

Amy Sillman

Interview by Melissa Gordon
Photography by Tess Mayer

American artist Amy Sillman has had a wide influence on contemporary painting. In an active career spanning over four decades, she has incorporated drawings, collage, animation, iPhone videos and zines around and within a practice of large-scale paintings that conflate the abstract and the figurative. A jack of many trades, she worked at a cannery in Alaska, at a feminist silkscreen studio in Chicago and trained at New York University as a Japanese interpreter for the United Nations before she graduated from Manhattan's School of Visual Arts in 1979. Fun fact: During her art studies, she contributed to *Heresies*, the iconic and longest-living lesbian and feminist publication in the States.

Amy's also a prolific writer who has expanded the discourse around material and painting in her numerous essays, and she has championed feminism, inspiring generations of artists to engage with paint in a new way. She's a co-chair of Painting at Bard College and currently teaches fine arts at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. Her recent show 'Landline' at London's Camden Arts Centre and her Artist's Choice selection for MoMA, titled 'The Shape of Shape', have been groundbreaking exhibitions.

Melissa Gordon: I thought it would be appropriate to start by talking about 'The Shape of Shape', the MoMA show that you just curated.

Amy Sillman: You haven't seen it?

Melissa: I haven't seen it. I would love to; I will, because I think your show and the whole MoMA rehang is an important shift in the landscape.

Amy: I think you should definitely go. Not only because of me, but because they did a huge job and you should take a look and see what you think. On top of rehangs the whole collection and an extensive expansion to the museum, they're planning to continue rehangs every six months, which is kind of astonishing. I've been there three times already and haven't even made my way through half of it. The general response to new MoMA is at least appreciative, if not enthusiastic, but people are also critical, from 'what a problematic mish-mash' to 'it's still just the old canon'. But I think MoMA really put themselves on the line for a public discussion and rethinking, which is super important.

Melissa: The conversation seems to be percolating. I showed my students the re-hang of the Faith Ringgold *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) next to Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R.)* (1907) and tried to offer the idea to them that perhaps we are in a moment where the canon is actually being reshaped. It's not just the gesture of putting female artists next to male artists who were more successful during their lifetime, but maybe changing the whole notion of the dialogue between artistic practices?

Amy: Well, I don't know if it changes everything right away. It's not like 'presto-change-o', you know? But I think that there's a will to change there that's palpable. Museums do change your consciousness. The way they organize things seeps into the public's thinking structurally, just like at a library or in a survey class. So I feel that it's crucial to look at the new MoMA. I also want to talk further with friends who had diverse reactions. They made valid criticisms, but for me overall it was fantastic in there, with many new vistas and kinds of objects.





For example, I loved walking through the new Latin American rooms. They hung the work in this series of spaces with interesting curved walls, and they included films, objects, documents, typed flyers, all kinds of things together with painting and sculpture. It felt totally exhilarating to me.

Melissa: I heard a talk you gave in Manchester¹, a precursor to your MoMA show, and was fascinated by the ‘un-language-ness’ of it. You were describing how you could not find much art historical writing on *shape*. And so you showed the audience about 800 images of works, very quickly, and it was a very *corporeal* experience, but gave way to a new consideration of how shape is evaluated. Perhaps not just art work and context are getting reshaped but the notion of the language around art works. Did anything come up in hanging the exhibition that was unexpected?

Amy: The most unexpected thing, to me, was how much it showed me that the way painters talk and know about things is so different from other people. Maybe that means all artists, but painters for sure know about specific art that no one else seems to know.

For example, so many viewers told me they were surprised by so much of the work in the show. People who I know are really well informed keep saying to me: “Who are all these artists? I have never seen this work before.” But to a painter like me, almost all the work in the show is well established, much of it painting from the ‘70s.

Melissa: I recently reread a statement you made over ten

years ago [in the book *Painting: The Implicit Horizon*] where you said: “I work in between the cracks.”²

Amy: I guess I’ve been working in the cracks all along.

Melissa: I’d like to ask more about that. I don’t think you mean marginal or between other people. Have you always felt this way? I remember reading somewhere that you studied Japanese before becoming a painter, and that really struck me.

Amy: Yeah, I started, not in art, but in studying language, specifically Japanese language. Then I tried to become an illustrator. It took me a long time to get to painting. I didn’t like or understand it at first.

Melissa: As a younger female painter I’ve always been really, really aware of your work: as a kick-ass painter, as a woman writing about painting, as a feminist activist and vocalist in the art world, as a female painter dealing simultaneously with being a painter talking to painting history and a feminist talking to that history, in paint.

Amy: Well, thanks—I’m a lot older than you! I started out living in NYC in 1975, wanting to be a translator or study classics or anthropology or linguistics or something. Definitely it was not about being ‘rich and famous’—but it wasn’t about ‘feminist art’ either. Feminism was my preferred social circle but I didn’t understand the art world yet. But painting was about trying to write in a kind of code. It was somewhere between image and pure gesture and letter form and character, a hybrid writing format that no one understood exactly,



Untitled, 2019, Acrylic on linen mounted on panel, 36 x 30 inches (91.4 x 76.2 cm)



TV in Bed, 2017–2018
Oil on canvas, 75 x 66 inches (190.5 x 167.6 cm)

- 1) Funny Peculiar, symposium at Manchester School of Art, June 6, 2019
- 2) Sillman, Amy. “Painting: The Implicit Horizon”, ed. Stakemeir, Kerstin, Moss, Avigail. Jan Van Eyck Academy, Maastricht, NL. 2012. P. 106.



Dub Stamp, 2018-2019, Acrylic, ink, and silkscreen on paper, 12 Double-sided drawings, each: 60 x 40 inches (152.4 x 101.6 cm). Installation view, Landline. Camden Arts Centre, London, UK. September 28, 2018—January 6, 2019

maybe even me.

Melissa: That's interesting, because I think for a while now you've been giving language to a way of thinking about painting, like you do in your essay 'On Colour' and the one on metabolism, 'Shit Happens': the idea that the movement of form and matter is thinking about all these dialogues within the conversation of abstraction. And giving language to it in a way which prioritizes how artists process material.

Amy: It's not that there hasn't been language for it, it's that I often feel that the language hasn't been embodied in artmaking knowledge. It's that people don't necessarily put their body in the way of language.

Melissa: This goes back to a question I wanted to ask you a long time ago. I wrote you a letter that said: "Dear Amy, how can feminists make an abstraction that's not of the body?" What I meant was, your own body as a female painter is present when actually as an artist you aren't thinking about it. You know what I mean?

Amy: I'm not sure if I do.

Melissa: Well, I guess I've been wondering if there is a language of female or feminist abstraction and how it deals with 'bodily' questions. I curated the show 'The Mechanics of Fluids'³ and included your work, alongside work that had the feeling of movement and transition at the forefront of abstract practices by women artists. But I've been reading about the question of what female abstraction is, or abstraction made by female painters is, texts by people such as Helen Molesworth and Mark Godfrey, and it seems that so much of the discourse on female painters is about absence, or unknowability, or unquantifiability, a kind of 'refusal to language' or a refusal to know, or to know too much.⁴ I'm curious to know what you think about this because I feel you've actually created so much *positive* language around making and being an artist that is not about absence or unknowability.

Amy: I understand your resistance to the idea of 'unknowability'—it's definitely super problematic. It reinscribes the female gender as some kind of darkness, or 'inscrutable'—in other words, the 'other'. But what I'm interested in is *knowing differently*, articulating the act of perceiving as a way of *knowing*. That's what Simone de Beauvoir wrote about too. She insisted on the subject's position. I take my cues from that.

When you're an artist, you're putting your body on the line. Whatever kind of body you have, you make something from there. And since I'm sensitive to language, articulating that has been an important challenge to me. I really think this kind of embodied knowing is a different part of consciousness, not about quantifying information and building a new legalistic proposal.

Melissa: Is that what were you trying to show in the MoMA curation, in general?

Amy: I was trying to find a way of hanging modern art as a kind of ecstatic experience, but one grounded in the body. I wanted to express a whole diagram of object relations, like an overwhelming flood of associations. But to do that I had to make very

precise decisions about where things are placed, down to the half inch. This is hard to explain if you're not standing in that show! It's a body experience. But I think it's the way painters think.

Melissa: When you are talking about the body getting in the way of language, it's not just the notion of a push and pull with the material: but rather your experiences that affect this?

Amy: I just think when I say your body, I include your brain.

Melissa: That's really interesting; of course the brain is part of the body. When I wrote the review of your show 'Landline' in *Texte zur Kunst*, there was a part where I described a moment of paint as being 'frozen'. The editor actually inserted a parenthesis that said: "And how could it ever be anything else?" And I left it because I was like, what does he mean by that? I guess I'm crazy for thinking paint doesn't freeze? Then I realized painters don't think of paint as something set at all, because we are constantly re-evaluating our gestures and trying to articulate them. In that sense, do you mean your brain is involved in the imagining the liveliness of all this paint and references?

Amy: Yeah, this is like deep process stuff that painters would think about, right? I mean we work with materials and the task is multifaceted. You work on a prosaic level with gestures, or materials, but you're also conscious as an artist of working at the same time with grand narratives, history, interpretation, judgement — all that stuff. But then below all that you just gotta make something that feels like it comes out in the right way, you know? You have to interrupt or interact or direct materials, to use your signal system to the world like the painting was a switchboard. It's like playing music improvisationally. It's a very deep and complicated thing to do.

Melissa: You mentioned in a recent Artforum interview⁵ that you were happily surprised that the reaction to 'The Shape of Shape' is as a political exhibition.

Amy: Well, it has been wonderfully surprising to me that various people I respect who are politically radical have responded in a very positive way to the show and have said that they found it political, or radical, in ways...And that made me realize that at a deep level, I wanted to put this formal question about shape towards something to do with questions we're all struggling with. It's not a specific proposal, I don't have an answer, but I was definitely working towards an area of emotion in the time that we're living in, which is terrifying.

But at the same time, I think everyone that I know is doing this on some level. There's this kind of crisis going on now but daily life is in many ways still just going on the same way, you know? But there's some really deep shit unfolding in consciousness itself now, and I wanted that anxiety to be part of the room I curated. I definitely wanted to signal a kind of nervous, anxious crisis.

Melissa: In that sense, of addressing this anxiety or crisis, do you think doing this show will change your painting process at all? In your show at Camden Arts Centre what struck me was the way in which I read a breadth of painterly time in your paintings: painting moves existing in time and history



Blues for Omar 1 (Film Strip II)
2018. Oil on canvas. 81 x 75 inches
(205.7 x 190.5 cm)

3) *The Mechanics of Fluids*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, Summer 2018.

4) Godfrey, Mark. 'Statement of Intent.' *Artforum*, April 2014.

5) "Amy Sillman discusses 'The Shape of Shape' at MoMA, *Artforum*. October 21, 2019.



- and through and on top of time. Some things felt very fast, light, plastic, some things were heavy, some gestures looked back and some looked forward. But now you are speaking more about a focus on a bodily reaction to things you encounter.
- Amy: All I'm really interested in is this quivering moment where something changes into something else in the studio. Changing things completely. I'm looking for a painting that expresses the before and after of itself all in the same frame. I guess it's almost like something that cubists or futurists were trying for. A kind of shattered expression of time and existence? I always think about motion, and worry about endings. My paintings have been looking really odd lately and I'm sort of trying to trust that. It's almost impossible to make a painting!
- Melissa: What you're up to sounds really exciting. The impossibility of showing time is really exciting. Like making 'Back to the Future' painting. I recently was thinking about how time changes work, too, in a show I saw in Düsseldorf at the Kunstverein titled 'Maskulinitäten'. It deals with the notion of masculinity but through the lens of those *interpreting* masculinity from outside. I've been interested for a while in the idea that femininity is something that actually male artists have coveted and reinterpreted and used to their own ends (the genius, the dandy, et cetera). But this show was such a great reversal of that, and I thought, what can we do with this, as women? I actually felt like I related to it so much more as a woman artist than work about femininity.
- Amy: Well, it must have been a relief for you because it's kind of like your own subject in reverse.
- Melissa: Exactly. I hadn't thought of that.
- Amy: A way to achieve something by going through the opposite thing?
- Melissa: Bingo. It's fantastic that these positions are now opening up: non-binary spaces within the persona of the artist. It has always been there, artists have always been pushing against it, but it's been viewed in the past through pretty concrete lenses of gender. What's so great about these shows, 'The Shape of Shape', the MoMA rehang, the 'Maskulinitäten' exhibits, is realizing all these subject positions have existed, but now they are being seen in a new light, not 'other' but perhaps in a dissolving relationship. Amy, you have been at the forefront of this discourse, and from a deeply embedded place *within painting* for so long.

