

Painters Amy Sillman and Cameron Martin on Tragicomic Abstraction

BY

Amy Sillman, Cameron Martin
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Cameron Martin: *Graphic*, 2025.
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Editor's Note: Ahead of Cameron Martin's exhibition "Baseline," on view at Sikkema Malloy Jenkins in New York through October 11, the artist sat down with fellow painter Amy Sillman. The two discussed semiotics and abstraction—and also what humour and tragedy can mean and do in times like these.

Amy Sillman: Can you begin by talking about how you made these new paintings, and how they differ from earlier works?

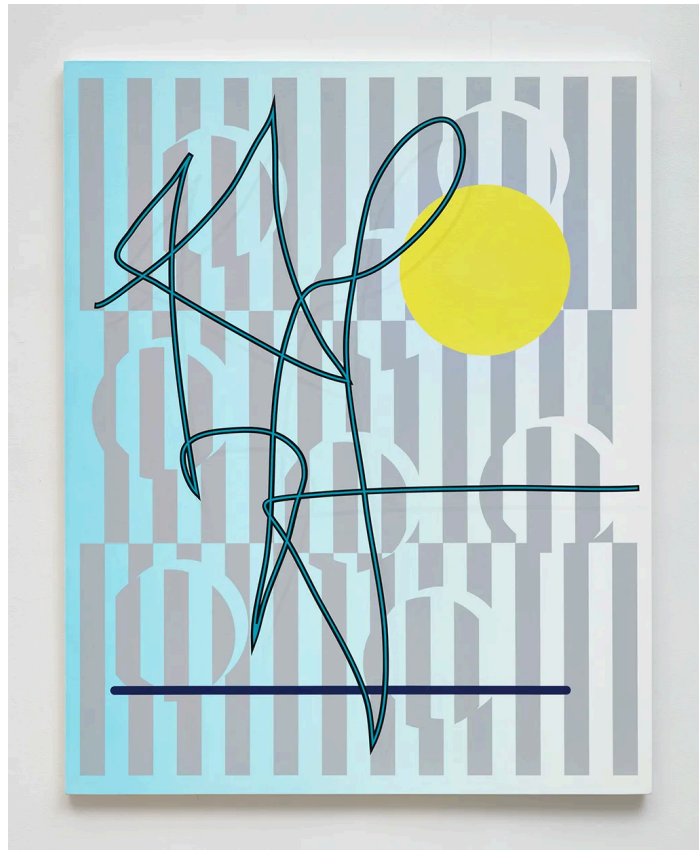
Cameron Martin: We are living in this time that involves so much paradox and contradiction, and it is tempting to run from that rather than embrace it. I wouldn't call that the subject matter of the work exactly, but it's been in the back of my mind. I'm interested in putting forms together that don't necessarily make sense in the same space, and then exploring what gets produced. In my last show at Sikkema [in 2022], several paintings had these articulated brushstrokes—graphic representations of gesture—but lately, I have been thinking about other kinds of surrogates or stand-ins for gesture.

AS: Why do you want to make a stand in for a gesture? Isn't that what representation is?

CM: In a way, yes. It's an attempt to put the brushstroke in relief, and to displace some of the baggage that comes with a certain kind of mark.

AS: So are they PICTURES?

CM: Starting in the late '90s, I made graphic paintings that were derived from landscape photographs, and I thought of them very much as pictures. I changed things up about ten years ago, moving toward what I thought was a more abstract approach [turning toward brushstrokes and shapes]. But I have come to understand that every painting I make still has the logic of an image playing with graphics and signs and grids.



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AS: Are they funny? Do you think of them as *droll*?

CM: They might be. Do they read that way to you?

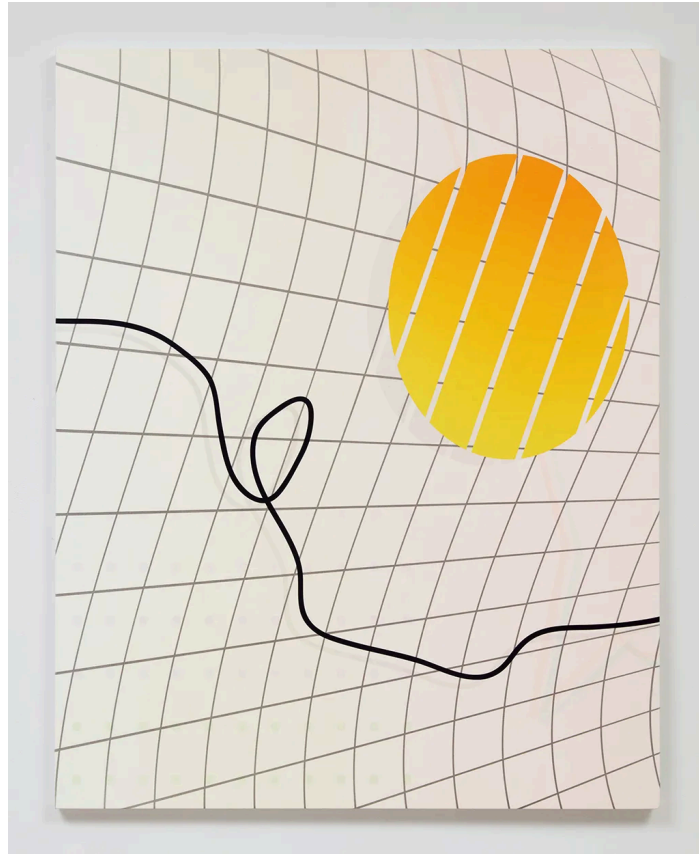
AS: I'm not sure I'd think so if I just saw them on their own, but I find it funny if you make this claim for them as "pictures," since your paintings are kind of like signs stripped of meaning, or pictures stripped of background and foreground, or images stripped of signification, and if you try to pin any of these categories to them they seem to wriggle away. I guess I find that sort of droll... "droll" as opposed to "witty," in the sense that witty is like a play on *words*, while droll is like an attitude of looking askance, having your eyebrows up... maybe a kind of undoing from below.

CM: I think that disposition produces a distinct kind of painting. Both in my paintings and in the things that I look at in the world—whether it's a design element from a credit card ad in the subway or something from art history—I'm thinking about what I call "almost signs," where the signifier and the signified don't quite add up. That's my version of abstraction. It allows for associative reads, where people might say, "this reminds me of 'x'," but if they're asked, "do you think that is a picture of that thing?" the answer is "no."

AS: Yeah, that's where the idea of drollness comes through to me: it's your sense of almost deadpan humor, a slightly oblique relationship to things. But your work's not visually deadpan; visually, it's like a baroque graphic.

These ribbon-like forms, they're doing something animated, even though there's a kind of non-disclosure about what they're doing exactly, which is a strange combination. Do you laugh when you finish one?

CM: I wouldn't say that I chuckle out loud, but I can be amused by things that happen within the paintings. And maybe that amusement is what comes out of the juxtaposition of parts that don't totally fit. That's one way a joke can operate, when the parts don't quite make sense, and things are just off enough that you might experience humor, if not full-on laughter.



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AS: You said “almost signs” and now we’re talking about the “almost comical.” Your collages—which I’m a fan of—have a whole different kind of affect. They’re animated, but not funny, whereas the paintings have a stilled quality, or a paradoxical situation of stillness and motion. I like seeing them together because I think that the collages give this sense of being fully physical, where the opticality and smoothness of the paintings makes them a bit “other” to the physical. I feel like as soon as you started making quote-unquote abstraction, it’s actually non-semiotic work.

CM: I thought I had done that, but I wasn’t able to get as far away from signifiers as I imagined. I feel sometimes like I am the last champion of semiotics: it’s still fueling the things that I am making, though maybe more obliquely than it was when I was painting pictures of mountains and “nature.”

AS: When you were painting “nature” did you think you were doing something political? Or something useful?

CM: I was thinking about our mediated relationship to the natural world, and the way the environment has become ideologically loaded. “Useful” is a tall order, though.

AS: Was your move to abstraction freeing, then? Because it amplified the kind of estrangement of picture-to-meaning that you’re into?

CM: I don't think a picture's meaning is ever completely straightforward. When I was addressing landscape it was always with an eye towards putting the term in parallax. I was thinking about what kinds of assumptions get made around natural imagery. But in some ways, abstraction more readily allows for a polyvalency of meaning. I find that exciting, and I suppose freeing.

AS: I think your collages are more organic than your paintings. They make us aware that they are being MADE, they are palpable. If I ran my finger over them I'd feel a catch, the edges of cut layers. But your drive in the paintings is remarkably toward a no-body, a non-embodied space where the optical prevails over the physical. There's no sense of physical resistance, no remnant, trace, stain, or grain is evident. But of course, that IS a paradox.

CM: I want them to have the effect of feeling like they just appeared on the canvas.

AS: Exactly. In your paintings it's almost impossible to see what happened before, or how something got there. They appear, and we look at them. But we who have bodies, we can't *not* have histories, residue, leftovers, remnants. Your paintings are stripped of this, purposefully. They're clean. But then your collages are slightly tingling with this tiny embodiment...

CM: On top of that, the collages have more concrete referents. The components clearly come from somewhere. I think that lack of tactility in the paintings results from having had a very theory-heavy upbringing as an artist. I've always had an ambivalent or even skeptical disposition toward painting. With all the things you're describing that we might frame as embodiment, I'm attempting to work against them as prerequisites for what constitutes a painting, to try to trouble the category a bit.



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AS: They seem to have no past, but they have a future in that way. What do you think about tragedy? You're describing a kind of work that's not bound up with agonistic production. But is there still a kind of "tragic" sense in

work that is imagined to be headed for some kind of instability, or... maybe you're refusing that kind of drama?

CM: When you talk about refusal I think about Freud's idea of negation, which allows for an insight into what is repressed. I would say we live in a state of omnipresent tragedy, so that is inherently part of every gesture we make. I wonder, then, psychoanalyzing myself, whether what you are pointing to as a negation of tragedy isn't an attempt at repressing the tragedy that is everywhere.

AS: Am I doing that or are you? (LOL) The work is also really asking "how far you can go without the body and still give things a body?"

CM: Our mutual friend Ulrike Müller said this interesting thing to me recently, that sometimes we don't paint the world we live in, but instead paint the world that we want to live in.

AS: That's kind of an idealist thing, isn't it? It reminds me of Agnes Martin's description. of the "classical," as opposed to the romantic. For her, classical work is based on a kind of clarity and lightness, as opposed to being all twisted up, self-descriptive, and expressionist. But her paintings can be pretty dry, without humor in a way. Lightness yes, humor no. Your paintings also have this sense of lightness, almost this festive quality of things moving around, dancing, defying gravity, and of course opticality. But I guess I'm trying to identify this kind of other feeling that I think you aim for at the same time. Maybe it's like the smile of the Cheshire cat... you're making something that's more unsure than it looks....

CM: I think that after years of making work that was pretty somber, when I made the pivot to abstraction I felt a desire for the work to have a different affect. I wouldn't say "festive" (that kind of makes me cringe) but I agree with you that lightness and a distinct relationship to gravity are at play. At the same time, the work is proposing a *lack* of fixity, an openness to multiple meanings being possible at once, at a time when there is a lot of binary thinking pervading everything from art to politics.

