

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Greg Cook, 'Painter Amy Sillman: 'I Do Have A Cheerful Vibe, But ... I Don't Like It', The Artery, October 02, 2013



*A sadsack humor pervades the blunt, shambling, cartoony lines in even Amy Sillman's most abstract canvases. It gives her best paintings an endearingly modest, playful feel. You might even call them sunny and happy.*

"I hope not," the New York artist tells me at a press preview yesterday for [her exhibition "One Lump or Two," organized by curator Helen Molesworth at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art](#). "I can't help it. I don't like it. I do have a kind of cheerful vibe, but it's not what I feel and I don't like it. So I try to suppress it."

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Amy Sillman. (Greg Cook)

The show, which opens Oct. 3 and runs through Jan. 5, surveys two and a half decades of her paintings, drawings and new rudimentary iPhone animations. Sillman is one of the standout artists of what ArtNews magazine last spring proclaimed the current “golden age of abstraction.” Unlike, say, the golden age of Cubism or the golden age of Abstract Expressionism, there’s not a clear flag under which the work marches so it’s easy to underestimate the mass of artists that becomes apparent when you tally up all the museum shows of recent abstract art.

Sillman’s paintings are part abstraction, part cartoons. They radiate anxiety, but these feelings are softened by a schlubby comedian’s shrugging, self-deprecating humor that makes problems feel normal, feel okay. You can sense this in her titles “Good Grief,” “Big Girl,” and “Fatso” (pictured at top left), of which she says, “I made it after going to the beach for a day with three very beautiful women in bikinis. It’s personal. I mean, it’s me.” On another painting, she’s written over and over “I’m sorry.”

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The results are abstract psychological diary doodles that—and this is key to her success—feel both fresh and comfortably familiar.

Sillman was born in 1955 and grew up in Chicago where she enjoyed the masters at the Art Institute of Chicago as well as found inspiration in the city's young funky Hairy Who pop art gang. After high school, she left the city in 1973 and bounced to Minneapolis, Japan, Alaska and Wisconsin, before settling in New York two years later. There she found herself puzzled and intrigued by the minimalist abstractions of Brice Marden that she saw in a Guggenheim Museum show. And she began learning Japanese before studying art at the School of Visual Arts in New York and Bard College.

“Studying Japanese was like a decision to study the most foreign thing I could find where no one else would understand the codes,” Sillman says. “I tried to study something that I really would go into the realm of indecipherable. And then making abstract paintings was the same thing. It was like going into a foreign land that you didn't speak the language.”

One of the earliest oil paintings here is her 6-foot-tall “Ocean 1” from 1997, two years after she completed grad school. It offers a pattern of Asian-style, cartoon comet waves drawn atop a blue field. An oval gap in the waves seems to glow and frame what might be a book open to pages showing two orange suns. Her paintings are filled with the residue of Sillman's thinking and changing her mind—in this case what might be waves and a sun setting on a horizon have been painted out but remain visible in what's now the sky. It's about acknowledging her thought process, about the messy imperfection that's part of being human.

In her 6-foot-wide “Me & Ugly Mountain” from 2003, a woman in the lower left corner (which seems to be a cartooned self-portrait) pulls a tiny rope that drags a giant sack of orange and pink lines across a vast empty, snowy landscape. The character has got a ton of psychological baggage, but, ya know, she seems to be getting along.

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Contemporary abstraction tends to riff on art history and be rife with alienation. One style dubbed alternately the “new casual” or “provisional painting” often purposely feels unfinished and verging on mistakes. In this post modern 21<sup>st</sup> century moment where there’s no embarrassment in wearing influences on your sleeve, Sillman operates at the intersection of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Abstract Expressionist artists like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Joan Mitchell and Richard Diebenkorn and expressionist realists and cartoonists like Francesco Clemente, Jim Lutes, Alice Neel, Gary Baseman, Nicole Eisenman and David Shrigley.

The axis of Sillman’s two modes is Philip Guston’s late 1960s merger of the languages of Abstract Expressionism and stumblebum cartooning, which showed many artists a way to continue on with the ambitious painterly pyrotechnics of Abstract Expressionism while undercutting its frequent macho bombast with worry, self-doubt, awkwardness, guilt, self-deprecation, imperfection, humility.

The general trajectory of Sillman’s art is from smaller to bigger, from cartoony toward increasingly abstract, though she continues to toggle back and forth. Amidst abstract passages, you might make out cartooned birds, elephants, noses, keyholes, hands, legs, breasts, penises, vulvas, boats, trees, feet, mouths, flashlights, tongues. Also, over the years, she’s drawn portraits of friends, colleagues and neighbors from life or memory, but in these she’s not the most perceptive observer. She’s sharper when cracking wise in small cartoons about the social mores at the top of the jet setting, striving, art world.

If you stand back from Sillman’s 7-and-a-half-foot-tall canvas “Psychology Today” of 2006, you might see hands and arms. But up close, it’s a tangle of smooth, quick seeming tomato orange lines gliding

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across fields of yellow and pale green. Lower down, red lines have been dragged across a black rain. The paint is by turns thin and thick, rough and smooth. At the upper left, a patch of foggy blue and green is glimpsed through a hole in the white ground.

Sillman has a talent for texture and color—warm oranges, sunny yellows, creamy whites, gummy pinks, acid greens. “These are corporeal paintings,” she says. “They’re physically hard to make. They’re huge. I mean you’ve got to get up on ladders. There’s a lot of pouring, rubbing, scrubbing, brushing, wiping.”

The last gallery is dominated by her newest, biggest, most abstract canvases. She likes to work on several canvases at the same time, some upright, some on the floor, turning different ends up as she goes. Passages are painted and then scraped off or covered over by something else. She favors playful-seeming off kilter rectangles and fields of colors with lines independently scrawled on top.

You might detect a neck at the top and legs along the bottom of Sillman’s 2009 canvas “Junker I.” Maybe it’s a person sitting, seen from behind. Or maybe they’re just ragged black and white lines. Scribbly blocks of violet and gray-purple float atop an orange surface scratched raw and scraped down to reveal a blue layer underneath. Sillman’s cartoon characters, which had served as signposts to how we’re meant to feel, are disintegrating. We’re left with traces that often have a bawdy feel—with faint suggestions of what goes on below the waist. More and more the texture and color of the paint itself and the choreography of lines now labor nervously to carry the emotion.