

Artisanal Abstraction: The Elusive, Effusive Art of Amy Sillman

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Installation view of “[Amy Sillman](#): Mostly Drawing,” 2018, at Gladstone 64, New York.

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Amy Sillman has always treated the act of drawing as an equal to her sister arts, painting and sculpture. For starters, Sillman’s drawings are not preparatory studies. She is not designing diagrams for future projects nor is she working out technical issues. You also can’t say this is what she does in her down time while the paint on her canvases dries. For this 63-year-old artist from the Midwest, drawing is a complicated, time-consuming, independent endeavor.

The 25 works on paper in “Amy Sillman: Mostly Drawings,” on view at [Barbara Gladstone](#)’s uptown outpost on East 64th Street in New York through March 3, are a case in point. Displayed in a line that rings five walls, they offer a thrilling, rollercoaster-like experience to visitors to the former townhouse designed by starchitect Edward Durrell Stone. As Bette Davis character once put it, “Fasten your seat belts, it’s going to be a bumpy night.”



Amy Sillman, *SK30*, 2017, acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper.
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Each drawing is a unique banquet of colors, lines, and shapes. Because she's mixed her palette's pigments, her yellows, greens, and blues are unexpected blends, not as familiar as they would have been straight from the tube. And her shapes are neither organic nor geometric. They're open-ended and elusive. Her work has more in common with an ugly duckling than a graceful white swan.

Sillman herself has written perceptively about the awkward character of her effusive art. As she sees it, "It's no accident that people use *awkward* after a faux pas, a moment of tension between the ideal and the real, where what's supposed to happen goes awry." For Sillman, "That tension is what abstraction is partly about: the subject no longer entirely in control of the plot, representation peeled away from realness."

Sillman’s latest drawings are multi-media affairs, executed with acrylic paint, ink, and silkscreens. But she doesn’t begin by applying yellow, green, or black to blank sheets of paper with a brush, a pen, or a squeegee. At the outset, there’s the matter of scale. Sillman recently told me, “Drawing has to start with your writing hand. You build out.” With few exceptions—the artist cited Richard Serra, in this regard—“you can’t get way from this unit.” According to Sillman, drawing relates to the scale of the hand while painting responds to any scale of production.

Drawings aren’t precious for Sillman. While making them, this artist remains open to all sorts of possibilities. She’s discovered that you “can do something, step back, and then, go, ‘It’s done.’” She also doesn’t hesitate to rip up clunkers.



Amy Sillman, *SK39*, 2017, acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper.
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To make a drawing, she said, “you can immediately charge in with a pencil line. You can build up as you go along.” Things are different with a painting. Working with acrylic colors and canvas is comparable, Sillman has suggested, to the way a beaver constructs a thatched roof. With a painting, you need to consider the whole picture. Unlike drawings, you make pictorial decisions with a goal in mind.

As she proceeds, Sillman can be very thorough. In her last solo show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., she had, by the entrance to the gallery, dozens of black-and-white drawings installed in tiers five sheets high, stretching from wall-to-wall. Each measured 22 by 30 inches. All but one of the works at Gladstone measures 25 by 40 inches, the next size up in standard drawing paper. The artist likes the ease with which she can purchase reams of it. Using 40-by-60-inch sheets offers the same convenience. That’s the size of an unframed work displayed over the fireplace on East 64th and others she next expects to make. “It’s always nice to have a beginning,” Sillman said, as I questioned her about her latest show.

Like a number of other artists who were featured in “The Forever Now,” Laura Hoptman’s 2013 show of contemporary painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Sillman makes work that is not quite entirely abstract. When referring to the recognizable elements in her work, she prefers the word figuration to representation. In the drawings at Gladstone, there are body fragments—heads, hips, a belly—here and there. A painting at MoMA had a large teapot-like shape. In Sillman’s art, these objective elements provide internal scale.

The combination of unabashedly non-figurative elements with overtly recognizable components in Sillman’s work is one of the many signs that she is at the forefront of a cohort of artists ushering in a new phase in the roughly 100-year history of abstraction. Pure abstraction has receded, replaced by something more diffuse and nuanced. It’s more thoughtful, too. MoMA curator William S. Rubin could never suggest that the discourse of this new, well-educated generation of painters is on the level of night school metaphysics, as he used to say about the Abstract Expressionists. These days, what might be called Artisanal Abstraction is practiced by a generation who were told in art school that painting is dead.



Amy Sillman, *SK28*, 2017, acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper.
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With drawing at the core of her practice, Sillman makes zines, iPhone animations, cartoons, and amusing dinner party seating charts. And like many of her compatriots, she works in varying dimensions depending on the genre. Her art—and those of her colleagues—tends to be layered (literally and figuratively). You won't find colors sitting next to one another, à la Color Field stripes or *Unfurleds*. Then too, different techniques are used on the same surfaces. Moreover, variations no longer register as the same idea developed multiple times. Dissimilarities abound. Lately, it's become harder to know when a work of art is finished. Sillman, for one, doesn't think paintings have endings. For her, that's part of the freedom a painting expresses.

Then, there's the nature of time. Ten years ago, Sillman provocatively wrote that "time has replaced space as the primary consideration in the visual arts." Take her own multilayered paintings and drawings and how deceptive they can be. A lot of tinkering is involved in

their creation. Sillman scrapes away colors and shapes that she's applied previously, and she ends up with images that could never have been preplanned. She once wrote, "That's the new emotion: simultaneity of experience, contradiction—we cannot see things one way any more." At a certain point, even she can't remember the order in which she laid down the marks on her sheets of paper. Eventually, she herself wonders what's in front, and what's in back. For the artist, "That's my greatest joy with them: wondering how did that happen?"

In a recent talk on her brilliant Michelangelo exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Carmen Bambach mentioned that the Italian word *disegno* expresses broader meanings than the English noun drawing. While referring to marks made on a surface, it also alludes to the inventiveness of the artist. Perhaps the current show at Gladstone should be called, "Amy Sillman: Disegno."