



Caught in the Act

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“I make weird-looking handmade paintings that are sort of poems,” says Amy Sillman.¹ It is the “handmade” that strikes me first and most, from within and outside the frame of her painting. She extends her hand and her brush and makes gestures—as physical motion, acts of kindness, a way of speaking.

All paintings start with gesture, or become gesture. But where does gesture start? Anne Carson says that “a poem . . . is an action of the mind captured on a page.”² For Sillman, a poem is an action of the mind but also real-life action—motoneurons signaling to muscles that in turn arouse a limb or the roll of an eye and make gestures that are also paintings. For Sillman, gesture is a kind of poetics—not a movement as sentence or stroke as word but an utterance that comes from within the body, a noise so big that the body moves with it.

Before Sillman made gestures, and after Sillman made gestures, there was the gestural *mode* of painting, rather than action—a broad-sweeping term for the marks of a brush on a canvas, be it abstracted or figurative, brash or nuanced. The Abstract Expressionists, a generation or two before Sillman, made epic, seemingly “unmeditated” strokes of “pure genius,” as if they were intuited by God or someone. Sillman’s strokes are neither brash nor grandiose, clipped nor formal; they are decisive and tacit gesture, re complicating with other “women and queers” the “terrain of gestural, messy, physical, chromatic, embodied, handmade practices,” she writes in “Ab Ex and Disco Ballers: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II.”³ For Sillman, gesture operates *between* abstraction and figuration—defining form, even when the form *is* abstract. Take one of her limbs, which is also where the gesture starts. She abstracts it until it transforms into another body part—on all fours now, breasts droop downward until they become . . . supporting arms.

In Sillman’s paintings, gesture operates between abstraction and figuration, but also between language and image. “Gesture painting was done with a kind of political body,” she writes, “maybe akin to the poets and their projective verses. I went for the idea that gesture painting was a form of expression lying *between* language and image, an utterance that implicates the maker, along the lines of the ‘personal is political.’”

To speak through—as gesture—is to get inside of it and inside ourselves, which is what Sillman is good at as a writer, and as a painter. How to get into gesture, not like getting into a hobby, or sport or gourmet cooking, but *inside* of it—and language? To implicate ourselves *in it*?

Take *Queenie* (2023), in which Sillman, cognizant of the shortcomings of gender, makes rudimentary female forms on the canvas. They are plural. It could be a Neoclassical sculptural garden with voluptuous muses, a strip joint full of arse, a bachelorette party, Grecian nymphs, or a group of people just having a good time. The sly *S* of the shoulders streaks

down, tightens in around the waist and out, extending into cherub pink haunches at the center of the painting. A single well-defined torso—chalky white, a little wax resist—is nestled against the haunches. Other legs, arses, and waists wait to throw out a shock move, definitive black strokes projecting from a hip before dropping into the meter of a leg. Bodies and their gestures are rendered in dashes and lines like language; the cleft of an arse repeats like a refrain. Ever green, evergreen infiltrates from the west of the painting—sheer like a glass bottle—and rebounds, refracting into defiant marks of emerald about an hourglass waist. There are bodies within other bodies; they tumble like sounds and lodge themselves between one another so that it's hard to tell where one body—and its gesture—starts and another ends.

Sillman reminds us that painting, like poetry, does not have to be serious but does have to be heartfelt—body-felt. She makes bodies that are implicit if not figurative—unheroic, unwieldy bodies that are funny “haha” but also strange. Because there is something funny, almost slapstick about bodies—painting bodies and painting with bodies—when every gesture is frozen, as if caught in the act.

Queenie is not the most gestural of Sillman's gestural paintings, if we consider gesture like the Abstract Expressionists do as something impulsive-seeming or unbridled, but it does get to the heart of it. To *gesticulate* is to speak with our bodies; sometimes this is sounds, but it is only later that the speaking becomes rhythm, meter, syntax. The *chora*, from the Greek *khoreia*—meaning “dance”—was, Plato said, the prelinguistic stage of infancy before the body is burdened with the weight of language, a language posing as reason. Later, semiologist Julia Kristeva assumed the *chora* into her work but did not locate it in a particular body. Her body was a body made of many bodies or an accumulation of bodies tumbling with pleasure and without boundaries, engaging with both the exterior materiality of the world and our chaotic, interior impulses. Like Kristeva's *chora*, Sillman's gesture—and thus her poetics—is shaped by language while also returning us to a time before it and reason.

In *Queenie*, the world is full of cheek, and arse, yes, but also veritable black outlines that close down the space of the canvas and make it intimate—structured tightly like syntax. Dashes of crimson, workman's orange, and a poor porcelain gray creep in and around those indomitable black lines like sunlight, thus marking time, and the language we have to use it. Sillman says that “time merges with materials to form constant changes” and that *color* is the “flesh of these changes—the way I mark the negations and negotiations of painting time.”⁴

Time enters Sillman's practice like a refrain, like the cleft of an arse or some godforsaken limb. For Sillman, gesture like language, and gesture as language, have to do with tracking it but not in a linear fashion—the

process of making a painting or a series of drawings is one of moving back and moving forward—accumulating and stripping off layers and peeling things back just to build them up again; it is pure anachronism. Kristeva wrote in *Revolution in Poetic Language* that “the *chora*, as rupture and articulation (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.”⁵ Sillman proposes that the right sort of gesture precedes and surpasses language, but also time. Then she holds it there—every gesture caught in a state of becoming, and so refusing certain definition.

Like Sillman, Kristeva seizes upon “becoming” as a liminal space and time; a space and time where abjection happens—what Kristeva refers to as a state of being that does not “respect borders, positions, rules” and “disturbs identity, system, order.”⁶ Sillman dwells there, in this rupture and refusal, *making* paintings that are becoming, but also unbecoming—awkward, refusenik, caught somewhere between abstraction and figuration, and I am reminded of Sylvia Wynter, whose far-ranging corpus considered “the possibility of undoing and unsettling—*not replacing or occupying*—Western conceptions of what it means to be *human*.”⁷

Wynter said, “Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities . . . And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.”⁸ For Wynter, humans are “words made flesh,” while Sillman extends this to gesture, as the flesh of language.

When I pull back from *Queenie*, I start to hear these gestures rather than see them—not as language but oratory fragments and composite forms—arching, soaring, sometimes repetitious sounds and sharp inhalations. Sillman gestures toward a cacophonous and unruly end to language, as we know it, or think of it.

1 Amy Sillman, in conversation with the author, October 2023.

2 Anne Carson, in “Anne Carson: The Art of Poetry No. 88,” interview by Will Aitken, *Paris Review* 171 (Fall 2004), 191–226.

3 Amy Sillman, “Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II,” *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (2011): 320–25.

4 Amy Sillman, “On Color,” in *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2020), 72.

5 Julia Kristeva, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26.

6 Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

7 Katherine McKittrick, “Yours in the Intellectual Struggle: Sylvia Wynter and the Realization of the Living,” in *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.

8 Sylvia Wynter, in McKittrick 2015 (see note 7), 1.