

## Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape

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Cynthia Cruz

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Installation view: Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman--The Shape of Shape, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019-20. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Heidi Bohnenkamp.

New York

### **MoMA**

*Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape* – April 12

I visited Amy Sillman's exhibition, *The Shape of Shape*, at the Museum of Modern Art on a Saturday afternoon in December, which is to say that the small gallery the exhibition occupies was packed with visitors. Sillman's show, organized as part of the long-running Artist's Choice series, includes nearly 75 works culled from the museum's collection. A number of the works included had never been shown before. As Sillman explained in *Artforum*, much of what interested her "didn't seem to rate in art history, to fit the correct teleology. Art historian friends who saw my list were like, 'Who are all these people?' I was like, 'Are you kidding? Everyone on my list is well known to painters like me.'" This discrepancy, naturally, has little to do with artmaking practice, and much more to do with who tells the story and makes the critical evaluations that allow artists and artworks to take their place in a canonical art history. How, then, to address the seemingly invisible power structures that inform these choices, and thereby categorize artworks as important

or unimportant, without reconstructing these same problematic power structures? How, Sillman asks, can we disrupt established narratives of art history without creating new, and equally problematic, hierarchies?

Sillman answers by installing her exhibition salon style, without the identifying wall labels that inform viewers who the artist is, why they have been deemed worthy of display, and how their work fits into the overall context of art history. Indeed, standing in the gallery, I watched as viewers glanced quickly at the artworks and walked briskly by, disoriented expressions on their faces. Without the context they were accustomed to, these visitors found themselves lost. However, there is a strong logic that guides Sillman's installation: the visual property of "shape" that the exhibition's title emphasizes. By organizing the show in this way, Sillman brilliantly bypasses systems of hierarchy. In an introductory text, she explains: "I wonder if, in fact, shape got lost behind when modern art turned to systems, series, grids, and all things calculable in the 20th century." In describing the art world's susceptibility to aesthetic trends ("systems, series, grids, and all things calculable"), she is also clearly speaking of the constructed hierarchies that inform judgements of historical importance or quality.

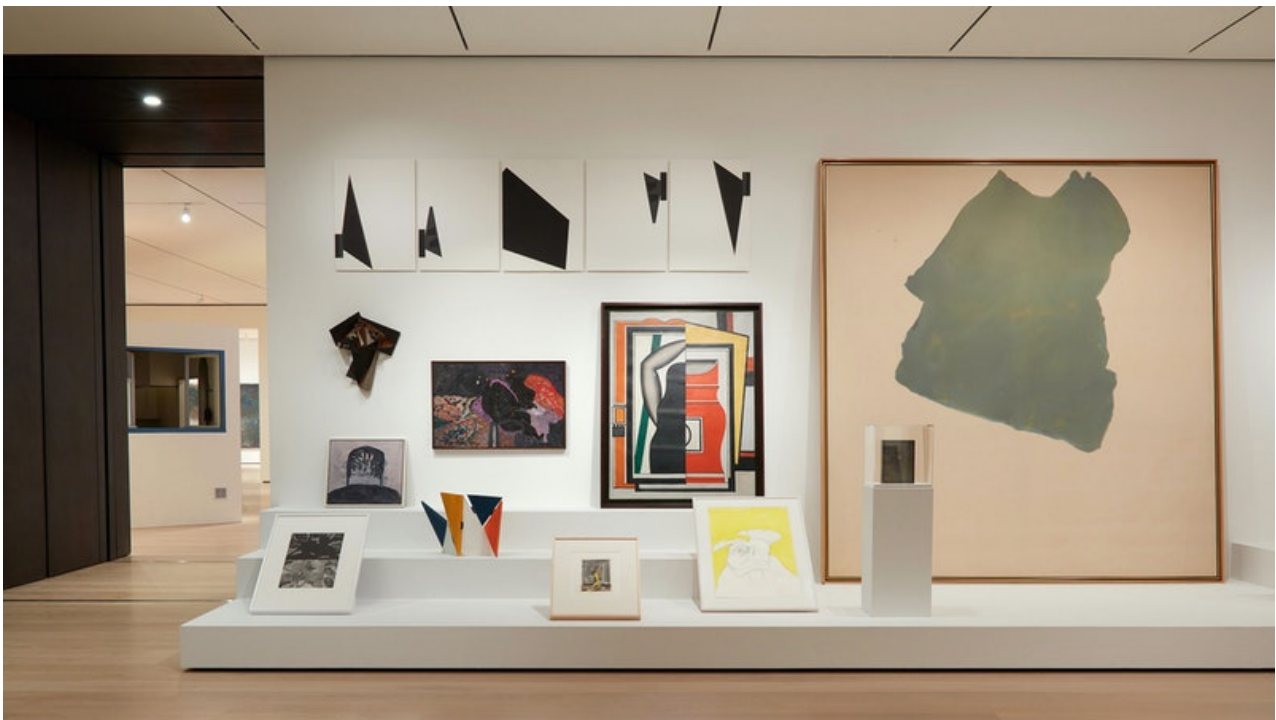


Installation view: Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman--The Shape of Shape, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2019-20. © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Heidi Bohnenkamp.

Sillman presents her selections in batches, small groups whose members speak to one another. The first set of works, for example, includes Charline von Heyl's painting, *Igitur* (2008), a small, black, wooden sculpture by Louise Nevelson titled *That Silent Place* (1954–55), and Jean Arp's *Birds in an Aquarium* (ca. 1920)—also a painted wood

sculpture. When entering the gallery, I first noticed the thick black lines that dominate all three works. The bold outlining of von Heyl's painting finds its echo in each of the two sculptures, which are block-like and appear solid, like a thick black brush stroke. Another example of such a conversation is found in Valie Export's stunning piece, *Encirclement* (1976), from the series "Body Configurations," alongside Carolee Schneemann's *Eye Body #28* (1963/2005). Export's black and white photograph shows a woman's body curved along the side of a street, complimenting Schneemann's image, also a black and white photograph of a woman whose body is brought into direct contact with curved, ovoid forms. Here, Schneemann herself holds a corroded ring to her face and sticks her tongue through its center.

The exhibition itself functions as a kind of room-sized painting in which the visitors become active participants rather than mere spectators. Viewers must work out, for themselves, what each piece is, how it relates to the works set alongside it, and how the entire exhibition operates as a whole. Furthermore, because each work is one part of a larger composition whose logic is primarily visual, the same decisions and skills Sillman uses as a painter—shape and form, play and harmony—are used here in her curatorial activity. Also, like her eclectic painting, what is most striking in *The Shape of Shape* is Sillman's ability to create new meanings through unexpected juxtaposition.



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Sillman's choice to present works without text, hierarchy, or historical and biographical context is strikingly different from the way most galleries and museums in the United States display art. This strategy, however, is more common in Europe. The Kolumba Museum in Cologne, for instance, shows artworks from late antiquity alongside modern creations without explanation. This type of display is akin to the presentation of an

archive, where each work is equal in meaning and importance, each gaining meaning from its relationship with whatever is displayed alongside it. These meanings, often suppressed, are the shadows or doubles of the canonical narratives usually presented in galleries and museums. As Sillman told *Artforum*, “Your shadow is like your mundane twin, an essential twoness, but also not there: They’re flat, without volume or tactility. They’re illusory, uncertain. They represent both presence and absence.” Like shadows, meanings are illusory, both present and absent, and, in the case of Sillman’s generous and thoughtful *The Shape of Shape*, sometimes unexpected or counterintuitive. By removing historical and biographical context from the exhibition, Sillman allows shapes and shadows, meanings both visual and invisible, to appear.