



Sillman O'Clock

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In her well-known essay “Women’s Time,” first published in French in 1979, feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva speculates that “women” have become a kind of placeholder indicating temporalities that run against linear teleologies.¹ Importantly grounding her arguments in the wake of the wreckage of twentieth-century European economic and political realities, she writes that “female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations.”² Alongside this pulsing time of “cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature” is a countervailing feminine “monumental temporality,” one that is “all-encompassing and infinite.” Kristeva does not essentialize her claims about “women” (a category that she acknowledges barely coheres), but rather understands that time itself—and, by extension, how the story of the past is codified into History—has gendered valences.

Kristeva’s essay attempts to map generations of feminist activism but becomes mired in what she herself acknowledges is a “problematic of unheard complexity.”³ Yet her provocations remain generative as I contemplate how feminist painter Amy Sillman approaches history, in particular, the history of Western art. Take, for example, Sillman’s masterful—I use the word advisedly—*Untitled (Frieze for Venice)* (2021). Installed in the central pavilion of the *Giardini* on the occasion of Cecilia Alemani’s 2022 Venice Biennale, *The Milk of Dreams*, Sillman’s works encircled the viewer, implying a sequence or progression that at the same time endlessly looped back on itself. The individual pieces, variously made with acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper, were hung on a double register, asking us to witness these two related yet discrepantly scaled timelines as they unspooled in space. The lower, larger works were hung vertically (an orientation that within Western traditions signifies “portrait”) and the upper register of smaller works unfurl horizontally (conventionally gesturing to “landscape”).

But beyond these templatic designations, any easy legibilities are thwarted. Sillman has noted that citationality is crucial to her process, and that “every painting is layered upon all the other paintings ever made.”⁴ As she undergoes a feminist process of erasure, defacement, and reclamation, she is in conversation with the history of Western art, but she participates in that conversation on her own terms. In the Venice frieze, there are hints of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse as well as hints of Alma Thomas, Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, Joan Snyder, and Ida Applebroog (to name just a few), but these are like flickers of a

flame: stare at them hard enough and they morph into something else, subsumed and obscured within the confident strokes and scummings that are decisively Sillman's idiom.

Sillman works overtly with traditions of easel painting, bringing a feminist urgency to her sensual constructions. She is a formalist above all, someone whose knowledge of art history is deep, and she derives great pleasure from metabolizing and transforming the movements of twentieth-century modernism: Cubism, gestural abstraction, Action Painting, graphism, concrete poetry, and more, movements that she prints over and remakes with a difference. For she is not obedient to strict dictums around flatness or abstraction, preferring instead to reconstruct her own textured language. As she roams through history, Sillman becomes a time traveler with an ability to take from the past in order to speak to the present moment. In the Venice works, made in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic, I glimpse body parts in graves, flowers pushing up from muddy ground, dismemberment, fleeing animals, embracing creatures, kneeling and supplicating women. Some of these are imagistic impressions, not definitive representations, but this gives a hint of the mood that for me emerged while surrounded by Sillman's abstractish series. Much here remains silent, obdurate, strange, in particular, the figure-ground relation in which opaque shapes rise to the surface in some works while in others those same shapes recede. Motifs repeat across canvases, morphing into other associations. Washes of delicate color are punctuated by bold assertive outlines that by turns congeal and then dissolve.

Across the Venice frieze, the mark-making feels distinctly Sillmanesque, as does the color palette with its almost shocking embrace of lavender and purple, tricky hues that have been underexplored in modernist painting. She stays with that lavender, pushing it around, besmirching it, pairing it with yellow and green to draw out its earthiness. The sheer durational quality of her play with purple feels stubbornly investigatory. Duration, of course, brings us back to time, to Sillman's own clock: a sequential, never-ending circuit of spiraling time in which she is endlessly critiquing and remaking histories of painting. The frieze has no ending and no beginning, and in it she thematizes the hard feminist work of wheeling back to look at the past in a new way, thereby creating different futures. In this, Sillman's frieze evokes Kristeva's understanding of a feminist approach to time that insists upon an "insertion into history and the radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time."⁵

This dynamic of simultaneous insertion and refusal feels especially critical in the context of the stakes of seriality in the twenty-first century, as we are overwhelmed by the incessant flow of images on screens. I return one last time to Kristeva's prescient essay to glean from it what I still find useful. She writes, "It seems to me that the role of what is usually called 'aesthetic practices' must increase not only to counterbalance the storage and uniformity of information by present-day mass media, data-bank systems, and, in particular, modern communications technology, but also to demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself to demystify, therefore, the *community* of language as a unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes." To do this, Kristeva exhorts artists and writers to bring out the "singularity" of each person alongside the "multiplicity of every person's possible identifications."⁶ Sillman's denial of narration—her decision to thwart this-then-that logic even as she has made a sequence of images—feels like a choice that militates against authoritarian certainties. By contrast, she welcomes contingency and association, addressing us in all our multiplicities.

1 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" (1979), trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 13–35.

2 *Ibid.*, 16.

3 *Ibid.*, 18.

4 Amy Sillman, in conversation with the author, January 2024.

5 Kristeva 1981 (see note 1), 20.

6 *Ibid.*, 35.