

# BEST SHOWS OF 2021

Amy Sillman on “Cézanne Drawing”

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Paul Cézanne, *Route à travers bois* (Road Through the Woods), ca. 1900, pencil and watercolor on paper, 18 1/4 × 23 1/2".

**AS SOON AS I GOT BACK** to New York from my Covid-period cave, I marched up to the Museum of Modern Art to see “Cézanne Drawing,” organized by Jodi Hauptman and Samantha Friedman, because, I mean, if you’re a painter, you’re supposed to somehow know how and why Cézanne was a genius. But what’s a genius anymore, and what does that even mean? Here was this introverted guy who lived in a vacuum, who ruffled up the picture plane like he was running his hands through its hair, unpinning it. I had seen an amazing portrait show a few years ago in Paris, and I knew that the likes of Elizabeth Murray and Carolee Schneemann were big fans, but I hadn’t really been in a *relationship* with the guy for a while, and I wanted to see if I could still feel something between us. So I went up to MoMA and dove in. At first, I was just going along with it, past heads, pears, statuettes, and jugs, but a few galleries later, in a room labeled “Time and Contemplation,” the drug I call C started to take hold; the world literally went pear-shaped. I found myself in front of a picture of a rumpled dish towel on a rack, agog, saying out loud to no one in particular, *Oh, fuck*, because the dish towel had nimbly unhinged itself from reality and taken me with it. It was no longer a towel but an ontological condition, a permeable vibration, a singularity. Then there was a coat crumpled up on a chair, somehow transmitting most of being and nothingness to me from its folds. *What?* From then on, I realized I had been dosed; I was on the other side of the looking glass. I kept gasping out loud at stuff—peering through C’s kaleidoscope at a world brimming with indeterminacy, at aqueous layers of diamond-shaped tesserae, the entanglement of a world overflowing with things and folds, branches and limbs seething with abundance yet



containing audacious brevity and silence, air pumped into things and places where it wasn't before, like trees rendered as flat parallel lines and whole mountains pocked with holes and voids, lacunae in the flow of time. The idea of "ratio" is not usually a heart-stopper for me, but here it was mesmerizing—the ratio of space between trees and of trees to one another was hallucinatory; the simple outline of a putto's bare leg next to a patterned background could suggest a full-on psychic rearrangement as you simply moved your eyes from left to right across the paper.



Paul Cézanne, *Table de toilette avec essuie-mains et cuvette* (Dressing Table with Towel and Basin), ca. 1880, pencil and watercolor on wove paper, 10 1/8 × 8 1/4".

C famously declared that there was no such thing as a line, but his world is made of lines—stubby, insistent lines that keep breaking off and then starting up again, like the switches on the circuit board of a nervous system blinking on and off. The most astonishing thing of all was that C had envisioned this situation of abstraction from inside his body, in his fingertips, when there was no such thing yet. This was just about being *out there*, recording what he was looking at so hard that he saw through and past things to a world of chaosmotic change,

where all that was solid really did melt into air. But this revolution was signaled by these notational lines in pencil on everyday paper. Abstraction was, or in C's hands could be, a situation of sheer potential, in which things are endlessly changing. Cézanne, who read Latin and Greek, knew the writings of philosophers like Lucretius and Anaximander, the latter of whom described matter as "things transformed one into another according to necessity . . . according to the order of time."

Once I got it, I was inside. It was exactly like tripping, or mountain climbing, or going to outer space, or having a vision. C's effect was to lend me that kind of psychic scale shift you can have when on a plane, for example, where you might start crying at any moment because you realize that we are situated among fields, rocks, atoms, stars, matter, sensations, rays of light, the passage of time, and the organization of units, and also that we are strapped in there fully packed with ambiguity, doubt, and terror.

I came out of MoMA a few hours later in an altered state, and I couldn't get over it for weeks; it ruined the experience of other art shows, because the here and now just seemed so strategic, gravity-bound, self-conscious, art-worldly, while Cézanne (or C, the drug that he is) reminded me of an out-there, an elsewhere, probably enhanced by the year of Covid isolation I'd just come from. It was exhilarating to feel such permissive and ambivalent sensations at a "drawing show"—if that's what I had just been at—being on this earth but *not*, in space and time but *not*, having a body but *not*. I forgot momentarily about art as money, as product, as hierarchy, as regulation, as country club, as something I'm cynical about. And I just thought that art was a way of being wrenched out of daily life and subsequently delivered back again in a more subtle form. There are other great art shows where I've felt this: at a Jack Whitten show, for example, and a Goya show, and a Nancy Spero show, and a Meret Oppenheim show. They don't call these people "geniuses" for nothing. We go in to see some art objects, and we come out full of some kind of radical amazement. So if that's what is meant by genius, then I'm down with it. It has something to do with soul.

Amy Sillman is an artist based in New York.