

ARTS & LETTERS

Amy Sillman's Love for the Scumble

The painter's 'intuitive' and 'groping' New York show, 'Stuff Change,' deftly intertwines abstraction with the graphic representation of lively messes

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At the core of Amy Sillman's current show, "Stuff Change," at Sikkema Jenkins in New York, are seven abstract oil paintings on canvas, each 75 x 66 inches. These paintings, like so much of her past work, have the ability to stay on point while appearing to digress and forget what they were intending to say. Sillman's *modus operandi* requires that she get lost before arriving at any destination. And she therefore arrives (or has arrived) fashionably late.

The paintings have a kind of bumbling inner compass. They are intuitive and admirably individualist. They evince their own thinking. They document their own groping. They're not "by the book" even when they strike a familiar chord or trigger a feeling of *déjà vu*.

As a painter, Sillman is generous in letting us see the steps she has taken. She allows us to experience the elasticity of her "trial and error." She incorporates "stuff" (to use her word). She is inclusive, speculative, experimental, rather than being exclusive, pat, and strategic. Her work is comfy being "out" and seems to be impervious to whatever trend is next to come in.

She is not staging a comeback from the black hole of Ab-X. Nor does she necessarily have a crush on Philip Guston (the man all critics compulsively turn to). Hence Sillman's nostalgia and arguably faux-naïf style boldly stand on their own in the present. One painter of the past who does shine through is Richard Diebenkorn. His sense of color and paint quality may or may not have been formative to Sillman.

The paintings are about their own blatant discovery and knowing when to pull up from a nose-dive to the soul. They are sexual and emotionally charged, but rarely overkill. Nor a product of over-skill. They don't bask in their own narcissism even though they can seem quite arrogantly hermetic. Sillman is neither too smart for conceptual art nor too cool for old school. She's not too aged for the new youth; nor is she too young to have an old soul. (She's 60.)

While the recent show in Chelsea has numerous side attractions (an animated painting in motion, a huge series of watercolors done from the tub, and a multi-paneled work that reads almost as an extended horizontal scroll incorporating digital imagery), the seven paintings I mentioned stubbornly, conservatively occupy center stage.

After deeper thought, they seem to distinguish themselves from the variety of other works that may have veered slightly off in fruitful yet perhaps somewhat digressive experiments. I'm all for the experiment, but the seven paintings to which I am referring seem to be driving at something, digging at something with the focus of an archaeologist, and are perhaps even on the cusp of revealing something.

These main seven paintings prominently highlight Sillman's central vision that we have watched blossom since she appeared on the scene c. 1994. This vision has, you might say, involved the contamination of abstract nonrepresentational painting—pure abstraction—with clumsy figures and doodles or “off,” even mutant, childish illustrations. Sillman has a knack for getting these two modes—one painterly, the other graphic (of fanzine or graphic novel appeal)—to coalesce, as if they were two strangers hitting it off at a party immediately after being introduced.

Sillman can't help but to tell stories through a kind of visual "stream of consciousness." The work is nothing if it isn't fundamentally psychoanalytic. Or in other words, Jewish.

Eventually Stream of Consciousness found a home in Freud's Talking Cure but also in the writing of many Modernist authors, most significantly James Joyce, first in *Ulysses* and then going into turbo in *Finnegan's Wake*, where it—the stream—is used as a device for the writer to go rogue, to journey in irrational, cubist, protean interior monologues, to flow via language beyond the limits of the reader's comprehension or the malleability of any legible dramatic structure.

When William James first coined the term in his 1890 book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) he declared:

consciousness, then, does not appear to itself as chopped up in bits ... it is nothing joined; it flows. *A river* or a *stream* are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let's call it the stream of thought, consciousness, or subjective life.

It is hard to speak of Stream of Consciousness without referencing Gertrude Stein. While at Radcliffe from 1893 to 1897 Stein was William James' prize student, and she had the opportunity to participate in an experiment called "normal motor automatism." The study was based on a phenomenon they noticed when the attention is bifurcated between two simultaneous brain activities causing the automatic involuntary, effortless release of a text.

But ultimately, Stein was resistant toward the idea that creativity and good writing could just spring out of the distracted, multi-tasking mind without writerly rigor and concentration. "Writing for the normal person," she argued, "is too complicated an activity to be indulged in automatically."

But at the time of the Lost Generation there was a sense by many writers that “stories” were somewhat generic and predetermined, and that all storytellers lead us along toward the same conclusion. According to Hemingway, all narratives lead to the same place. He was famous for saying, “Madame, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you.”

But Sillman seems to know more than Hemingway, whose endgame statement sounds a little too strategic—a convenient way to dominate the conversation by establishing a rule that grants oneself the final word in every argument. (Everything after me will be dead.)

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Sillman’s thinking may more closely reflect Ecclesiastes, which derives, like most knowledge, from earlier forms of Classical Greek philosophy. In the JPS version of Ecclesiastes 1:7 one finds these words: “All the rivers run into the sea, Yet the sea is not full; Unto the place whither the rivers go, Thither they go again.” What if all narratives do not end in death? But in renewed life? (Joyce, let’s keep in mind was an advocate of Metempsychosis—a philosophical term referring to transmigration of the soul, especially its reincarnation after death. How else would he have understood the Jew enough to create as sympathetic and lifelike a Jewish co-protagonist as Leopold Bloom.)

Sillman’s paintings become lush and built up without ever seeming to overindulge their maker or their viewer. If anything there seems to be a series of checks and balances in place, a filtration system. The two interrelated systems could best be called: not the stream but the *filter* of consciousness.

Brought on by the dueling modes of representation, these seven canvases could be traced back to the advent of Synthetic Cubism, when Picasso struck a balance (a choppy flow) with three seated musicians constructed by clustering, glomming, stacking, primary geometric shapes in bright colors and patterns seated at a table in a shadowy

room. Like Picasso, Sillman's paintings are geometric, biomorphic, and cartoony.

They certainly string us along, but what do they really have to say? Sillman's latest paintings have titles that reference fingers, legs, tables, and humorously the back end of a horse costume. (Similar to the horse costume that appears in Picasso and Erik Satie's 1917 ballet *Parade*—though this may not have any relevance.) Her titles provoke, they inspire us to scan her paintings in order to register a kind of vague scenario within an equally vague scenery. As abstract as they are, they impel us to hunt for clues, to work to solve a representational puzzle. Like in the paintings of Francis Bacon, one can feel like a voyeur peeping in on a private encounter that is never sufficiently unfolded.

In one painting in the show, titled *Tough Girls*, voluptuous calves, thighs, and butt cheeks are strongly rendered, but in other paintings, the legs are more those of a flapper, undernourished and seemingly understated. In other paintings, repeating vertical, leggy forms teeter between human legs and furniture legs—a case of hallucinatory anatomical ambiguity, or Surrealism. (And her feet—Sillman has rendered these as blocks, possibly to be interpreted as the blocky heels of a shoe.)

Innuendo is the Sillman mode. It is her way. In one work, the legs appear not to be legs but stockings (one black the other white) hanging in a cobalt blue bathroom reminiscent of Motherwell's Mediterranean-influence *Opens* paintings (c. 1967-1970, some of which were recently exhibited at Andrea Rosen Gallery). Or if viewed topographically, the same legs seem to emerge from a bathtub. In such ambiguity, the paintings can be frustrating. But the artist has no choice. It is essential that they resist becoming literal, that they stave off depiction, delay confirmation. They generously articulate, but willingly sabotage their calling to illustrate. (See Sillman's dexterous portraits if you want to see her talent as an illustrator; there is a latent Maria Kalman there.)

One friend rudely called the paintings "geriatric," as if Sillman's subject is specifically the aging body. Interesting word choice. Isn't

painting itself an aging body? An aged art? Indeed modern painting may be worn out after 200 years. Painting while never dead may be geriatric. Perhaps there is an unconscious link to be made between legs and canes.

Whether the work is old or just old fashioned, its maker is self-deprecating enough to turn this pejorative into a compliment. There can be a humor in making it—the painting—defective. In a Keaton-Chaplin-esque way, they revel in their own clumsiness and bad timing. They have a physicality as explicit as a doomed attempt to touch ones toes or to find enough legroom in a crowded bed.

There is a “Bed, Bath and Beyond,” aspect to the work. Their stick-ish figures and comfy patchwork of color suspend us between domestic specificity and the macrocosmic. They are reminiscent, in their bodily charm, of Gertrude Stein’s highly aroused poem, *Lifting Belly*. (A poem that forces one to type into Google: “What is a lifting belly?”)

Amy Sillman occupies a distinct place in the current New York City painting scene. She has become a household name perhaps due to her recent multivenue midcareer retrospective that toured to Bard and the ICA Boston, etc.) She has many fans. Many collectors. Many students. Many critics. With some artists, fame courts arrogance, mystery, and remoteness, but Sillman’s fame has come without a room in the ivory tower. As Montaigne once told us “On the highest throne in the world, we still sit only on our own bottom.”

Sillman’s love is for the scumble. A verb meaning: “to modify (a painting or color) by applying a very thin coat of opaque paint to give a softer or duller effect.” And buried within the word *scumble* sits the word scum. Dare I say, there is something wonderfully scummy about the paintings. It conjures themes that George Bernard Shaw explored in *Pygmalion*.

Contemporary art has used too much soap and disinfectant. But Sillman’s work is un-scrubbed, full of germs and yet likely to survive. Perhaps this is what she is getting at in the show’s humungous installation in a wall-size grid of 100 so-called Bathtub paintings.

These are small watercolors with gauche on paper said to have been painted literally in the tub.

Don't the pages get wet? One would ask. Well, yes. But Sillman's wetness—her smoochiness—finds its way into all the work. And it is this juicy quality that makes Sillman's style so irresistible.

Bottom line, they look do-able. And their do-ability is satiating. People enjoy the work's flavorful umami. Her shapes interlock, and obscure, obfuscate. Some in this show remind me of Goya's little doggy-paddling dog, fighting to stay above the rising waters. Or even his truly upsetting Black Painting, "Saturn Devouring His Son." But without the Goya angst or social commentary.

Perhaps more accurately, they re-teach the lessons taught by Louise Bourgeois, whose watery pinkish pregnant women (and pregnant men) were an obvious influence on Sillman. Bourgeois' "Family" renderings were made when she was up all night, night after night, with insomnia tortured by the voices in her head and images in her mind. Sillman does not come across as tortured like Goya or Bourgeois, but it is perhaps her happy-go-lucky earnestness that makes her and her work so sympathetic. (Again to quote Montaigne: "The most certain sign of wisdom is cheerfulness.")

Pure abstraction they cannot and never will be because Sillman is impure. Her work is an honest offshoot of a woman living in contaminated times. Swimming with the "stuff" of our population and landfills. Like Paul Klee, she is a degenerate and damn proud of it.

We are amidst a "Stuff Change," the show's title asserts. A stuff change? What exactly is a stuff change? Is that like a Sea Change? Stuff, you could say is at the core of the modern problem. Look at our problem with refuse: The instantly possible and instantly disposable dream. Like any producer or consumer of paint, Sillman admits to the trashy necessity of metabolizing stuff. Her press release spells it out. "I would call it a metabolism: the intimate and discomfiting process of things changing as they go awry, [as they] look uncomfortable, have to be confronted, repaired, or risked, i.e., trying to figure something out

while doing it.” Most of all, this word “stuff” is the go-to word when an author can’t muster up a description. For Sillman, it is the hinge between the literal crap that fills our lives, that is often well worth description, and the mucous-y, oily medium at her disposal.

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