

Henry Ward  
Bethany



# Talking About Painting

## Henry Ward and Amy Sillman in Conversation

February 2023, Brooklyn, NYC

While in residence at the Albers Foundation in Connecticut, a couple of hours north of New York, Henry Ward arranged to meet Amy Sillman at her Brooklyn studio. They discussed their approaches to painting. The following is an edited transcript from this conversation.

HW One of the things I have been thinking about, and am interested in, is the idea of setting yourself a rigid structure, a set of rules, that you can improvise within. Then producing something that feels like it's opened a door to another way of making and then finding that the painting slams the door in your face. How you're forced to invent another set of structures.

AS Yes, instead of 'anything goes' there has to be a new, very determined way to find the conclusion of a painting.

HW The idea of tricking yourself... doing something that you maybe know isn't going to work, but you have to do it to get to the space where stuff happens. You know you have to do that, even though you know it isn't going to work. To get yourself into a space where you have something to battle with.

AS It's still just 'hope for the best, fear the worst!' But maybe it's a method of 'get out' after a certain number of mistakes, which reminds me of that great Janet Malcolm book, *Forty-One False Starts*

[2013]. Get out of the painting after forty-one mistakes. I want to allow for a number of attempts and failures.

I'm generally rather fearless but everyone approaches the 'not quite done painting' with their dripping paintbrush with some terror. You know you're probably going to wreck it.

HW Absolutely, and this idea of putting a method in place. There's something about the left accidents, the drips, that's quite terrifying in a way. When something like that really works, especially early on, you're in trouble.

AS Yes, because then you're dealing with your darling...

HW Stepping around it.

AS It ends up being garbage with one nice bit of painting.

HW So you have to be brave. You have to destroy the beauty.

AS If this is the way you work. It's not the way everyone works.

HW One of the reasons I'm so drawn to your work is because of this method, this approach. When I'm looking at your paintings, they seem to be evidence of an exploration, of a journey – much more



- than you are setting off with a map of what you're planning. I am interested in the rules you set yourself – like saying, 'Okay, I'm going to go north, I'm going to travel for this number of hours.' But then, once you set off, you follow your nose, get a bit lost, but you're recording where you're going and at the end we have this evidence, which is really exciting, rather than setting out with a clear plan. I think that's what I'm trying to do too.
- AS Starting out with a plan means that you have a picture in mind. I think there's a difference between wanting to arrive at a picture and wanting to just arrive. I'm always going into a painting with nothing, which is why I can't have a real painting studio assistant. There is no 'picture'. But you need something to go in with, everyone does. And you need somewhere to come out. With all process art, which is what I'm basically involved in, you could say that the beginning and the ending is simply a philosophical position.
- HW I've heard you say that someone once asked you how you know when a painting is finished, and you said when someone takes it away.
- AS No, that's what de Kooning said!
- HW Oh, so de Kooning said that? I'm sure you've quoted it. You've previously said something about continuing to paint the same painting on the same canvas...
- AS Well, it's sort of magic. But it's not conjuring, it's not trickery; you're basically co-making a painting with the materials.
- HW Absolutely, it is a conversation with the paint, the canvas, the tools.
- AS With an inanimate object.
- HW Sometimes you're not even speaking the same language; it's like you're trying to translate. I find when I come back into the studio after having made something, I see it and think, 'Did I do that?' – I've no memory of doing it.
- AS It's also about the appearance of a layer or a moment. As a studio painter, you're alone most of the time, and then when something appears or manifests itself on a surface, it takes a kind of skill to recognise that and leave it alone.
- HW Absolutely! I know you take photos on your phone in the process of painting, and it's something I do too. What does that do for you?
- AS Well, the iPhone made it possible for me to see that I should have stopped earlier! But that I went on anyway.
- HW Do you have that thing where you are going through your phone photos, scrolling through, and you think, 'Oh yeah, I should've stopped...'?
- AS Oh yeah!
- HW ...but then you scroll forward and think, 'Actually, I was right to rework it.'
- AS Not always! [Laughs]. I realised after using the phone that I don't make anything 'better', I just push it further along. It almost never ends when it is supposed to end. Things just don't work out, though sometimes you can rescue something brilliantly at the end of a disaster. Usually I could've let it go at an earlier point when it was really interesting.
- I think the camera helped me understand that I overwork. I pretty much overwork everything, but once I had a camera it

also became clear that certain paintings were done on the first day. You get a feeling as a painter. You learn to listen to it. Sometimes I have a 'damsel in distress' feeling towards a painting, like I'm rescuing it... but other times I'm being cruel and pushing it over a cliff.

HW You've said something about manifestation, a thing appearing, and then there's this sense of responsibility for it...

AS You're in a relationship, you care for it.

HW And if you then make a mess of it...

AS It's depressing.

HW You feel responsible?

AS Yes. But it can be a kind of wish to have a one-night stand with a thing... a 'that was great, see you around' kind of attitude.

HW What about those experiences of coming back in the studio when you see something you made that you thought was messed up and then you see it again and think...

AS 'It's not bad...'

HW Or even it's actually really good. I'll also come back to something I thought was nailed and then the next morning it's 'oh dear'!

AS I definitely have the Tuesday morning let-down after a Monday session. But I must say, I have honed the skill of watching out for the few paintings that are doing something interesting right away, when they manifest something immediately.

HW For me it's like walking a tightrope. As long as I'm moving fast and not thinking

too much, I'm okay, but as soon as I think about what I'm doing and start analysing it too much I wobble and I'm likely to fall off. You need to run at pace, rather than edge in.

AS The worst are the ones that fall in between, where you're between those two things. You've lost the verve of the fast walk, but you're also so muddled that you can't find the joyful logic of a conclusion. Because some of the paintings that I am most proud of are ones where I really did struggle to find the ending, and it felt like a triumph, like solving a hard math problem. In the end, I think the great thing is to be able to re-see and re-achieve the visual logic that was really there at the beginning. That's where the real euphoria is.

HW That rings lots of bells.

AS The moment when you start to trust your most formal moves and instincts, but you know that you've arrived at a higher tier of a spiral through the dialectic of gut instinct and real cognition.

HW To some extent it's like you're describing it as 'dumb' painting. But it isn't just that. We're talking about the importance of criticality?

AS Yes!

HW I often write when I'm painting, I make notes. I think you said once that when you're writing you can't paint and vice versa. Do you think there is a relationship between writing – and maybe talking – and painting? Because here we are in your studio and we're talking about painting and that's shifting the way I am thinking about your painting, and thinking about my own painting... there's a dance there.

- AS There's a ferry channel between the two things, right? It's not that the two activities aren't complementary, they're completely connected, but the production of writing requires listening to the way the language sounds when you read it aloud, and I can't quite get into that space when I am in the studio toughing it out... it's like a runner trying to swim. But what is totally connected is spoken language.
- HW So talking is closer to painting?
- AS Talking is painting! In that it involves a deep structural understanding of the core grammar, how sentences are built, but the flexibility of not knowing what you are going to say next. You trust both kinds of structures of thought. This is something I first learnt in poetry, by reading poems out loud. Maybe talking and listening are painting!
- HW I guess that's the thing. Writing serves such an extraordinary range of functions, from poetry to the signs on the motorway; it does all these things, and talking does all these things. But I love the way that even a simple act, like describing what you did to a painting, opens up that painting in a different way. I think that's really exciting.
- AS A painter talking about painting to another painter is a special thing. Another kind of score!
- HW I have this discussion with other painters a lot. Painters I have an affinity with, where we might discuss how you moved your arm, what came first, what got put back. But with other painters, I'll look at their work and think that this has nothing to do with what I am doing at all... they just happen to be using the same material to make it. We're not doing the same thing. One of the things I am trying to do – and it's something I am really drawn to and excited about in your work – is that when we look at it what we're seeing is the end of all the decisions we've made along the way, though the viewer's experience of it is the reverse. Painting is a time-based medium.
- AS You can read the order of layers well as a painter.
- HW The difference is between the painter having a statement, versus the painter undertaking something to work out what something is. I feel like so often I'll mess around for hours not doing the thing I know I need to do, not acknowledging it to myself.
- AS Yes, but it's also not worth wrecking things just for the sake of it. Sometimes you do need to leave it.
- HW While I've been on this residency, I've been making cut-outs and using the wall in my studio as a large area to pin them up and move them around. It's shifted things in the paintings and now I've started making shapes on canvas using masking tape, so it looks like they've been collaged; they haven't, but they are about collage. I think a lot of your paintings are about drawing and printing.
- AS Exactly.
- HW You make paintings that look like you printed them, but you didn't. But in a way you sort of did! And they are about drawing too. There's an affinity there that I am very excited about.

## Colophon

Henry Ward  
Bethany

Edited by Matt Price  
Designed by Joe Gilmore  
Proofreading by William Lambie  
Reprography by DPM, London  
Printed and bound by EBS, Verona  
Produced by Anomie Publishing, London

Photographer credits:  
All artwork photography by Damian Griffiths; residency photography by Henry Ward (pp. 4, 130, 133, 136, 139, 140); portrait by Rachael Causer (p. 142).

Typeface:  
Studio Pro

Papers:  
140 gsm Arena Natural Smooth  
150 gsm Arctic Volume White  
125 gsm Wibalin Natural (cover)

First published in 2025 by  
Anomie Publishing, London  
[www.anomie-publishing.com](http://www.anomie-publishing.com)

© Anomie Publishing, 2025  
Artwork © Henry Ward, 2025  
Texts © their respective authors, 2025

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be stored, shared, reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-910221-64-8

### Acknowledgements:

I'd like to thank Matt Price and Joe Gilmore, Fritz Horstman and the team at the Albers Foundation, Amy Sillman, Jonathan Watkins, Jenni Lomax and Stephen Swindells.

Rachael, Flo, Lettie & Dot.

I am particularly grateful to the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation.

## Writer Biographies

Fritz Horstman is an artist, educator and curator based in Bethany, Connecticut. Since 2004 he has worked with the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation where he is Education Director. He is author of *Interacting with Color: A Practical Guide to Josef Albers's Color Experiments* (Yale, 2024). Recent curatorial projects include *Anni Albers: In Thread and On Paper* at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin. Recent solo exhibitions of his artwork have been held at the New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Planthouse Gallery, New York; and Municipal Bonds, San Francisco. He has lectured and given workshops at Yale University, Harvard University, l'École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, the Royal Academy of Arts in London, and many other institutions.

Jenni Lomax is a curator and writer based in London. She is Director Emeritus of Camden Art Centre, London where, from 1990 to 2017, she established an influential and forward-thinking programme of international exhibitions and artist residencies, with education at the core of the institution. Before Camden Art Centre, Jenni developed and headed up the Community Education and Public Programmes at Whitechapel Gallery through the 1980s. She continues to work in an advisory capacity with many arts, education and charitable organisations, and is currently working on curatorial and publishing projects in London and Naples.

Amy Sillman is an artist based in New York. She is represented by Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Capitain Petzel, Berlin, and also shows at Thomas Dane in London/Naples. Her most recent solo exhibition *Oh, Clock!* is currently on view at the Kunstmuseum Bern, and will travel to the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany, in spring/summer 2025. Sillman has held professorships at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and on the MFA Program at Bard College in Annandale, New York, where she was formerly longtime co-chair of painting. Sillman's own book of writing on art, *Faux Pas*, was published in 2020 by After 8 Books in Paris and is now in its fourth printing.

Jonathan Watkins is an independent curator and writer. He was Director of Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (1999–2022), Curator of the Serpentine Gallery (1995–97) and Director of Chisenhale Gallery (1990–95). He has curated international exhibitions including the Biennale of Sydney (1998), Tate Triennial (2003), Shanghai Biennale (2006), Sharjah Biennial (2007), Guangzhou Triennial (2012) and the Quebec City Biennial (2019). He was the curator of the Iraqi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and contributed to the 2007 Riwaq Biennale in Palestine with an exhibition of work by On Kawara. In 2019 he received the inaugural Ampersand Foundation Award to realise the exhibition of his dreams (*Carlo Crivelli*, Ikon 2022).

**albers**

Josef & Anni Albers Foundation