

AMY SILLMAN'S DIALECTICAL JACULATIONS

FELIX BERNSTEIN

Amy Sillman has increasingly placed painting, animation, and drawing in a dialectical tension in which mediums interrupt one another in associative swerves both elusive and ecstatic.

The surfaces of her works are like permeable membranes through which prior transmissions seep through layers and leave vestigial traces. These transmissions spread out across dimensions in her latest show at Barbara Gladstone, *To Be Other-Wise*. The enigmatic core of the show is *UGH for 2023*, a series of three hundred drawings in ink and acrylic on pulpy handmade paper (figs. 1–2). Two hundred of the drawings depict the devolution of a torso while the remaining ones feature interjections like UGH, AGH, and OAF. Across all the drawings, parallel iterations of marks create into a sense of into a sense of genealogy—but just a sense. Her work invites a curiosity that is not terminated by the knowledge of temporal sequence but keeps unfurling as you look. The works seem neither stationary nor mobile but midway through a metamorphosis. The drawings are presented in two distinct clusters—two hundred and fifty are featured in the animation *Minute Cinema: Spring*, and sixty are hung on one wall of the gallery, where they where they look less like animation cells than like a developmental diagram of Sillman’s marks.¹ However, any morphogenic progression is punctured by the word drawings, which serve as existentialist speech bubbles marking the incomprehensibility of the present moment.

Sillman describes her drawings as “unpacking” the packed suitcase of a painting. Her animation repacks the drawings in a staccato parataxis of disconnected shapes.² Despite the jump cuts, the viewer’s perception fills in metamorphic linkages between the shapes, and forges the semblance of continuity: isolated brushstrokes become claws, boxing gloves, wrenches, and twisted limbs only to morph back into abstractions. The slapstick soundtrack by composer Marina Rosenfeld compounds the sense of gestural action with swooping oscillations. The animation conjures the limbo of cartoonish violence in which wounded bodies keep resetting to permit fresh violations.

When the torso drawings are viewed close up, the animated gestures seem intensely visceral. Cracking, faded, peeling pools of color are juxtaposed with wet-on-wet swipes. Many of Sillman’s marks seem to cut into the paper’s pulp as if abrading the surface of a membrane, scoring the page with bruises and veins. Stained paper towels are glued onto several drawings, sopping up paint and exposing the paper’s watermarks. The towels act as both recursive and supplementary frames, highlighting how the density of a medium inflects the attrition of marks.



Figs. 1–2. Two drawings from *UGH for 2023* (*Torsos*). Acrylic and ink on paper. Top: 32 × 22 in. (81.3 × 55.9 cm). Bottom: 32 × 22 in. (81.3 × 55.9 cm)



Figs. 3–4. Two drawings from *UGH for 2023* (*Words*). Acrylic and ink on paper. Top: *Word Drawing 59: VZZZ*. 32 × 22 in. (81.3 × 55.9 cm). Bottom: *Word Drawing 57: HYBAUMR*. 32 × 22 in. (81.3 × 55.9 cm)

The word drawings feature calligraphic interjections made in jet-black ink, which are overlaid with a transparent play of white figures (figs. 3–4). Painterly gestures assemble and dissemble to become alphabetic characters. Like the initials in illuminated manuscripts, Sillman’s letters often double as human figures, their outstretched limbs serving as windows onto the underlying ground. The exclamatory utterances are rendered through a prism of typos—UHNGH, EUGUR, ACH, BURF, CNO FRP VN—like verbal pratfalls that form as physical frustration burbles over into utterance. These unspeakable *jaculations* reflect Sillman’s process of reciprocal interruption: mediums, frames, and shapes concatenate one another so that no single sequence takes priority.³

Sillman’s new works build on a strategy she used for her 41-panel work *Temporary Object* (2022–23), for which she reconstructed the stages of her painting *Miss Gleason* (2014) through a set of a diagrammatic drawings.(figs. 5–6).⁴ This procedure echoes Sigmund Freud’s 1924 essay “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” in which he compared this children’s toy to the human psyche.⁵ The device consists of a thin sheet of clear plastic that covers a thick piece of wax-coated cardboard. You write on the surface with a small stylus, pressing on the plastic sheet so that it makes contact with the wax layer and creates a visible mark. Lifting up the plastic sheet appears to wipe the slate clean, but the stylus’s traces remain etched in the underlayer. Freud compared the clear plastic sheet to our conscious mind, where our thoughts and perceptions are “written.” In turn, the wax underlayer symbolizes the unconscious, which holds the vast reservoir of our memories and drives. When we recall a memory, it is as if the writing occurs in reverse, the unconscious underlayer (the wax) intruding upon the conscious overlayer (the plastic). However, the lower depths are never fully revealed, as they are always distorted by present perceptions.

The phases of the composition of *Miss Gleason* were reconstructed by Sillman through the associative retracing of photographic documentation; the process of making the painting is never exposed as a material fact but reinterpreted in a new series of drawings. The frames show a continuous deformation of spatial cues. Linear perspective gives way to geometric abstraction. A wayward unbalancing act is struck that favors dissymmetry and quavering. When the composition becomes too imagistic, it is scraped away but not abolished; all traces are retained for later use. These traces aren’t preserved on a palette, or even in memory, but are continuously uncovered through Sillman’s re-marks. When styles, patterns, or idioms recur in her work, it is the result not of mechanical replication but rather of the reformulation of repeated urges, hunches, and questions.⁶ While *Temporary Object* looks backwards, *UGH for*



Fig. 7. Edward Henry Wehnert. (British, 1813–1868). *The Albatross around my neck was hung*. 1857. Wood engraving.

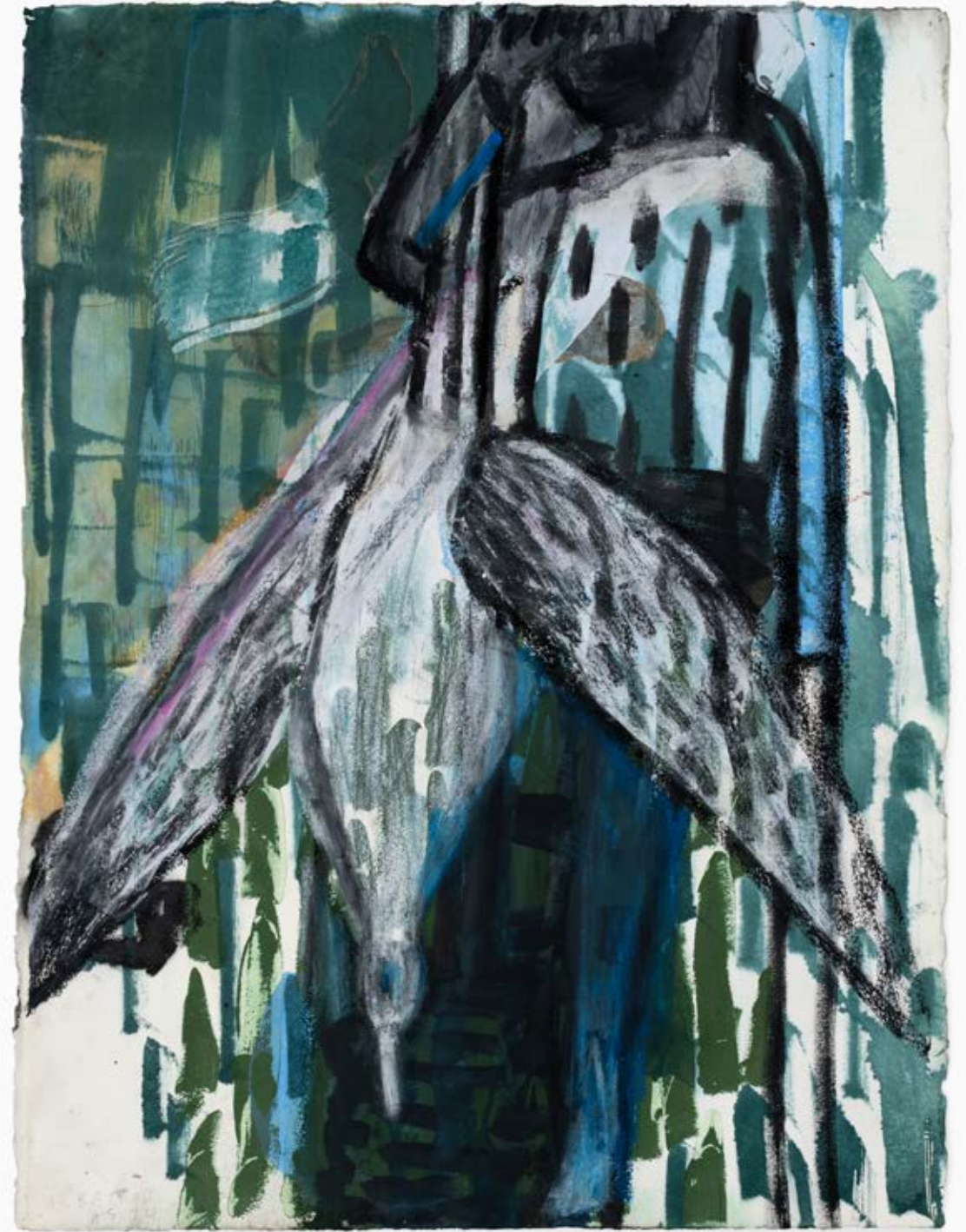


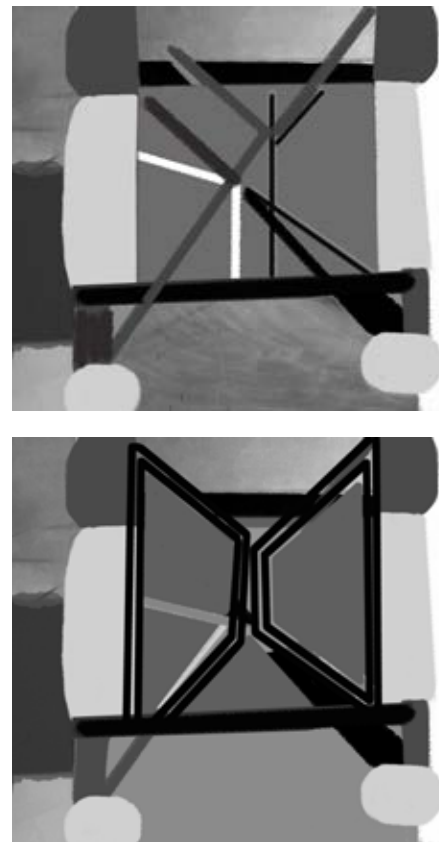
Fig. 8. Amy Sillman. *Albatross*. 2024. Acrylic, ink, and oil crayon on paper. 31 × 22 ½ in. (78.7 × 57.1 cm).

2023 points time's arrow forward only to create a loop, since the first and last torso drawings depict a relatively identical figure.

In the new series of paintings at Gladstone Gallery, Sillman finds an emblem for metamorphosis and recursion in Samuel Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798). The Mariner, a Romantic iteration of the Wandering Jew, is punished for killing a sacred albatross, doomed to retell to retell his story while he awaits redemption. He wears the bird's carcass upside-down around his neck as a reminder to the world, and himself, of his sin (fig. 7). The giant albatross weighs on his mood, stature, and hope—an anchor and burden that transforms him into an inhuman creature lurching toward the abyss. While Coleridge's mariner is stuck in a tragic repetition, Sillman's mariner seems a vehicle for infinite variability. She depicts him as a decapitated body, which is characteristic of her trend towards headless torsos (fig. 8).⁸

In Sillman's work, all upright and natural grounding has been displaced; bodies are strewn in a limbo of groundless limbs. These limbs are not balanced and contoured with grace as in a classical contrapposto where the shifted weight of the legs conveys spatial depth, but instead they hover in ambiguous dimensions. The body never attains an ideal form but is caught in the simulacral strife of double vision in which each pose carries the semblance of another. You cannot pin down a coherent body scheme since each body is morphing into another.⁹ As Jenny Nachtigall and Rachel Haidu have both recently argued, Sillman's shapes unravel the metaphysics of form by laying bare the haptic and sub-figural ground of abstraction.¹⁰ Shapes mark the restless, asymptotic pursuit of unrealized forms.¹¹

Since Sillman's work has no clear-cut orientation, a viewer gets their bearings by scanning the surface, finding depth cues etched in infra-thin intervals between the layers. The paintings evoke scales, scores, and diagrams only to defy any procedural order. Maybe some of the indeterminate depth cues in her work can be attributed to the fact that she does not have typical binocular vision, so her depth perception is flattened? She makes us rely on non-retinal ways of perceiving dimension such as stereognosis (the ability to use haptic clues to identify an object's dimensions).¹² While eschewing linear perspective, her paintings are not evenly flat planes but are beset by lumps that symptomatize their lower depths. The relative surface elevations suggest an auto-frottage of paint layers rubbing against themselves, exposing and redoubling degrees of encrustation and jaculation.¹³ The images that are formed in this process are not the imaginary gestalts of idealized body images. As



Figs. 5–6. Phases of *Miss Gleason* (2014) as documented in *The Work of Art*

Haidu has pointed out, Sillman's paintings subvert the unary trait that reduces identity to a single characteristic.¹⁴ The self in Sillman's work is like a haptically constructed sculptural model rather than the coherent body found in the mirror stage mirror stage and in conventional photography.¹⁵

Sillman's *Clownette* (p. 37) lays bare the "jestural" absurdity of striving to make sense of shapes. Carnavalesque patterns crystallize into torsos, silhouettes, or maybe land masses, but it would be shortsighted to call any of these perimeters a body. They function almost like geographic provinces, unified and autonomous, even if dissociated from the whole. They overlap and underlap in a patchwork that continuously interrupts itself. Across these disruptions, a quiet rapport is established by adjacent shades of blue, horizontal strokes, and S curves, as if an immutable core is resurfacing. As the zones cohere, a sense of completion inter-erupts: the edges underline and rim each other in a perfect frisson until our sensorial grasp gets lost in jaculations—

UUN ... OAF ... FLD ... NURG ... STUK

—which are perhaps the phonemes falling from the gaping mouth of Sillman's sculpture, *The Bored Stripper*, who sits on the desk of the gallery and calls out to us in anguish, exasperation, and/or ecstasy.

- 1 *Minute Cinema: Spring* debuted on March 18, 2024, as part of Sillman's quarterly opinion column, "Abstraction as Ruin," for the *Washington Post*. See: [washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2024/artist-amy-sillman-spring-animated-video-humor-absurdity](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2024/artist-amy-sillman-spring-animated-video-humor-absurdity/).
- 2 Unlike Sillman's earlier digital animations, *Spring* is technically a stop motion film without the smooth transitions of traditional animation forged by the additional "in-between" cells, which create the illusion of continuous motion.
- 3 Interjections are also called ejaculations. *Jac-* and *ject-* both mean "thrown," and words in this family indicate a fixed trajectory: interjection is thrown between, ejaculation is thrown out, subject is thrown beneath, object is thrown against, and abject is thrown away. Departing from this sequence, Jacques Lacan spoke of *jaculations*, which are throws with no inferable direction—ecstatic overthrows that overflow semantic meaning. The jaculation is the *homographony* of shape, sound, line, and letter burbling over the message. For Lacan, the jaculation of enunciation overwhelms the statement. For Sillman, the jaculation of sketchy lineaments overtakes the ideal geometries of formal composition. Lacan coins "jaculation" in *Seminar XX* to link mystical discourse and feminine sexuality (and refers to his own works as mystical "jacques-ulations"). See: Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 153.
- 4 The drawings are based on photos of Sillman's process and were printed on metal plates. The plates were shown in a horizontal sequence (on a shelf and in a vitrine) at auroras (São Paolo Brazil) and at Thomas Dane Gallery (Naples, Italy) in 2023. The drawings were also included, with Sillman's narration, in Adam Moss's 2024 book *The Work of Art: How Something Comes from Nothing*.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), 227–232. The toy is commonly called "the Magic Slate" in English.
- 6 This method is something like "abduction," rather than deduction or induction, a method that Sillman has compared to drawing.
- 7 Before 2000, Sillman's works often featured miniature figures on a giant ground. Since then, the ground has increasingly merged with figures, which have been reduced to disfigured torsos. Heads and feet must be imagined by the viewer as "outside" the canvas. (Sillman has alluded to this in photos of herself carrying the painting in which her feet look like the feet of a painted figure.) The fragmentary torso appears in art history both as a grotesque disfiguration (Hieronymus Bosch) and as epic memento (the Belvedere torso). Sillman's torsos are often contorted like torsional tubes or tightly crossed legs, giving the sense of arrested flows in search of discharge.
- 8 The metamorphic flight of forms through unstable transfigurations has a precedent for Sillman in Ovid, whose stories she animated in her video *After Metamorphoses* (2015–16).
- 9 Rachel Haidu, *Each One Another: The Self in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023). See also: Jenny Nachtigall, "Shape, Unceasing. Notes on Process in Amy Sillman's Recent Work," in Eva Birkenstock, Kathleen Buehler and Nina Zimmer, eds. *Amy Sillman: Oh, Clock!* (Cologne: Walther König, 2024 [forthcoming]).
- 10 Sillman, Amy. "Shapes." *The O-G*, vol. 14. Spring 2020. <http://www.amysillman.com/Zines>.
- 11 To test for stereognosis, which requires the full functioning of the brain's parietal lobe, a subject is asked to identify small objects with their hands.
- 12 As with Marcel Duchamp, the anti-retinal does not mean the eyes are inoperative. On the contrary, they are put to work as haptic scanners.
- 13 Haidu uses the concept of the unary trait found in Freud and Lacan to describe primitive traits of identification. Haidu, 19.
- 14 In her work with sightless and autistic children, French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto found that clay modeling could be used to construct body images that incarnated the child's sense of proprioception and affect in a way that mirror images could not. See: Veronick Knockaert and Helena de Preester, eds. *Body Image and Body Schema: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Body* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2005), 300.