

OPINION: THE FOUR SEASONS

Fall: Abstraction as X-ray

By Amy Sillman

with sound by Marina Rosenfeld

December 19, 2024 at 6:00 a.m. EST

Amy Sillman is a visual artist known for process-based paintings that incorporate abstraction and figuration and engage nontraditional media including animation, zines and installation. A solo show titled “Oh, Clock!” is on view in Switzerland at the Kunstmuseum Bern until Feb. 2, and will travel to the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany, in March. 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.

My fall contribution to the ongoing Four Seasons project is a new animation made for a season on excruciating edge, post-that and pre-this, a cold time when the trees are unloading their leaves, the flowers have dried to husks, and few can sleep through the night because our glands do or don't deliver whatever substance is needed while the light fades. We're just nervous systems now, running on fumes of disasters, accusations, knots and bumps. Consciousness is a mess, and I'm thinking about layers — and how art can be a kind of psychic X-ray, allowing us to peer through surfaces into regions where the mashed-up, inchoate layers of thoughts and feelings really entangle.

I wrote to my collaborator, the composer Marina Rosenfeld, asking her for a minute of sound that would register these vexing layers and changes. She sent music that builds a sonic architecture shifting between resonance and stillness, foreground and background. To her handmade rhythms I added images of a murky space where figures flit and jerk around in low-fi animation, culled from one archive of drawings done in January 2016, where figures drag along the ground, strain to find footing, crumple up but try to unfold, and catch their breath. To these figures in trouble, I added a more sanguine set from 2010, made for a project about equal rights for same-sex couples, images of mirrored couples, poking at each other at the level of the body's core contents, literally touching each other's lungs. In these drawings, breathing becomes palpable, and the lungs morph from shapes to profiles to little shoes, to the wires of a grid, to uncanny emissions from nostrils — something passing from one person to the other. Because, isn't breathing amazing? We share the air with others, our lungs resting gently inside the frame of our skeletons — twin red shapes, a set of pink bellows through which life gently and rhythmically passes.

But lungs alone do not guarantee breath. I remember a line from a 1938 poem by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again." "Equality is in the air we breathe," he wrote. "There's never been equality for me, Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free.'" In the video, the lungs — bright-red breathing machines — flicker on top of the abject figures as they crawl along the ground. They blink on and off, a sign of life that comes and goes.

[View video and text on Washington Post website](#)