

## Amy Sillman: Alternate Side (Permutations #1–32)

For over three decades, Amy Sillman has created allover compositions in which figurative elements emerge from and recede behind abstract forms through an iterative process of layering and redaction. The artist, who identifies as “more of a drawer than a painter,” uses media categories interchangeably, often describing one—such as drawing, painting, printing, and even animation and writing—in terms of the other. Applying this category-shifting sensibility to her Bridgehampton exhibition, *Alternate Side (Permutations #1–32)*, Sillman reimagines the relationship between figure and ground, using the gallery as a literal ground on which the improvisational and systematic coalesce. With her newly commissioned, screenprinted painting, Sillman approaches the wall as a piece of paper, an impermanent surface that will later be erased, and collages a new series of framed monotypes over and around it. These distinct yet integrated components are built up via a hybrid method in which Sillman moves both spontaneously and procedurally between the hand-drawn and the mediated. Here as throughout her practice, the artist privileges fluid process over fixed output, seeking to work at “an affective edge where things ... can't be conclusive.”

Sillman made the prints on view during a 2024–25 residency at Two Palms, a New York print studio, where she worked with their team to produce this suite on surplus handmade paper. Using characteristic, self-imposed limitations, Sillman defined a set of symbols to deploy individually or in combination in each print. Forms such as a vertical, trembling line and an almond-shaped “palm” recur, coming together as the alphabet assembles words or like speakers in a conversation, revealing traces of the artist's early engagement with pictographic language (before finding art, Sillman briefly studied Japanese). Building “a language of form,” Sillman's gestures of screenprinting, painting, and drawing yield shapes with varying degrees of legibility. Some compositions feature crisp-edged, clearly defined palms printed in bright purples and blues coupled with metallic copper paint, while the edges dissolve in what Sillman refers to as the “muddier” prints, dominated by gray and brown hues. Each print captures the tension between forms and processes to, as Sillman puts it, “estrangle by any means necessary.” The serial yet staggered display of the monotypes simultaneously suggests and denies a sense of uniformity—a quality typically associated with the medium—that is further undermined by the idiosyncrasy and irreproducibility of each print and the site-specific wall painting into which they seep.

Sillman's direct-to-wall work extends the material and methodological experiments she undertook at Two Palms, embracing the generative possibilities of improvisation while working in response to the specific conditions of the space, and allowing these contingencies to inform the work as it reveals itself over time. On the south side of the gallery, forms are printed onto the architecture with the same kind of screens used to make the framed prints—in addition to marks made with paint, turmeric, sponges, and squeegees—drawing attention to the whole-body, labor-intensive process of this scale of printmaking. Meanwhile, the north wall blurs the line between these techniques as

she hand-pulled ink down the surface like an embodied printing screen. Enveloping the space, unplanned interactions between the printed and painted layers generate spectral resonances and relays, formal coincidences and correspondences. A friezelike band of faint forms rims the bottom edges of the gallery like the margin of a page, further collapsing these two- and three-dimensional architectures.

Although *Alternate Side* highlights some of Sillman's distinctive ways of working, it also evinces new territory for the artist. Sillman had not worked directly on the wall since art school until she elected to paint on the interiors of the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland and the Ludwig Forum Aachen in Germany, as part of her exhibition *Oh, Clock!* in 2024–25. In a gesture both curatorial and artistic, these exhibitions included works by Sillman and other artists that were installed over and near her wall paintings, forming new, nonhierarchical relationships that Sillman describes as “figure on figure,” upending the traditional figure-ground dichotomy. This modality has offered her a way “to pose a question rather than nail down an answer” by working intuitively, with no sketch or plan, as she did here. At Dia, Sillman asks: Can printmaking itself serve as a model and method for a whole room? As a site for the recombination—or permutation—of forms, in this gallery the relationship between figure and ground transforms again, the techniques of painting and printing working together to enact a “system of ground on ground.”<sup>1</sup>

With its title also alluding to parking ordinances and movement regulations and limits, the exhibition operates within and in excess of technological, mechanical, and self-imposed restrictions, expanding what is possible within the confines of the printing process and Sillman's own mark-making vocabulary. She employs printmaking not just as a method but also as a versatile methodology, remarking, “painting is analog, and printing is digital,” as the latter enables an artist to save, undo, and repeat gestures and forms, whereas painting is less forgiving, more permanent. As she toggles between media, from analog to digital and back again, Sillman layers, distributes, and excavates to produce uncanny dimensional and perspectival shifts among flatness and volume, color and shape. Thus, the notion of moving to and from alternate sides operates as a heuristic process and compositional strategy, further emphasized by the asymmetrical hanging of the prints on opposing sides of the gallery.

It comes as no surprise that, just as gestural painters Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell did, Sillman draws inspiration from the light of Long Island, where she lives and works part-time. Recognizing the constitutive impact of light on space—“shades of time,” as she puts it—the row of prints extends over the windows, interacting with the natural light that enters the space. In this way, time and light continually alter the installation, underscoring Sillman's view of the work as “fixed in space but not finished.”<sup>2</sup> This consideration of light, as well as the color palette of the wall painting, nod obliquely to Dan Flavin's permanent installation and to the stained-glass window (a relic of the building's past life as the First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton) upstairs.

Using a fitting metaphor for Dia Bridgehampton, the artist explains the clarity drawing brings her by comparing it to the filament of a light bulb, the marks clearly visible and bare on the paper. This location has long offered unexpected bridges between artists and media; in fact, Flavin initially envisioned the institute hosting a print studio, and a printing press still resides in a back room. Meanwhile, throughout the 1990s, Dia Bridgehampton hosted exhibitions of numerous artists not typically associated with Dia's program, such as Keith Haring and Alice Neel. *Alternate Side* thus builds on a history of presenting groundbreaking painters while contending with the legacies of medium specificity, in keeping with the aims of Minimal and Conceptual artists key to Dia's collection.

—Jordan Carter and Emily Markert

## Notes

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Amy Sillman, in conversation with Jordan Carter and Emily Markert, Brooklyn, January 15, 2025.

1. Amy Sillman, in conversation with Jordan Carter and Emily Markert, Zoom, May 19, 2025.
2. Sillman, May 19, 2025.