ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Amy Sillman

Gladstone Gallery

By Barry Schwabsky

Amy Sillman, *Albatross 1*, 2024, acrylic and oil on linen, 75 × 66″.

Amy Sillman's exhibition "To Be Other-Wise" comprised works made since 2023: fifteen paintings on linen and one on paper, along with an animated video and a wall-filling grid of seventy-four drawings. Sillman has been known to deny the obvious fact that she is really a painter, claiming instead to be someone whose art is surreptitiously *drawing* above all, citing Philip Guston and Terry Winters as fellow drafters on canvas. So let's start examining that idea with *UGH for 2023 (Torsos)*, 2023–24, the aforementioned grid. Although the piece does not reiterate and modify its organic and letter-shaped forms like the individual cells of an animated film, it definitely feels sequential, especially in the way it starts out so watery in the arrangement's upper-left corner, with pale washes gradually gathering force to embody, mainly, blunter Gustonesque pinks that grow darker toward the middle of the grid. Grays and blacks suddenly come to the fore toward the bottom, along with big doses of white, which add opacity rather than lightness.

What *UGH* shows me is that if Sillman's painting is really drawing, then her drawing is really animation, and her animation is really painting, so that the distinct aspects of her work are in fact stages in a single process—which I am going to insist on calling painting. The practice exposes an iterative process in which adding is also effacing, and in which unnameable shapes simply represent feelings more unfathomable than those that can be summed up in, say, a depiction of legs and feet, or even in what I am pretty sure is a Roman *fascinus*—let alone in letters of the alphabet, of which *U*, *G*, and *H* are only a sample.

Many of the paintings on view here were denser than Sillman's work has typically been in the past. The intersecting bundles of vertical stripes that dominate *Harpie*, 2023–24, with its twisty central glyphs locked in place, look like they were made by a cranky kid bearing down on some big fat crayons. As in *UGH*, white is used here to close space off rather than open it up. There are many layers, but the view is barred. Forms mesh by way of mutual interference. As is usual in Sillman's work, figurative traces keep appearing yet get canceled out: In *The Banana Tree*, 2023, the shape of the titular fruit is evoked by reiterated curved brushstrokes in black—the color occurs without reference to the banana's form. In *Albatross I*, 2024, the bird's head hangs down toward the left of the painting, but does that flurry of half-rendered forms at the composition's center portray the creature's murderer, Coleridge's ancient mariner? It's a definite maybe.

Sillman thrives on ambiguity. Maybe that's why that recent period when about one out of four painters at any MFA program would be more or less doing their own versions of her work seems to have passed. Doubt is out of fashion in most quarters, and the kind of art that Sillman has called for —"awkward, slow, funny, unaesthetic, non-product-oriented, skeptical, passionate, complicated"—once again represents no more than a single artist's undemonstratively idiosyncratic way of being in and with the world. Sillman must have meant to acknowledge that idiosyncrasy in the "Other-Wise" of her exhibition's title—the wise otherness of eccentric insight, sage oddity, or otherly wisdom on which her art continues to insist.