

OPINION: THE FOUR SEASONS

## Summer: Abstraction as apprehension

By Amy Sillman  
with sound by Marina Rosenfeld

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*Amy Sillman is a visual artist known for process-based paintings that move between abstraction and figuration and engage nontraditional media including animation, zines and installation. She curated the Museum of Modern Art's collection in 2019 and 2020 with an Artist's Choice show called "The Shape of Shape," and a focused overview of her work will open in September at the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland. Marina Rosenfeld is an American composer, sound artist and visual artist. Her work has been produced and presented at the Park Avenue Armory, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum.*

**A**ugust is upon us, and we're in the heat of another mood swing. As with my contribution this spring, here's a one-minute video. Once again, I've prepared an animation made from cut-up ink drawings, augmented digitally and set in motion to a score by artist and composer Marina Rosenfeld, with a little help from her friend Michael Foster on saxophone.

In March, when I made the first seasonal piece for these pages, I began with something comical because a spasm of laughter felt like the best response to what we were living through then. Marina provided me with a more somber score this season, and I wondered what the opposite of comedy might look like. Should we call it apprehension? Or difficulty? Or even ugliness? What is ugliness anyway? Is it something unlikable but also, perhaps, unavoidable?

So the new video is not about summer's ease and laughter but its more vertiginous sway of apprehension, with discordant overlays and shards of narrative hurtling by, often too fast to fully grasp; the ambiguity of a season when roses bloom but their thorns also prick. Marianne Moore reminds us of this state of affairs in her 1924 poem "Roses Only": roses, she writes, "are not proof against a worm, the elements, or mildew." This work, then, is not a merry cartoon; instead, it's an attempt to capture how things change, how alacrity can become apprehension — and vice versa.

The video begins with the face of a girl whose mouth opens and closes. She is on the verge of speech or breath — it's not clear which. We flicker between her face and body and various light sources, incandescent bulbs and handheld flashlights that she eventually points at herself. The flashlights conjure a cone-shape that mirrors the red stuff emerging from her mouth. Are these word balloons? Is language always illuminating, or might it feel more convoluted than enlightened?

Meanwhile, a second figure eyes a black hole nearby and is engulfed by a column of darkness. The lines between outside and inside grow murky: a tongue becomes an inky line; a couple of faces in profile make small talk, but their own word balloons reach out toward a tall figure — part totem pole, part snowman. The couple plunges clumsily into the figure's belly, and the mood shifts inward as objects become unmoored. We enter a place of surging change, while Marina's score chugs forward with percussion and drone, a little like being inside a metallic machine. Occasionally, we break from the clang to see not-at-all-ugly things, even wonderful ones, like flowers being set upon a table or the moon and clouds rearranging themselves against a white sky — respites before the relentless pace begins again.

Change is difficult, and difficulty can be scary, and fear, in turn, can be ugly. What if we walk it back the other way: ugliness, in turn, can be complicated, but complications can be provocative, and provocation can be energizing. I remind myself that Moore's poem begins like this: "You do not seem to realize that beauty is a liability rather than an asset." And ends like this: "Your thorns are the best part of you." Let's look at the whole rose, stem and all.

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