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ABSTRACTION OF THE BODY

Melissa Gordon on Amy Sillman at Camden Arts Centre, London

„Amy Sillman: Landline", Camden Arts Centre, London, 2018, installation view

Amy Sillman's show "Landline" at Camden Arts Centre brings a number of important painterly concerns to the fore that are incredibly timely. It is a historic show, not just because it is a multi-faceted look at Sillman's practice (which feels like a boulder now rolling free and wild down a hill after being pushed up that hill for many years), and a remarkable undertaking of new work, but because it raises questions around medium, vitality, humor, relationships between the figure and abstraction: issues that are at the very front and center of the contemporary debate on what painting is doing today.

It is particularly important to unpack what Sillman's work does to gesture, in both her paintings and her practice and installation of painting. There is an almost filmic quality to Sillman's paintings, an aspect that reveals an understanding of gesture as something that is "in-between" action and event. In other words, gesture, in painting, is akin to a kind of liquid movement between states. In Giorgio Agamben's essay "Notes on Gesture," he tells us that "cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture."[1] Agamben describes gesture as something which is "inscribed" into the sphere of action, but is neither entirely acting nor making. It is not a production or a performance; not the mark and not the act that makes the mark.

A distinct register of weight permeates the

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Amy Sillman, „The Lie Down", 2018

works in "Landline": from light paintings, almost cartoon-like with acrylic washes and air between the moves, such as "Edge of Day" (2018), to heavier surfaces that feel like painted bricks where thick oil paint is dragged over dense, almost dry surfaces, and which sucked the air out of my lungs as I took them in. Many of Sillman's titles in "Landline" confirm the preoccupation with weight (or the imagination of a body being weighted down): "TV in Bed," (20188), "The Lie Down," (2017), "Lift & Separate," (2017–18), "Pink Ground, Face Down," (2018), "What the Axe Knows" (2018). Weight implies seriousness, too, and despite the real sense of humor that pervades the show, such as the installation in Gallery 3 of drawings of a female figure with slack tits vomiting while dragging herself along on her knuckles, there is also something intimidating at play.

What is intimidating? It's Sillman's surfaces. They are worked on, reworked; they are like caverns that draw the gaze into their unknown depths. Paint sits there, immobile (how could it be otherwise?), and yet something else, another action of color, suddenly and completely obliterates it, creating another surface altogether. This is an endless task. This act of layering seems rudimentary enough, but an important distinction should be made here: Sillman's paintings are not constructed; nor are they assembled (that is too neat). It would be more correct to say that Sillman's surfaces are forced – they elucidate the

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Amy Sillman, „TV in Bed", 2017–2018

force of their making, physically. Grunt, ergh. *Heavy*. But in a completely irreverent and in-your-face manner. There is an understanding that painting is being taken seriously but also being played with: paint, according to Sillman herself, is not simply a veil of color or a means of making marks. It is matter itself. In Sillman's hands, paint is lumpen, it is "stuff," and it's on the move; thick or thin, scrubbed, rubbed, dragged, or pushed.

I have a draft email that's been sitting in a folder for years now, which reads: "Dear Amy, can we – feminists – make 'pure' abstraction which is not of the body??"

Bodies are funny. They are full of comedic failures, especially as you get older and less insecure. It is these embarrassing episodes with fluids and gases that make us human to others: as Sillman describes in her essay "Shit Happens": "… this laughable casement that is the body below, as ankles swell, farts are emitted, rolls of fat jut out, the penis does its own thing. Shit happens and then you die."[2] In "Landline," bodies and body parts come up, and it is funny. Is that a torso or a lump of clay? Yes, that's a shoulder, a hand or a glove hanging there, a flaccid penis or a kidney. A nose? The spectres of other bodies are there: Guston's big noses, de Kooning's flayed legs. Sillman describes her relation to comedy as a "yes-and!" approach to making work. That comedy is a way of building up, encouraging unexpected encounters – of figurative elements inside abstract paintings and vice versa.

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Viewer's bodies, in "Landline," are moved in turn in a non-linear manner. For example, drawings on paper, some with silkscreened dots, wrap around corners. One large installation consists of almost 50 drawings arranged in a large grid of thick black lines, with red over-drawings; the drawings are individually wonderful: combined, their making is a material decision, a filmic unfolding. There are a number of animations and also Sillman's ongoing series of zines for sale in the foyer, an explication of a practice in which gestures move between states. A thought to an image, to a word, to a material choice, to the next decision, searching for an uncomfortable, inevitable end.

„Amy Sillman: Landline", Camden Arts Centre, London, September 28, 2018 – January 6, 2019.

Notes

1 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in: Means without End, Minneapolis 1992, p. 55.

2 Amy Sillman, "Shit Happens: Notes on Awkwardness," in: Frieze, 22, Dec 2015–Feb 2016, pp. 74–79.

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