

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Desi Gonzalez, "Boston: Amy Sillman," *Art in America*, January 2014, p. 101-102.

BOSTON

AMY SILLMAN

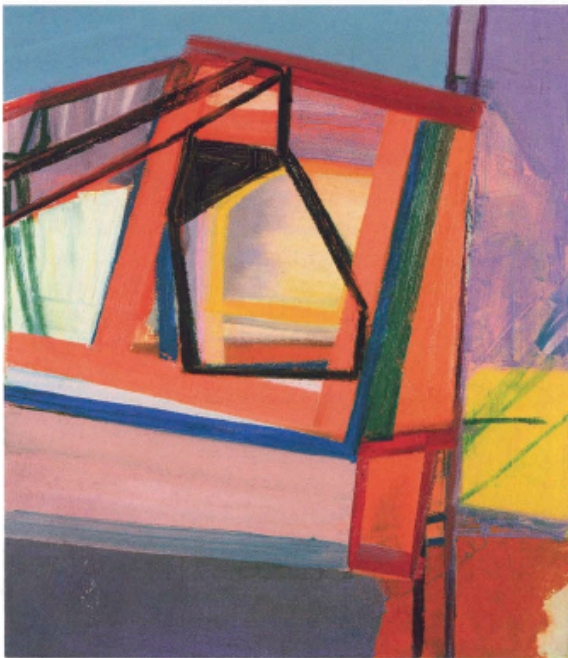
Institute of Contemporary Art

ON VIEW THROUGH JAN. 14

In a zine reproduced in the appendix of the catalogue for "Amy Sillman: one lump or two," the artist has scrawled in shaky cursive the words of composer Arnold Schoenberg: "I have no objection at all to being lumped together with all the rest." It's difficult to lump Sillman with anyone else. While she has helped renew the relevance of painting in recent decades, she does not limit herself to works on canvas, but also creates cartoons, drawings, prints, animations and self-published zines like the one reprinted in the catalogue. Echoes of Abstract Expressionism may be found in her use of scale, intuitive sense of color and composition, and brashness of line. But Sillman also undercuts the serious, tortured tone of postwar art by incorporating cartoonlike motifs into otherwise abstract compositions.

The first two-and-a-half galleries of this loosely chronological 20-year retrospective are primarily dedicated to pastel-hued paintings and works on paper, dating from 1997 to 2003, in which playfully rendered figures inhabit shadowy landscapes. These works give way to large-scale canvases of the mid-2000s that approach pure abstraction without ever completely abandoning representational elements. *The Elephant in the Room* (2006) is a study in horizontals, verticals and ethereal planes that evokes Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" paintings. A dense orange band dominates the bottom of the piece; on the right, vertical black stripes alternate with murky, dripping patches of color; and a fading yellow wash occupies the upper right quadrant of the canvas. A green streak, swooping down from the far left and curving upward into the yellow glow, interrupts the canvas's geometric order. As in many of Sillman's works, language hovers around this painting. In light of the titular pachyderm, the green form appears trunklike; a figure of speech designates the figurative imagery latent in the abstract composition.

If Abstract Expressionism centered on an unbridled outpouring of the (male) painter's true, genius self, then Sillman's process is more self-conscious about worldly



Amy Sillman: *C*,
2007, oil on canvas,
45 by 39 inches;
at the Institute of
Contemporary Art.

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concerns. In satirical line drawings and text-based paintings, she assumes the role of a witty, self-effacing observer who skewers the manners and mores of New York's contemporary art scene. An untitled cartoon from 2006 depicts a lineup of four stereotypical creative types, the last of whom, a turtle-neck-clad man with arms crossed, asks, "Are you going to Basel?" While at times Sillman's paintings appear as heartfelt and expressive as anything de Kooning could make, her cartoons reveal a keen awareness of a social landscape defined by art fairs, professional rivalries and naked careerism.

The last two galleries are dominated by paintings of what curator Helen Molesworth calls the "diagrammatic line." Instead of impulsive swaths of paint, Sillman's large canvases from the past five years seem to indicate vectors and motion. "Diagrams are a kind of model for what it's like to make a painting," Sillman said recently at a panel discussion. "I'm always trying to find a visual form for what it's like to think." A suite of paintings from 2007-08 are derived from reducing the negative spaces in portraits of couples into prismatic webs of lines. While the notion of the diagram seems tenuous in these free-form works, the term draws attention to how thinking and painting are inextricable in Sillman's practice. The compositional finesse and virtuosic use of color of her earlier paintings are evident in her diagrammatic works, and so, too, are traces of questions raised, pondered and left unanswered. Turning to the last page of her zine, we find ourselves left with the words of Gertrude Stein: "Sometime all this will have meaning."

—Desi Gonzalez