

Your iPhone Doesn't Understand Amy Sillman

At Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples, the painter reflects on the time and materials of a medium that continues to surprise her

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BY ANDREW DURBIN AND AMY SILLMAN IN FEATURES, INTERVIEWS | 27 APR 23



Andrew Durbin You're in Naples for a solo exhibition at Thomas Dane. Can you tell me about these new paintings?

Amy Sillman When I work, I think about sequence and page-turning. Lately, I've been trying to use an exhibition, like this one, as a framework that expands the painting outward and allows for a substructure of time to hold the work together. I make contradictions; that's the way I go forward – by making a big painting, then 20 little ones, then an abstract one, then one about people, then heads, then turning them upside down and making torsos, and then saying, 'That's all wrong.' For this show, I photographed every stage of a painting as it was being made, then printed the black and white images on aluminium panels so that they can be seen as a film strip; this work – *Temporary Object* (2023) – amounts to an animation, where you see all of the innards of a painting and how it develops sequentially.



Amy Sillman, 'Temporary Object', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Thomas Dane Gallery; photograph: Roberto Salomone

AD Does the character of a place like Naples affect how you put together a show?

AS It's more that, when I install a show, I still feel in the period of the work. I always hang my own shows in collaboration with whomever I'm showing with. I like to think about how the work unfolds from wall to wall, room to room, passage to passage. Every time I go to a place, I feel it intensely and spend a long time sensing its heaviness and lightness. I'm an intimist. I feel proud of this show because, when we installed it, I saw immediately that we nailed it in a certain way. I felt similarly about my contribution to last year's Venice Biennale. It was hard to make it look good, but then the intimacy came through – you had to see it at different distances. So, in a way, I'm thinking about choreography and movement – the outside of a painting as much as the inside. And I am formal when I build an abstract painting – I'm looking at line, space, depth, transparency, scale, density, all of that. But it's all attached to feeling – and thought.

AD You're someone who's interested in the genealogy of images, gestures and colour. Your work is so playful and vibrant, and it often seems improvisatory, but there are these embedded histories in each work. It's a lot like your writing.

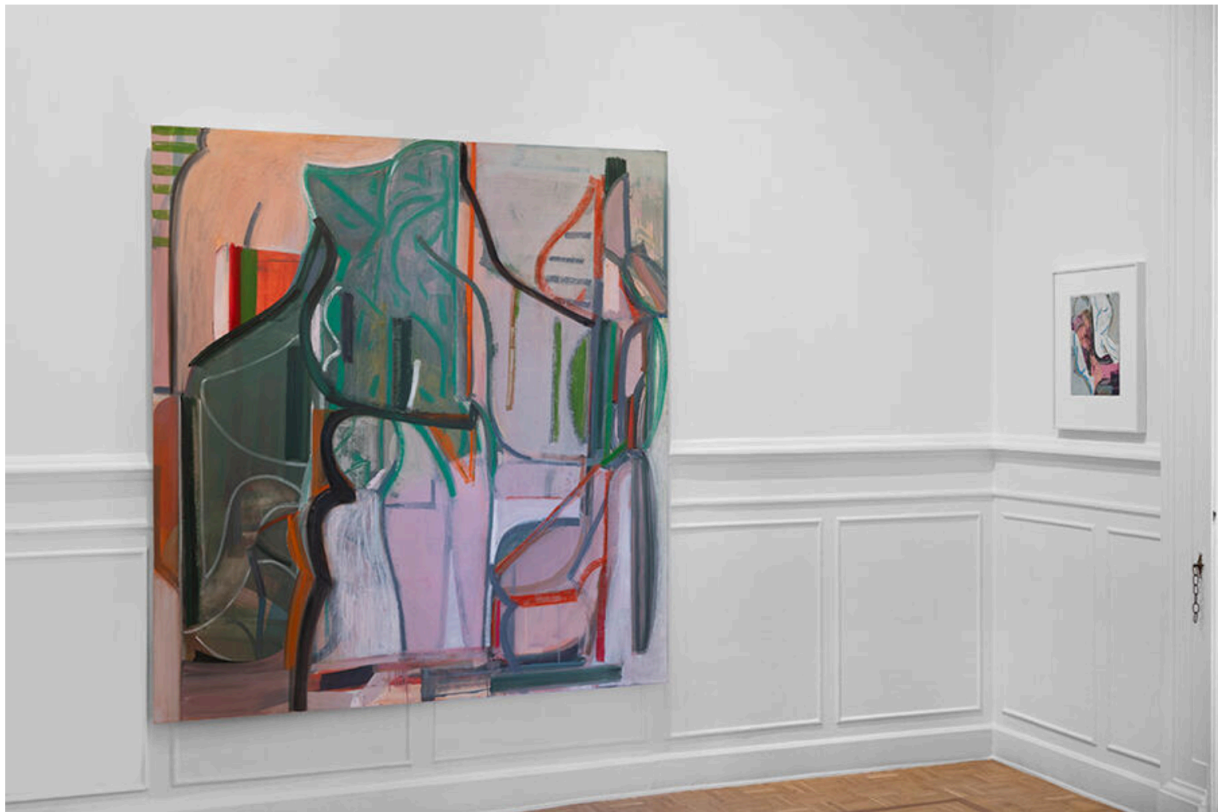


Amy Sillman, 'Temporary Object', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Thomas Dane Gallery; photograph: Roberto Salomone

AS Whenever I'm given a writing assignment, I just read everything I can about the subject. I try to immerse myself in the mesh of words that surrounds everything and, during that process, I come to something I don't agree with – and then I can write. It's the same with painting; it's kind of contrarian. I'm always trying to figure things out. And that's when feelings come in: great swells of euphoria, terrible pits of hatred and resentment and doom. Oil painting is great because its materiality is such that you can layer and scrape down 50 times before you're done. So, there's a kind of destructive urge and contrarian quality to it that can be positive, it can be affirmative without being too affirmative, which is similar to editing an essay.

AD Do you think of the way you write or paint as recuperative too?

AS Totally. The great thing about making a painting is that you start out, and it looks great. But by day four, it's a mess. Then, you both hate and love it. This is a meaningful part of the process; it's a kind of love, a practice. You push it over the cliff, risk everything, see what happens. Everything isn't tied to what's pragmatic and useful. It's about exploring the mess. Paul Thek once said he believed in 'local culture'. And I've always felt that painting is 'local culture' because my paintings don't look good in photographs. And that's so not of today. I'm just interested in failure and mistakes. And I love that Thek said he was interested in the local, because that's such a nice way to say 'the personal' and it still feels collective and civic. Each place has its own dialect and that's true of painting. Painting is a deeply knowledgeable language. A New York painting is like walking on a sidewalk, and a California painting is like driving in a car and looking out the windshield. Painting is not nationalist, it's local.



Amy Sillman, 'Temporary Object', 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York and Thomas Dane Gallery; photograph: Roberto Salomone

AD When I visited your 2021 Captain Petzel show in Berlin, I was struck by how reactive your paintings were to the particular light in that space on a winter's day on Karl-Marx-Allee and how difficult it was to photograph them with my iPhone. I almost wondered if you were painting against the iPhone.

AS It is the effect of working in a very old-fashioned, stubborn way. Which is to say, you don't work until it looks photogenic. This is a slight leap from your question, but recently I've started using a score for my paintings, where I draft instructions for myself. So, I have a different set of principles to make paintings, and they change with every season, every place. With the Berlin paintings, they were hard to photograph because they had the fewest layers I've ever made; you could actually see how unresolved they were – a lot of white ground and empty space. Here in Naples, the exciting paintings are those that I overworked. Usually, I overwork everything, and it can look bad. I mean, I risk death and destruction. But I pushed these new works to the very edge of their life, and I overworked them like crazy, which looks good here because they are like ancient walls – perfect for Naples.



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AD What is the score for this Naples show?

AS In this show, I tried to identify every unit of time that I could have used in a painting. There are works that took me one second to create because they were stills from a video I made. Others took a day or a week or a season or a year. It's not something anyone will notice when they visit. But in Berlin, I worked in a sequential logic that moved from painting to drawing to painting again. And for this show, it was about the second, the minute, the hour, the day, the week, the month, the season, the year – the whole spread.

Amy Sillman's 'Temporary Object' is on view at Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples until 29 July