

Interview with Amy Sillman

Ricardo Kugelmas

Ricardo Kugelmas: You were born in Detroit and grew up in Chicago, and you've lived in New York since the mid 70s, a time when the East Village was an epicenter of experimental filmmakers, poets and artists. I am curious about how each city played a role in your work.

Amy Sillman: Detroit probably not much. Chicago greatly. Although I didn't go to art school there, Chicago has this legacy of a different art history—not the same as the MoMA one. I think the artists in Chicago were trying to establish an “otherness” contradictory to the narrative that was dominant in the NY School. In Chicago they liked art that was fussier, more illustrative, comic and outsider art. There is a great art school there and a lively counterculture, and The Art Institute of Chicago showed different stuff than they would put up at classic MoMA. For example, when I was growing up there was a huge Florine Stettheimer hanging in the main painting gallery, so we took it for granted that Florine was up there with Seurat. But then I moved to NYC and almost no one I met had heard of her. (That was before the big Stettheimer show at the Whitney in 1995.) There was also a massive Georgia O'Keeffe dominating the staircase at the Art Institute, a very abstract cool painting of clouds that would certainly not have been hung prominently at MoMA then. When I moved to NYC, I understood that all this stuff was disdained in NYC—craft and funk and textiles and cartoons and homemade oddball objects. So Chicago was both more permissive and more about narrative and image. When you come to New York after that, you're like “what is this ugly kind of painting here, that is so bleak, scraped and dirty?” I didn't understand it, but I wanted to learn about an abstract language.

R.K.: What about the East Village?

A.S.: Well, I didn't really feel that much a fit in the East Village. And when I went to school everyone hated painting. I knew a lot of musicians and experimental filmmakers and the students were conceptual artists. I was by nature a very linguistic person, so the idea of a “turn to language” was completely natural to me but I wanted to do something with my physical self and not just be analytical. When I went to school, the kids I was friends with were either doing things like organizing file drawers with index cards or making a kind of joke painting. The older painting was kind of boring. It was hard to bridge the gap between that more formal older work and something

super ironic. I wanted to be serious and sincere, but I didn't know where to put the rest of me. Now I can see, from a long distance away, that what was the most important thing to me was the process of editing. That was the conceptual or linguistic procedure that I was into. But it took me about the past 40 years to figure that out. (LOL)

R.K.: Besides making paintings, drawings, zines and animated films, you've been teaching and writing for many years. Can you talk about how these activities inform your artistic practice, teaching and writing?

A.S.: I think writing came out of teaching. I started teaching in 1990, and I remember around 2000, when I was co-chair of my department at Bard, sitting in a café with four friends, other teachers, and they all said, “this is part of your art practice, organizing a painting department with a vital discussion going on.” This really hit me, that they were right, that I wanted to develop a conversation, and that this was something that critical or collaborative artists had been doing all along. So teaching gave me a way to in fact be more conceptual, to make questioning work on a deeper level. What became interesting to me was the staging of questions and process, and to embed something that questions paintings alongside the paintings themselves.

R.K.: In a slightly different direction, I want to ask you about the drawings. You make a lot of drawings – from satirical diagrams, figure drawings, portraits of couples – who are often starting points for your abstract paintings. And I know you hate the binary idea of people dividing painting into abstract and figurative. I remember you wrote once that all painting is in the end abstract because it involves decisions. Could you talk about your process?

A.S.: Yes... I loved it when Arto [Lindsay] came to *auroras* the other day because he understood immediately what I am doing. He said, I see that it's partly improvisation and then it's also about structure. So I guess there's an action and then a self-reflexivity that happens in my work simultaneously. It's intimate, very personal, and about searching. I make all these fragments very physically, and then reorganize them, like editing raw footage in film. I like to build something very complicated that can't be described beforehand. In these times you could claim it as a non-binary. Yesterday I heard someone say “now we know that ideas are just feelings”—

To go back to your question about drawing, drawing is the way that all this acting and thinking and feeling can be fast and transparent and occur in real time. Drawing is also related to writing. I studied Japanese for a year before art, and Japanese is a language that is literally a sound, a character, a picture, a word, a meaning and a drawing all at the same time. In this sense, studying Japanese, with its brushes and ink, was actually the source of

painting for me. And as an encounter with a language I could not read, it was also a form of abstraction—being in Japan was like when a door opens and the unknown stands before you. What would be the word for that feeling? Not euphoria, not anxiety, but maybe the sublime, which is both awesome and terrifying.

R.K.: I remember once talking to an artist who said, “A lot of people are uncomfortable when they look at something and they don’t understand it, because they want to know what they’re looking at.” But art should be something that you ask yourself a question about, something that you don’t know, that you see with your personal experience...

A.S.: Yeah, I was thinking about this just yesterday, what if we think of language as a sense organ, sight or smell rather than a cognition. If language is an organ that releases meaning as a rose releases a scent, then that’s why poetry is crucial to human life. I think that’s what I’m seeking, a site where sensory and cognitive functions are collapsed and reorganized. The reorganization of the *idea* of knowledge.

R.K.: In *Temporary object* you give the audience the opportunity to understand the long path of making a painting, which is different from what one would expect. It does not only involve adding but it involves erasing, covering, excavating, subtracting, rediscovering. I wanted you to talk about your idea of giving yourself a score, some prior game rules for your process.

A.S.: At some point a few years ago, I decided to develop guidelines for behavior within a set of paintings. I outlined a number of steps to be done before culminating in two final layers, the 11th and 12th layers, that I called “the wild card”— *a Coringa* [the Joker]. I decided that whatever big *bagunça* [mess] was going on in the painting, after the Wild Card was played I had to stop, to get out.

R.K.: And you still use this score as a structure?

A.S.: Sometimes I do. Not always.

R.K.: You said you have been using paintbrushes less and less?

A.S.: I know, it’s funny that with all this emphasis on gesture, I don’t really like brushes. I think it’s because I’m using pencils, crayons, oil sticks, sponges, towels, trowels and scrapers instead, those are my preferred tools. And then anything I have for erasure, rags, paper towels, wiping, erasure, rubbing. Maybe I haven’t solved the tools of the “wild card” ... maybe it needs to be wilder. I should think more about that, because I’m interested in the relationship between the tool and the making. I do use

silk-screening as a tool for under-layers, which in a way is like an X-ray, if you think of it. The *Temporary object* prints we showed at *auroras* are like X-rays — layers of a painting that you can’t see from its outside. An X-ray is something you have to obtain when something’s wrong, when you’re ill and you have to look inside the body to find out what the problem is. I like the idea that there’s something wrong with painting, that *Temporary object* is a work about seeing what went wrong, not just looking at the good solid development of the top-most layer.

R.K.: Francesco Clemente was very close to Morton Feldman, who told him: “When a composer hesitates, he falls. When a painter hesitates, he becomes immortal.” When we started planning this exhibition a couple of years ago you said: “it would be nice to show with an artist from Brazil.” And I came up with the idea of showing you the work of LIUBA, and then later on you proposed to also include Rebecca Watson Horn. So we have the work of three artists who are from different generations, but somehow you all came together beautifully in different parts of the house.

A.S.: LIUBA was a stroke of genius on your part. She seems pitch perfect for what we ended up showing. There was such a cooperative organic unfolding on all our parts together. LIUBA is literally one-third Soviet monument (with her Bulgarian upbringing), one-third some kind of Parisian modernism, and then one-third this Brazilian sculptor of a tropical bird/ animal image. There was this great moment where we all got together in the small room upstairs, and Rebecca noted how LIUBA’s *sculptures* are like the shapes I draw, but that the rough concrete of her bases is like Rebecca’s rough burlap painting substrates.

R.K. : I really like the fact that all three of you go together so well, though you are all from different times. In a way all of your works could have been made 50 years ago or could all be from exactly now. You’re all kind of from a different time than the one you’re in.

A.S.: Yes, we’re all somewhat anachronistic. And I think all three of us deal with a *frottage* against time, rubbing up against chronology.

R.K.: Yes, and I remember noticing a few years ago that your prints looked like fossilized animal prints from an excavation, and how when I went to Napoli this summer and saw your show there, I also went to the Museo Archeologico, and I kept thinking about this archeological aspect in the work.

A.S.: Yeah, in Rome once I went to a talk by an archaeologist and I remember asking afterwards, “How do you know that what you are hypothesizing is true, about this ancient culture?” and her answer was

“we don’t, though we have a lot of clues.” I realized that archeology is a speculative narrative. And I thought, how is that any different from painting? You dig down, exposing things, finding some little fragment that seems to signal something, and then say, “AHA! Here it is!!” Painting is to me poking through a big pile of rubble to make some kind of sense.

R.K.: The paintings have titles in Portuguese?

A.S.: Partly just from conversations with you about vocabulary. Like, the paintings were partly about dynamics between the left side and the right side of each painting, and you said *puxão* was about both pushing and pulling, which was cool because of the term “push/pull,” the expression coined by Hans Hoffman to describe the dynamics of space in abstract painting. Or when you said *Casal* means “a couple” —so it’s kind of the left side and the right side dealing with each other, like how many of the structures that I use are open at the bottom but closed on the top, like a wrench, or a hinge. And one day I came down and looked at the silhouettes of the LIUBA works, which had these similar kind of wrench-like forms, and it was amazing how things kept pairing up. I think it’s funny to have a show where you literally don’t speak the language, but the language fits exactly, even if you don’t know what the words mean.

R.K.: Yeah, synchronicities kept appearing, even the decision to call the show “Objeto temporário”...

A.S.: Yes, the name came from Ferreira Gullar, his “Theory of the Non-Object” from 1959, a piece of writing that I was introduced to a long time ago, but I kept thinking, my piece is not a NON-Object, but a *temporary* object.

R.K.: A lot of people who saw the show were curious how the sequence came about with the 41 UV-printed metal plates.

A.S.: I took all my studio snapshots from during the time of making a particular painting, and put them in chronological order, and then devised a black-and-white diagram for each snapshot. Then I printed these b/w diagrams on metal panels and came up with a shelf structure to hold them and to span the building of *auroras*. But it’s a “false explanation”—a kind of implausible excavation of the past of the work. I’ve often done this, made something funny that seems to “explain” the work but is tongue-in-cheek, making it even clearer that there’s no possible way to genuinely reconstruct what a painting really IS. I guess that’s the Duchampian part of me. It’s a game, an absurdity.

R.K. : One of the things that I love in your work is this stance of anti-pomposity, an accessibility that allows people to see the procedures, but

still leaving the door wide open, to a non-bombastic attitude. I think that’s why a lot of painters in Brazil who had never seen your work in-person were so interested in your work.

A.S.: Thank you. And vice-versa. An open door goes two ways. I recognized in Brazil a warmth towards both materiality and concept that is related to how I think, and to how Rebecca and LIUBA and I all work. Plus, I don’t think you can really see my work in photos— photos of paintings are basically the enemy—so you removed this blinder between me and Brazil, which I’m so grateful to you for doing.

September, 2023