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Changing the Ground: Amy Sillman Talks About Painting

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Amy Sillman, "Ghost," 2023-24. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Amy Sillman is a highly regarded painter, writer, and curator based in New York. One might regard her as a consummate insider. The artist has a solo exhibition at [Gladstone Gallery](#) this May but hails from a lineage of outsiders like Simone de Beauvoir, Édouard Glissant, and Patti Smith. She is fascinated by language, a certified “language *freak*,” yet deeply invested in the sensorium of lived experience, and she ponders how that experience is ultimately unnameable. These issues play out best in the studio. The artist paints large expanses of color with gestural brushwork, and then layers, scrapes, and negates as she negotiates resolution and irresolution. At times she applies dense networks of stripes that rest on color-fields framed by dark outlines; some moves appear to counteract others, disrupting a sense of intentionality. Some paintings lie in wait for days or weeks in a kind of purgatory awaiting final judgment, conflict, or painterly redemption. In this way, Sillman is a painter who flirts with alienation.

The art world often speaks of otherness but less of alienation. Alienation has aesthetic roots in German Expressionism's bohemia, its painterly depiction of clowns, prostitutes, and vagrants—the underbelly of bourgeois society. Although bohemia may no longer exist for painters, it remains a psychological home. Alienation produces generative doubt, a reasonable skepticism. This is a contemporary condition after Postmodernism. Abstraction is no longer a grand project; in its wake are misfit parts that no longer resemble a whole, but they can be reimagined.

Sillman was born in Detroit and moved to New York to study at the School of Visual Arts, where her encounters with teachers like Michael Lowe opened up a new pictorial space, one that would last the rest of her life. She's part of a loose group of painters including Laura Owens, the late Cora Cohen, Suzanne McClelland, Joanne Greenbaum, and Jacqueline Humphries, whose canvases breathe new life into old forms with techniques like animated brushwork and gestural abstraction. Sillman's paintings are strikingly personal, humorous, painful, awkward, and humanistic, like surrogate personalities or visual stand-ins for the self. Sillman's work reminds us that good paintings have to factor in a sense of time.

The artist still believes in the power of abstract painting to reward retinal, phenomenological experience. This is not Modernist nostalgia, however. Other oft-heard critiques of abstraction include the following: it universalizes by way of transcendence, it has supposed color/gender/orientation/colonial blindness, it has been displaced by technology, or that it resurfaces due to conservative impulses that seek to displace a responsibility to social and political ideals. Some of these critiques risk becoming academic and generalizing, failing to engage with the material and aesthetic particularities of a given painting. These are problems of language and context, issues at the heart of Sillman's work. Just as the meaning of a given word is ultimately not fixed to the real world, an image, mark, or painterly gesture does not automatically generate significance. By way of installation, groupings, and disparate associations, her work suggests that they are context dependent, use sensitive.

Amy and I sat down in her studio in March to discuss painting as a language and the limitations of narrativity, how paintings both affirm and negate aesthetic values, the legitimacy of absurdity in the face of crisis, and how the historical legacy of Abstract Expressionism parallels our own angst-ridden moment.



Amy Sillman, *The Banana Tree*, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

Jason Stopa: Was there a specific time or place where you knew that painting was the medium?

Amy Sillman: No. In high school I hung around the art room, but the painters were these really cool, “knowing” people. So I mostly made bad ceramics, because I was like—I can make a jar. *[Laughs.]*

JS: Where was this?

AS: In the Chicago suburbs. Eventually, after a bunch of false starts, I ended up in painting at SVA in NYC, still clueless, but somehow I got there. My friends went to Cooper, but I was too scared to apply because I knew that if I got rejected it would really crush me. At SVA my first painting teacher was this wonderful older man named Michael Lowe. He had a sort of Mondrian way of talking, and I didn’t understand his work, but I remember so poignantly that at a crit, I showed these *really* naive, beginner abstract paintings, and he somehow took me seriously and said, “This is a language of form.” It was just so moving and hopeful to me that he said that. I had studied linguistics prior to going to SVA, but when Michael described my paintings as a *kind* of language it was a total mindblower for me.

By saying I was *making* a language, a door opened. I was overjoyed. I did not know how to make that connection between form and language yet.

JS: That seems like a real watershed moment. And I wonder about that, too. There are a number of people, myself included, who still think about painting as a language, but I feel like I hear that kind of statement less and less among certain kinds of artists.

AS: Well, he was showing me something about making a language *in your own hands*. It wasn't a linguistic or political language, it was a matter of the poetics of form. And I knew instinctively that he had *seen* me, and I had *understood* him.

JS: That makes sense.

AS: I was so innocent and such a baby, but that was the first time I felt the beam. And I went on that beam for years, in a way.

JS: I feel like there's a number of abstract painters in recent years getting their due.

AS: I don't think Michael ever really got his due, though ...

JS: When I was in college, I would carry around Ad Reinhardt's black paintings book. That was basically my bible. I had it in my book bag from the library, and whenever it was due, I would bring it back up and renew it. And then put it back in my bag.

AS: But you didn't want to buy it?

JS: No, I didn't want to buy it. I had no money. I just wanted to have it.

AS: Had you seen the black Reinhardts in real life?

JS: I hadn't. I was at Indiana University.

AS: Where'd you grow up?

JS: I grew up in Massachusetts, but we moved to Indiana when I was sixteen. This was in the late '90s, and I was like, *I'm not leaving now; we just got here. I guess I'll go to school here. I'll study painting.*

I was so wrapped up in this sense that painting could arrive at some finality, like a final statement that might sum it all up. With Reinhardt, I loved the contradictory writing. He says a lot about what painting is not, but never quite defines it either. And the negation drew me in. I was into hardcore punk, I had a lot of angst, and I think that kind of antagonism appealed to me. And not even knowing really what it was all about yet ...

AS: Did you read Sartre, Adorno, existentialism, critical theory—I mean, were you into negative aesthetics?

JS: I was really into negative shit.

AS: Yeah. And Bad Brains.

JS: Yes. I love Bad Brains. Still do. That was my path to painting. That ingest gets translated in interesting ways today.

I'm thinking about what you were talking about with language and your teacher, Michael Lowe, about opening up this language of form.

Charline von Heyl once stated, "I'm just trying to keep the paintings ahead of language. Or better yet, ahead of sentences. Nothing is truly beyond language, obviously. I just want to get the viewer to move past definitions and on to something more personal and fragile, a place where thoughts and feelings meet, where looking feels like thinking."

I think that's an interesting way of thinking. It's not about classical figure/ground relationships or purely formal relationships; it's about not making something congruent. This way of working allows more idiosyncratic, complicated ways of painting.

I think you and Charline, among other painters, have this sensibility about non-composition—a slight aversion to language being the foundation of the painting. I feel like you're kind of trying to get away from that. Like you have a beef with that to some degree. Is that fair?

AS: Well, about language—I mean, I'm a total language *freak*, a person who literally lives and loves in language. But I also believe there are also other kinds of operations that are going on, and that not everything can be boiled down to this one function or kind of cognition. I think not *everything* is language.

For example, there's this profoundly subjective kind of sensorium that everyone's going around inside, in their own body—everyone's eyesight and color perception is completely different, and maddeningly, we can actually *never* know exactly how another person feels or sees the world, even though there's this kind of agreement that, for example, such and such a vibration is "red," but the fact that you can *never really know* who sees what when they see red, that's what Josef Albers is all about. I think there's this kind of subjective/objective dialectic that's happening all the time, and each has its own sovereign realm. And the sense-world is deeply intelligent.

But talking about non-composition, I have problems with the way that the whole non-composition thing is discussed. I mean, for example, Ellsworth Kelly is sometimes used as a formative example of this thing about non-composition because, like, in his early work, rather than sitting at an easel and composing forms, he was doing things like walking around, taking pictures, then transferring the shapes of shadows in photographs to the shapes in sculptures. I understand the stakes of calling it "non-composition"—of focusing on *transfer* instead of personal subjective invention. It's a critique of bourgeois subjectivity, if you want to say it that way. But I think it's not really a description of what's happening in the making of the work itself. I would call what Kelly did more *hypercomposition*, rather than *non*.



Amy Sillman, *Ravenna*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

JS: Even selection, at the end of the day, is a kind of compositional strategy. Editing, too.

AS: Decision-making in general.

JS: Right. When Greenberg would come along and select a section of a Pollock painting as the painting, for example, there's a kind of compositional strategy going on. It's misleading as a term. "Non-composition" makes it sound like there's no decision-making.

AS: Maybe what you're *not* doing in "non-composition" is relying on traditional figure/ground relations. Maybe all you're doing is changing the *ground*.

JS: Like you're just kind of building based on one thing to the next.



Amy Sillman, *Albatross I*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

AS: “Non-composition” is kind of a dated discussion, but now, in digital times, we *all know* how different it is to cut, drag, and paste than to build up layers like in a traditional painting. We can talk about how very different digital layering is from older painting’s way of interlacing the figure and the ground. So maybe this non-compositional thing is just a way of talking about a change of attitude and what it means technically. Like with digital space, we know the feeling of a “layer” on top, but what oil painting is good for is making the layered relations very complicated, and that is an old technique for ambivalence, which is something very dear to me.

But in a general sense, is there really anything in painting that is *not* based on form, honestly? Even though I’m sure you agree with me when I say there is a very paltry discussion about form nowadays. There’s so much fear or anxiety about it. It’s kind of sad, you know? People like you and I still think about trying to develop what I think of as a “speaking body”—a way to talk about the work of the body—and think that language comes *out* of the body.

JS: We are witnessing a profound lack of intelligent conversation among painters. I think this is in part due to internet culture and social media culture, which permit thinking about painting as an image-making strategy and encourage our desire to grasp and retain all images in a two-inch-by-two-inch screen.

This kind of easy transmission and focus on “accessibility” is a poor substitute for the real. “If I understand painting as a JPEG, but its materiality conflicts with it, it’s a problem”; I think there’s a general public that might see it in those terms. Whereas I think for painters like us, the materiality *is* a virtue.

AS: Yes, I am a materialist.

JS: How do you move into a space where perceptual, optical, material, and linguistic issues are in play? Basically, how can a painter do things that only paintings do? This is lost in a lot of conversations, and there may also be a kind of lazy acceptance that those kinds of conversations have just exhausted themselves, and what’s exciting is only subject matter. People want to know: how is your subject matter communicated?

AS: Yeah, and that’s all about affirmation, whereas the premises we talked about earlier, where you and I started out from, were entirely negational in structure. To me, abstraction is a form of both affirmation and negation, in equal measure—affirming all the stuff that we *don’t* like, and negating all the stuff that we *hate*. HA!

JS: That is exactly it. Aesthetic values are about cultural values. By selecting, naming, editing, etc., we are staking a claim for something, and by staking a claim I’m actually saying that I’m *not* staking a claim for the *absence* of that thing. That’s a certain kind of politics that we carry in the world with us. There was a certain point in which New York painting thought about painting in these kinds of terms.

AS: A double negative. I’ve been reading a lot about Rauschenberg lately, and one of the best things I’ve read was a book about Beat poetry and art in San Francisco and the connection between Keinholtz and Rauschenberg, and this author noted that all the Beat poets and California funk artists in San Francisco were working only a few years after the atom bomb was dropped in Japan.

When there’s a crisis, which there seems to be now and essentially always, that sometimes supports abstraction and sometimes deflates it, right? We should make a little chart. [*Laughs.*]

JS: An Alfred Barr map but with a time vector: when it does, when it does not. [*Laughs.*]

AS: I just made this piece for the *Washington Post* op-ed page. It’s a video and a short text to go with it that I titled “Abstraction as ruin.” It’s about how shabby and terrible and inefficient abstraction might be—and how the world is also so terrible that maybe abstraction is perfect for now.

JS: [*Reads from Amy’s text.*] “All I could think of was a moving small picture and animated video as ridiculous as our terrible current affairs. Something absurdly comes apart at the seams.”

AS: “What if abstraction is not the grand form it’s cracked up to be, but something we carry with us, half illegible, half illegible, inefficient, and shabby.”

JS: It reads like a manifesto.

You posted something not too long ago about abstraction, otherness, and strangeness. I visited Pam Lins’s studio not too long ago, and I brought up the term “weird,” and she said, “Well, ‘weird’ to me is like stuff that I don’t have language for.” I’m curious about this case for strangeness, for outsider-ship. How do you see your relationship to all of that?

AS: Well, I mean, honestly, I'm a consummate insider, as are you. We're writing and publishing things. We're not "outside" in that sense. But I think there are many ways to *feel* like an outsider, to feel sensitive to the idea of what an outsider is—certainly gender, disability, sexual preference, living somewhere nonurban, having a full-time job, being a mom, whatever. There can be a million ways that people feel cut off and un-legitimized and not listened to. But I think I was posting about a kind of tradition in culture history that is more psychological than demographic—a tradition, for example, that appears in figures like Artaud or Camus, Dubuffet, Genet, even Glissant or Simone de Beauvoir. It's about a kind of alienated figure. Someone lonely. Someone alienated. Strange.

JS: Or the dandy ...

AS: Yeah, and in Beat poetry. I went to this Patti Smith event last weekend where she kept saying, we have to honor our poets, because they're the people who are the weirdest in the whole culture.

JS: They really are.

AS: And that's a kind of outsider. And I'm from Chicago. You know how it is when you're from the Midwest. You're kind of a dork. [*Laughs.*]

JS: Yeah. [*Laughs.*]

AS: I mean, there's a lot of ways of not "wanting" to assimilate to success culture, like—you're not chic. You don't care about accessories. You buy clothes at hardware stores. [*Laughs.*]

JS: It's neither in or out of style. [*Laughs.*]

AS: It's just bad style. My friend Svetlana Boim used to talk about the "off modern." She meant things and people at a diagonal from the main thing. They're not against, exactly, but they're at an oblique angle. The bishop's move, you know, is the diagonal. The bishop, next to the Queen and King, is the only piece that can go on a diagonal.

JS: And it's an important move. It reminds me of "What Is the Contemporary?" by Giorgio Agamben. In that essay he argues that if you're too aligned with your moment then you're part of a trend, and because of that, you can't really step outside and see the moment that you're in accurately. Essentially, you can't engage with it from a place of distance. For him that's what fast fashion is: throwaway culture. He goes on to say that to be contemporary you're trying to see the darkness in your moment, the things that maybe aren't easy to see or hard to warm up to, because that's going to counterbalance the immediacy of the culture.

JS: Let's hop over to your studio and keep talking. Standing in front of your paintings now, it seems like there's little parts of representation peeking through in some of the works—

AS: For sure. There's hands here and feet over there, shoulders and legs ...

JS: Is there a place where you know it's resolved? Is it a balance thing? Is it a form thing? Or is it a feel thing?

AS: It's kind of like an analytic *with* emotional visual assessment process, and it's a long one because I get attached to all these layers. I'm working in layers all the time, but not like how we were talking earlier about the digital way of just putting stuff on top. I'm working back and forth to resolve and intensify these very complicated relations between figures and grounds.

JS: They feel notational, too, as if they are saying: I'm this form that's kind of a partition, a barrier. And then I'm also this color thing that's balancing all of these colors, like this intense red-pink.

There are areas where there's really fresh mark-making, places that are left open, retained, versus areas that then get successive layers. You then balance what weight feels like, what that touch feels like in relationship to the next.



Amy Sillman, *Afternoon*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery.

AS: For sure, there's a certain kind of rhythm or pulse I'm looking for. And it's kind of overworked, but sort of on purpose.

JS: Yeah. And there's space within them that feels right down the middle of the painting.

AS: There is a purposeful construction in all these; they're all torsos but they have these vertical color bars that kind of make you feel like you both can and can't see into, or feel into, the space ...

JS: Right, right. It feels like a shadow space.

AS: A space that is both visible and partly occluded. And with things that could be there or not, body parts that might also be exploded, or diagrams, or nothing at all. I want all of that ambivalence.

JS: It goes back to this thing about ruins, something that's partly gone.

AS: These spaces were very much inspired by trips I took, one to Naples last year where I was blown away by the archeological museum, and then to Brazil, with all of its modernism *and* ancientness, and also European-ness *and* African-ness. In both cases this partly abstract, partly torso-based figuration just folded strongly into my set of coordinates and memories, and well, there it is again—a form language.

JS: In a now-famous interview with Mark Stevens, Philip Guston wrote, “You want to feel resistance. Or I want to. All my pictures must be fought for. Lots of overpainting and rubbing out. You want to have lived it. The complicated problem is when you do a painting that you think looks good. Then you go into the house and you go to sleep and you wake up in an hour convinced that you’re kidding yourself. You haven’t lived it yet.”

A number of painters who came up after the New York School saw this as perhaps too romantic and wanted distance from this relationship to painting. And now Guston’s sentiments are viable once again. You’ve talked about how a painting is a kind of relationship. Can you talk more about this? Is it that a good painting plays out all of the internal struggles of the maker? Is that what form really is?

AS: I believe in that Guston quote completely. I guess I’m a total throwback, though mitigated by skepticism and dislike of humorless academicized religiosity about it. And I hate anything without *some* sense of humor ... I don’t mean jokes, I mean the deepest kind of sense, the *sense* of nonbelief and absurdity.

But ... yes. I feel entirely involved in the idea of struggle, in the terrible difficult wrestling match that painting requires. I’m definitely in a relationship with painting and with each painting, and often it’s a bad relationship. But I think formal struggle is real and the goal is to be surprised, to become strange, yet also to permit yourself to do exactly what you do, whoever “you” are. And so often that is the hardest thing to permit yourself to do. Guston has often said this. To recognize and let yourself do the exact thing you do takes so much work and so much throwing away of garbage. And painting is the opposite of making good, moral, effective, or useful commodities. So it’s a tortuous relationship. What a job, eh?

By Jason Stopa

Jason Stopa is a painter and writer living in Brooklyn. He received his BFA from Indiana University Bloomington and his MFA from Pratt Institute in NYC. Recent solo shows include Glass Arcadia at Thomas Park, Seoul, Korea (2024) DIY Paradise at Assembly, Houston, TX (2023), Garden of Music at Diane Rosenstein, LA (2023). Recent group exhibitions include Intuitive Nature: Geometric Roots & Organic Foundations at The Schneider Museum, Ashland, OR (2023) Wayne Thiebaud Influencer: A New Generation, at Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis, CA (2021). Stopa is Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at FIT. He is a contributing writer to The Brooklyn Rail, BOMB, Hyperallergic, Momus, Artforum and artcritical, among other art journals.