

Uncomfortable Beauty

Joshua Decter, 2025

When is a painting or drawing finished or unfinished, complete or incomplete? When the artist – or viewer says so? And when it is *finished*, what does that mean? Some of the paintings and drawings that I admire the most transmit a quality of deliberate *unfinishedness*, or purposeful *incompleteness*, which is also one way to think about abstraction – as a visual language that enlists the viewer’s participation in the making of meanings. Perhaps some artworks are best left *finished in their unfinishedness*, in their *complete incompleteness*. Maybe this is part of their beauty. Abstraction as an aesthetic condition can also be thought of as a means of signifying purposeful incompleteness.

There are artists who wish to emancipate us from certain expectations about what constitutes a finished artwork – a controlled letting go of control. What is not depicted can be more impactful than what is depicted; amorphous, abstract areas of the painting may generate mystery, tension, ambiguity, unknowability beyond the realm of representation, while paradoxically bringing into representation the unrepresentable. Some artists may implicitly authorise the viewer to complete what only appears to be incomplete. One might consider Robert Rauschenberg’s methodical erasure of Willem de Kooning’s drawing in his 1953 *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as a coy gesture of *unfinishing* that artwork, while also amplifying Kooning’s own procedures of de-representation. Rauschenberg in a sense approached the de Kooning as a *readymade artwork*, and then proceeded to subtract the de Kooning from itself, unmaking the drawing and pushing it into a realm of non-objectivity.

The Readymade not only opened up the possibility for us to think of non-art things as art, but also to consider art itself as a *readymade language*, incorporating the recursive languages of painting, that can be adjusted and remade. One could reasonably argue that painting has already been turned inside-out, and outside-in, in every way imaginable: painting as a formal and material art language, painting as a concept, painting as a means of expression, painting as a signifier of identity, painting as a way to figure something into representation, painting as a way to re-represent something into abstraction, painting as a way to articulate a narrative, painting as a refusal to communicate beyond itself, painting as a mediator of spirituality, painting as a critique of itself, painting as meta-painting, and so on and so forth. To be a painter is to be liberated inside the prison house of painting’s post-historical languages, syntaxes, grammars, codes, styles, pastiches, innovations and de-innovations. One of the anxieties of painting, and of painters, has been the challenge of making people pay attention to painting in the age of mass distraction and the society of the spectacle: the distraction of television, movies, shopping, work, war, etc. One solution has been to create paintings that *are* spectacle, rather than being consumed by the spectacle: painting as a mode of distraction from other distractions.

From the first time that I met Amy Sillman in 1990, it was clear that she was on a mission to plumb the depths of painting and drawing: to develop complex, weird, recombinant, and humorous styles of abstraction–representation that would invoke – and problematise – the omnipresent ghosts of modernism. In addition to curation, her deeply researched and eloquent writing about art can be seen as co-extensive with her art, in the sense that as she interprets and analyses the work of other artists, she thereby builds communities of artists and discursive networks that feed back into her work. Uncomfortably beautiful, her art transmits an ethos of *unfinished finishedness* or *incomplete completeness*, as if she – and her artworks – are reluctant to accept an ending. Indeed, she allegorised such conditions in the 2012 *15 Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting*, a digital animation in which

an iPad drawing program operates as a post-medium medium to produce numerous possible iterations of a painting. There never is a *last picture show* for Amy.

In Amy's 2019 Artist's Choice project at MoMA, *The Shape of Shape* (which I am tempted to retitl *The Art of Art*), she rethought modernist and contemporary art histories by proposing new aesthetic narratives through the staging of unusual visual correspondences and frictions in relation to shape and line, amplifying interpenetrations between abstraction, representation and figuration. The works she selected could be understood to comprise a kind of *readymade* language of art. Curation became a tool of visualising, to a certain extent, her own creative process; a subjective archive of influences, an essay comprised of artworks. One could almost imagine the works in the MoMA show appearing as characters in a movie or animation – perhaps even a meta-documentary – that Amy might produce about her own practice. One could also imagine the exhibition being restaged endlessly in different configurations, artworks being added and subtracted, an ongoing reimagining of art's variegated languages. *The Shape of Shape* was also the shape of Amy. There really never is a *last picture show* for Amy.

Traditional analogue film and animation are built from a sequencing of still images, an assembling, montaging, cutting together – and putting into motion – of particles of visual information. (Digitisation has facilitated more liquid, synthetic production processes.) Within the historical avant-gardes, photography, cinema and animation were in a continuous dialogue with the image-worlds of painting, drawing and printmaking. This spirit of investigation into artistic hybridisations and cross-pollinations animates Amy's work. The previously mentioned *13 Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting* delivers a humorously self-reflexive exposition of Amy's artistic process, wherein she demonstrates that a painting can be understood as an unfolding temporal event that happens at various speeds, signified through a sequence of formal rearticulations, as if in a fluid state of *completed incompleteness*, or *finished unfinishedness*: painting reconceived through the medium of digital animation as meta-painting. In large-scale works such as the 2012 *13 Possible Futures: Cartoon for a Painting* we are presented with what could be described as an archive of drawings-as-paintings/paintings-as-drawings that operate as distinct works but also as elements of her visual language. Amid these reformulations of her own visual grammar and syntax, we can observe the hand-painted sentence, '13 possible futures for a painting', indicating that these works constitute an evolving vocabulary that is also the operating system for another possible future painting that might appear as a painting, or as an animation about a hypothetical painting that can be considered painting by other means.

Amy's analogue paintings, drawings, prints and hybrids do not feel entirely comfortable in their own skins, as if they are complicating themselves, but in ways that do not alienate us, because there is always sufficient humour and formal beauty. In the *finished unfinishedness* or *incomplete completeness* of her art, Amy generously opens a space for us to imagine what it is like to be an artist experimenting with what could be described as a *creolisation* of languages of abstraction and representation. In vibrant new paintings such as *Persona*, *Punch*, *Mug* and *Flower*, which pop with colour and motion, we feel that she is continuously rethinking the complex interrelationships between line, shape, figuration, de-figuration, abstraction, de-abstraction, representation and de-representation – problems that really do not have solutions, only moments of aesthetic revelation and, dare I say, optical sensuousness and visual joy. And yet, these paintings also emit degrees of formal discomfort, as if things don't quite fit smoothly together, a quality that gives them a palpable tension.

And while we can recognise a Sillman painting or drawing as a Sillman painting or drawing, her works nevertheless defy the formulaic, resisting easy stylisation and convenient aesthetic branding.

As evident in the 2013–14 exhibition *one lump or two*, as well as in *The ALL-OVER* (2016), *Landline* (2018) and her contribution to the 2022 Venice Biennale, Amy has developed installation methods that illuminate her artistic processes, at once constructing and deconstructing how drawings, paintings and prints come into being, and un-being. She mediates drawing through painting, and painting through drawing, printmaking through drawing, painting through printmaking, and she is in a constant process of rethinking and remaking these interpenetrations, which involves a hand that is the extension of a complex body ... a body that is at once there and not-there in the work. Her printed aluminium panels – collectively titled *Temporary Object* – are at once object-like, print-like, drawing-like and painting-like, and yet these categories and designations seem insufficient to describe what is going on inside of each of these panels, and in the relationships between the panels. The panels are at once cold and hot, the raw and the cooked, digital and analogue, human and posthuman, embodied and disembodied, improvised and programmed, and dryly humorous – they constitute an archive and an index of Amy’s hybrid visual grammar and syntax. They operate at different velocities – at once fast and slow – and can also be thought of as various possible futures of other artworks.

There has always been an anxiety that animates Amy’s work – artmaking as an expression of the anxieties of artmaking. Her aesthetic is at once messy and organised, conceptual and intuitive; a dialectic of structure and anti-structure, of legibility and the enigmatic. Artmaking is an act of vulnerability, performed in public. Some artists reveal their vulnerability more than others. For an artist to share their vulnerability *as an artist* can be awkward, particularly if there is a questioning of *mastery* in relation to how one delivers the work of art into the public sphere. Amy has mastered *unmastery*, systematising improvisation and spontaneity, playing with excess and control. Anti-method as method. We can feel Amy’s nonstop energy transferred into her work, which is then transferred into us. Her work signals an obsessiveness that is wryly cognisant of its obsessiveness. She gives us shapeshifting on formal and epistemological terms. One of her new large drawings – *Torso with Green* (2023), rendered in hues of green, blue – could be seen as a body entangled with its own processes of disembodiment, the body becoming alienated from itself, a body as something other, an *unfinished body*. Could we understand this shapeshifting – a fluidity of forms suggestive of transition from one state to another – as an expression of an aesthetics of queerness? Perhaps. All I can say is that the visual ambiguities that characterise Amy’s work ultimately evince an uneasy gorgeousness. If every finished painting or drawing is in some sense still a work in progress, then there is a reason to wake up in the morning and make something else. Perhaps Amy’s exhibition will be finished when the exhibition is unfinished. There really, really never is a *last picture show* for Amy.

Joshua Decker is a writer, curator and art historian. He has authored numerous publications, including *Art Is a Problem: Selected Criticism, Essays, Interviews and Curatorial Projects*.