* (2020), from a distance, a large white shape intrigues; closer up, how this section was painted becomes engaging.

Like other Sillman shows, unframed drawings occupy a distinct section. At Gladstone, these are exceptionally large, as the "XL" in their titles indicates. Instead of standing back to look at them, you experience them processional. As you walk among them, you realize there are more body parts than appear in the paintings. With abstract components, the artist has assembled an unusual narrative sequence.

The flower studies on differently sized sheets of paper are probably the most unexpected aspect of the show. Sillman painted them with acrylics on her kitchen table during the first months of the pandemic. While other modernist painters have limned flowers, these are so enthralling they merit comparison with the enchanting chrysanthemums, dahlias, amaryllises, and other flora Piet Mondrian once executed.



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As it is, Sillman is a gamechanger. Her paintings and drawings reframe long-held notions regarding the look and emotional character of abstraction, a style that enjoyed its golden age in America a half century ago during the 1960s. For Sillman, there are no rules; and she sees good taste as a limitation. Sillman's art is messy, multivalent, lively.

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### Contributor

#### Phyllis Tuchman

Phyllis Tuchman is currently organizing, for Guild Hall's 90th anniversary, *Abstract Expressionism in the Hamptons*.