

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Jennifer Samet, 'Shape Shifting and Body Politics: Amy Sillman at Bard College',
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Installation view, 'Amy Sillman: one lump or two' (2014), Center for Curatorial Studies, Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College (all photos courtesy CCS Bard unless otherwise noted) (photo by Chris Kendall)

Considering that I had always thought of Amy Sillman as an abstract painter, I was surprised to encounter, after seeing her mid-career retrospective at the Hessel Museum of Bard College, an *oeuvre* that was entirely about the body, touch, and the awkwardness of human interaction. Sillman works in a variety of media: cartoons, zines, iPad drawings and iPhone animations, on paper and on canvas — but the work is remarkably unified in terms of the issues it explores. It occurred to me that Sillman, more than any other contemporary artist, has been thoroughly mining the range of possibilities opened by the late work of Philip Guston.

Sillman has described herself as “a Jewish folk artist” and this exhibition — curated by Helen Molesworth — reveals what she means. Sillman’s work, like the literature of Philip Roth or the comedy of Sarah Silverman, deals with feelings of strangeness and shame around the body, social anxiety, and sex: its inelegance, the fine line between our outside appearance and organs, lumps, excrement. (“You all come out of a couple of holes,” reminds her voice in one of the animations.)

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*Amy Sillman, "C" (2007), oil on canvas, 45 x 39 inch (Collection of Gary and Deborah Lucidon)
(photo by John Bereus)*

The exhibition, though arranged in a mostly chronological fashion, veers from a perfectly ordered presentation, which gives it a lively — but also somewhat jumpy — feeling. Recent cartoons are placed near earlier ones, and the most recent piece in the show, “13 Possible Futures for a Painting” (2013–14), a room-sized installation, is at the very center, adjacent to a small group show within a show — co-curated out of the Hessel collection by Sillman.

The Hessel Museum, an impressively large, beautiful space, is old school in its reliance on *rooms* — human-size, separate rooms that each contain a handful of pieces. This allows for curatorial projects in which a narrative quietly builds. However, the current fashion for exhibition design is relentlessly multi-media, multi-sensory: rarely are we free from a soundscape element. I was wishing this show, installed in the quiet and breezy rooms at Bard, would be an exception, but the narration in Sillman’s iPad animation, “Draft of a Voice-Over for Split Screen Video Loop” (2012), was audible in several rooms. The voiceover is a poem by Lisa Robertson, read by Sillman, on the theme of women and the public gaze (“She thinks she undoes her femininity to give herself pleasure ... When women are exiled it seems normal.”)

This animation, together with a 2012 series of collage drawings, which are based on memories of rooms where Sillman experienced feelings of shame, are presented as the show’s conclusion. This ordering — and the insistently audible narration — serves as a reminder of Sillman’s experimentation across media, and her explorations of societal gender constructions. A “modernist” ordering might have concluded with the large-scale abstractions; this show moves through these, and back to more multi-media, narrative-driven work.

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Amy Sillman, "Shade", (2010), oil on canvas, 90 x 84 inches. Private collection (photo by John Berens)

The animations function as direct visual expressions of Sillman's aesthetic project: shapes and forms morphing into others from frame to frame, as a visual stand-in for the politics of the body. But in this way, I considered "13 Possible Futures for a Painting" one of the most powerful pieces in the show: a summation of Sillman's work. Comprised of hundreds of inkjet prints pinned to all four walls of the room, in floor to ceiling rows, it describes these processes of metamorphosing shapes. Breasts become internal organs, chambers of the heart, lumps.



Amy Sillman, "A Shape that Stands Up and Listens #55" (2012), ink and chalk on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 in (courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co) (photo by John Berens)

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It is the process of animation laid out before us, but it is also the processes behind making an abstract painting. It exposes the strange bedfellows of intentionality and randomness that are present in art-making. How much is artist-directed, how much do forms evolve almost spontaneously, as side effects of technical processes? Although Sillman works radiantly and expertly across big canvases and a spectrum of different color palettes, she can be decidedly anti-heroic in her stance. (“You’re done [with a painting] when you don’t want to do it anymore,” she admitted in a *New York Times* profile.) In “13 Possible Futures for a Painting,” Sillman turns the (gendered) idea of scale on its head: she uses small sheets of newsprint, tacked to the wall, to create a piece of all-over dimensions. Sillman has a wicked sense of humor. Her cartoon “Phrase Guide for the Spring Art Season” (2006) is a translation of art-opening small talk, as in, “We should get together” = “Hopefully we won’t, ever.” However, the real accomplishment is that Sillman is capable of conveying these sentiments in abstraction, not just captioned cartoons. Her paintings are often very witty too. For example, “Shade” (2010) shows a very abstract version of what looks like one arm and hand reaching between another person’s legs, grasping only a tiny green circle.

For a series of drawings, Sillman asked couples to pose in any position they liked, as long as they were touching. The resulting drawings are as much about distance, awkwardness, and desperate clinging as they are about intimacy. Arms and fingers reach across expanses, eyes gaze in different directions; these couples feel generally out of sync. In one drawing, long stemmed flowers (or a feathered sex toy? a breast morphing into a placenta and umbilical cord?) underneath an oversize haunch connect the couple.



Amy Sillman, “L & M v3” (2007), pencil, ink and gouache on paper, 22 x 30 in (courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co) (photo by John Berens)

Sillman’s work thematically travels through the terrain of the myth of Sisyphus, nihilism, and human alienation. These themes are more overtly illustrated in the early work, like “Me & Ugly Mountain”

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(2003), which shows a solitary figure connected to a mountain, “Trawler” (2004), in which a bird is dragged along / left ashore by a boat, and the ink drawing “Untitled” (1999), where a figure is threatened by a towering form.

However, in Sillman’s universe, the reclaimed triumph is more about the power of abstract form to function as an effective visual metaphor for a range of emotional truths. It is also about the deliberate reclaiming and de-gendering of Abstract Expressionism by a feminist born a few generations later. The lushly colored, geometric, abstract paintings of 2008-09 that we tend to call to mind when we think of Sillman grew out of the drawings of couples uncomfortably connecting with one another. The quirky, angular forms in her paintings function as metaphorical limbs: arms and legs reaching out to touch, to be touched.



Amy Sillman, “Me & Ugly Mountain” (2003), oil on canvas 60 x 72 in (Collection of Jerome and Ellen Stern) (photo by John Berens)

In the brilliant, sardonic and rambling essay Sillman authored in 2011 for *Artforum*, “AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II,” she suggests just this: that the malleability of abstract form, the tactility of the materials is the potential content. Thus the vocabulary and the tools of Abstract Expressionism could be re-used, re-done, not just un-done, erased. For all her cynicism, Sillman’s exhibition is an inspiring testament.

Amy Sillman: one lump or two *continues at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, (33 Garden Rd, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York) through September 21.*

<http://hyperallergic.com/142739/shape-shifting-and-body-politics-amy-sillman-at-bard-college/>