Artists & the Unknown

Art21
Interviews with
Artists

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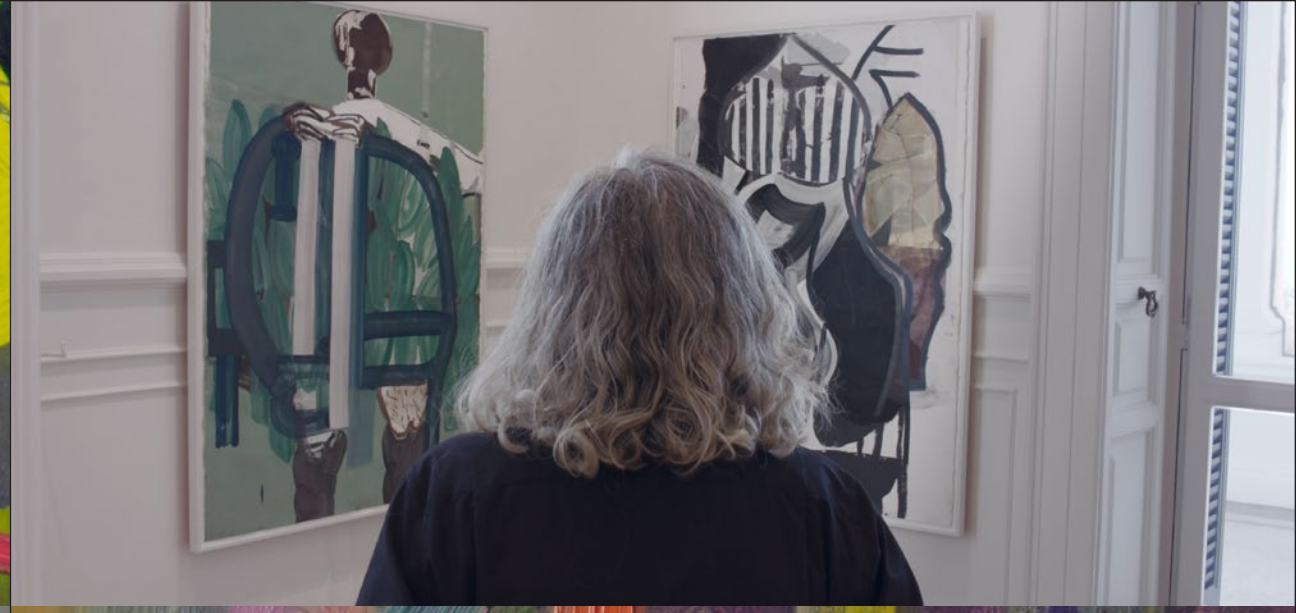


Merry
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Amy Sillman stakes out contradictions

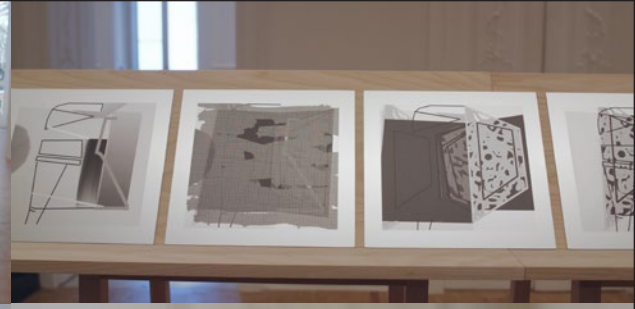
This interview took place in March 2022 at Amy Sillman's studio in Brooklyn, New York. It was conducted by **Ian Forster** for the *Extended Play* film *Amy Sillman: To Abstract* (2024).

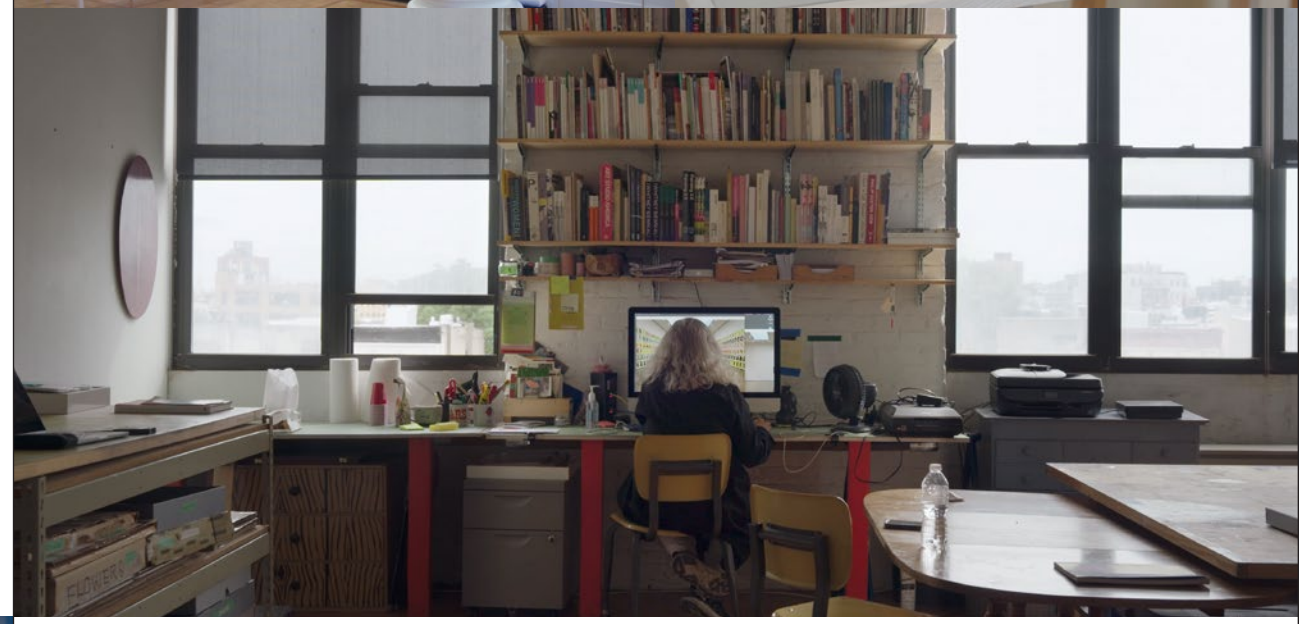
IAN FORSTER
In the moments you've wanted to erase or cover up or scrape off while painting, what's been the issue? How would you describe those problems?

AMY SILLMAN
They're formal problems. It's about what it looks like. It's about space, scale, color, size, outline. I'm looking for ambivalent aesthetic surprise and resistance, for something that contradicts the layer that came before and creates a certain amount of space between a thesis and an antithesis. It's a dialectical process.

It's about building a formal language that feels scruffy and open and dedicated to spatial and coloristic surprise. I don't know what's going to happen before I do it. It's like constructing a sculpture from small parts without exactly knowing what you're going for. I do know that I'm interested in a particular kind of ambiguous space, and I'm interested in the difference between a painting and a drawing. When I'm talking about space, I mean painting space, the literal illusion of there being a back and front in a flat painting.

I'm always interested in creating a certain kind of tension, something that feels like it holds together and it's falling apart at the same time, something that looks like it's built like a drawing but holds together as a painting but you're not sure why. It's a very elusive position that takes

a lot of time to find, and then you can't name it. It's not unlike waking up from a dream and desperately trying to explain your interesting plotline to somebody and it disappearing as you attempt to put words on it.

This process is a nonlinguistic activity that is foiled by language, so to answer these questions is an impossibility. It's kind of a phenomenon. You know it when you see it, but you also know that it's wrong when you see it, and you have to keep making adjustments. You may feel like you're finished when the painting is just the thing that was there first, but after having gone through a narrative of being built and unbuilt and rebuilt until it finally arrives at something. This all sounds ridiculous when you're not literally looking at a painting, but I'm looking for complexity. I'm uninterested in images. I'm uninterested in iconography.

At the same time, I'm not an abstract painter. I think abstraction allows you the freedom to not make something look like the thing. But I think my paintings look like

a thing that isn't a thing. I'm going for something that's increasingly elusive as you go forward. I'm also not interested in a single picture, but in the way that something changes.

In the end, I make two kinds of things. I make paintings that are a million layers that you can only see the top of, like a packed suitcase where you just see the top layer of the suitcase but you can't see all the contents. Then I make these long, horizontal drawing, printmaking, and painting sequences to make a situation of time, or invite or inveigle the viewer into a situation of time, where it's really about sequence and the difference between this one and the next one, which is very filmic, but it's nonnarrative. So you're seeing changes and shifts and adjustments, getting the impression that everything is constantly moving, and that's its formal quality. I'm looking for paintings that are both still and suggesting that they can never be stilled, and all of these things are hard to get at. I can try to explain it for hours, but I don't think it's really the thing. It's just an analogy on the edge that I can make to answer the question.

Talking about layering and filmic qualities, maybe we could talk about Venice?[1] The way you just described your sequences works well for how that was installed.

I didn't know that I was going to be invited to the Biennale at first. In 2021, during the pandemic, I was working on Long Island. I was working on little drawings on the table. There were literally stacks and stacks of little works on paper that were being made like my paintings and drawings, but that was the scale that I had at my availability.

I ended up with this huge stack of small drawings, and one day I put them all on the floor and started moving them around and cutting them into a sequence that was not narrative. But it was about things that seemed to open up, and clear out, and be really bare, and then clutter up and get complicated. The trajectory of those little drawings was about densities, open passages, and then increasingly dense areas.

Around then, I was invited to be in the Biennale. My first request was, "Can I not have a room with five big paintings in it, and instead could I show a sequence?" And Cecilia said, "Why don't you do a frieze and I'll give you a room where we could have a long sequence of works that are all hung next to each other."[2]

She gave me this big room, which is a complicated room because it's broken up and there's staircases and a window and a high ceiling and complicated architecture and pipes and stuff. It wasn't a smooth white cube at all. It was a big challenge.

Typically, when you walk into a really big room and see forty huge things, you look at two of them and keep going. So I proposed to do only little images, and I really wanted to show those year-long drawings and just have those on a little shelf going around. But I thought maybe having one little belt going around a big room is also kind of coy. I don't want that.

So, then I tried two layers of big ones, and it looked a bit overkill. They sort of drowned each other out. Then one day I thought, "When you edit video, you have this picture, and then you have this little soundtrack going below it." I've edited animations and videos before, in low-budget, DIY kind of animation, but I've done it, and I know what it looks like. I thought, "Oh, that would be kind of cool—that there's a track and then there's another track. And the little track gives you one kind of information, and the other track gives you another kind of information." So, that's what I did.

The little track was handmade and all cut up and no printing because it was during the pandemic and I had literally a table and scissors and some glue. The lower track were these bigger drawings that I had been experimenting with making at a silk-screen studio in Brooklyn. I thought I should take the parts of the little

1
The Venice Biennale is a biennial international art exhibition held in Venice, Italy, since 1895. Presented in 2022, the 59th edition, *The Milk of Dreams,* contemplated themes of imagination and transformation. For the exhibition, Sillman installed a series of drawings and prints along the walls of a room in the Central Pavilion of the Biennale.

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The Milk of Dreams was curated by Cecilia Alemani, who is also the director and chief curator of New York City's High Line Art.

track that I like and print them big below and then leave gaps so that there's a kind of rhythmic structure. I ended up thinking of the whole thing as a score. I figured out a layout that I thought would be enough complication for that room but not too much complication for that room. That was the trick—how to hold that room together.

Going back to your process here in the studio, you talk about your body a lot in the book,[3] and you have drawings, and humor comes into things, too. What's the tension between your body and mind, the intellectual and physical balance, when you're working?

It's the tension of the comic everyday. Everything that ever happens to anyone is exactly that same tension because you're dealing with mistakes all the time, and you're dealing with regret and thinking, "Oh God, no. Let me do that again." It's totally the same tension. Or it's not the same, but it's equivalent to other tensions in life. There's this essential tension of being alive, of the constant subjectivity of life itself. Like the insane fact that you can never see yourself, except in a mirror, which isn't quite right, or the fact that everyone's going to die, but nobody wants to think about that all day.

On the big level and on the little level and on every level in between, there's this paradox that you're always dealing with, which is about unknowability. The slippage between control, finesse, and form. Wanting it to be good and constantly adjusting things and trying to make it better, between the first thought and the best thought. That tension is the tension of me making my work.

The process that allows me to do multiple things at the same time is a process where you do whatever you want and then you edit. Editing is the solution to the tension of mistakes. What I'm trying to achieve is a kind of work that seems to imply to the viewer that there was a process—there was an editing or a set of dissatisfactions or something adjusted and adjusted again. It's not perfect. It shows its scrape-downs, and it shows its revision, and it shows its finickiness, but it also shows its openness. That's a kind of work that I love because it's about dissatisfaction and this, maybe vain, attempt to push further, dig deeper. ●

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In 2020, After 8 Books published *Amy Sillman: Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings*.

The unknown is definitionally indefinable.
It is something we encounter in ways big and small every day of our lives. It appears when we wake up and wonder what the day holds, as we watch the world around us change, develop, and decay, and in our risks, dreams, and curiosities. The unknown can appear unexpectedly, at any time, and with myriad forms and faces. What do we do with that information? At Art21, we look to artists.

Drawn from over two decades of interviews with the leading artists of the 21st century, *Artists & the Unknown: Art21 Interviews with Artists* captures engaging, inspiring, and stimulating conversations that explore encounters with the unknown. Featuring the works and words of eighteen artists, this collection serves as a guide and a companion in your own encounters with unknowability.

Art21 is a celebrated global leader in presenting thought-provoking and sophisticated films, educational programs, and publications about contemporary art. With the mission to educate and expand access to contemporary art to inspire a more creative and inclusive world, Art21 is the go-to place to learn firsthand from the artists of our time.

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