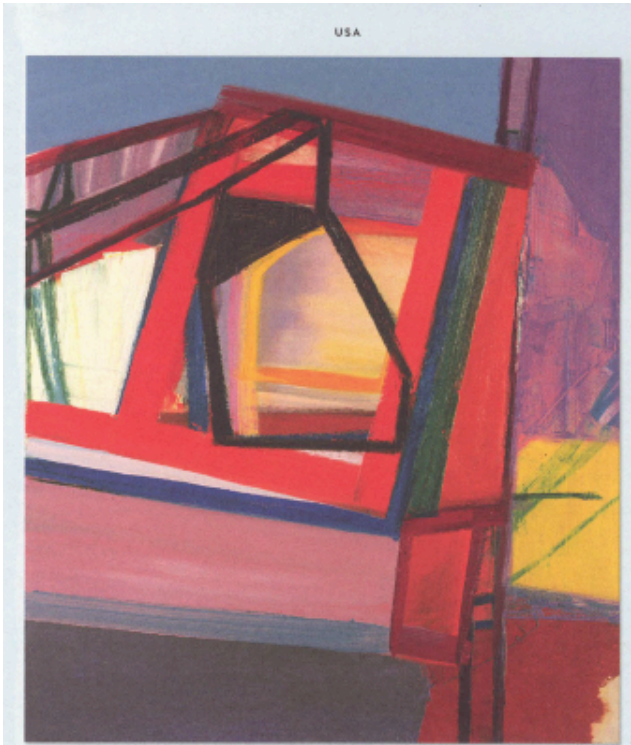


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Scott Roben, "Amy Sillman," Frieze 160, January-February 2014, p. 163.



## AMY SILLMAN Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

Last spring, at a conference on contemporary painting held at Harvard, Amy Sillman silently projected a series of images that documented the making of a single abstract painting over a period of several months. Of course, the amount of labour was staggering – 'I don't know if any of that did any good,' Sillman admitted wryly – but so was the device, which very casually condensed months of thought into approximately 20 seconds of PowerPoint. It's nice to think of 'One Lump or Two', her recent exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, which charts the last 25 years of her work, as similarly condensed. The retrospective format turns out to be compelling not only in that it permits a big-picture view of Sillman's struggle to revise the terms of abstraction, but also in the natural way it brings out the question of time as it is embedded in and surrounds her practice.

Temporality has always played a role in Sillman's work. Recently, that question has been addressed by animations created using an iPhone, two of which are on view here. It's less explicit in her paintings and drawings, where different languages of representation rub up together, sometimes obliterating each other, other times yielding to pictures which are as lucid as they are strange. Drower (2010), a canvas divided into two equal parts, each occupied by a diagrammatic gear-like

form, is surely an example of the latter. The left half is brutal, scarred by moves that were subsequently erased, pointing to a sequence of steps, or the real work that happens in the studio, while the right half is relatively smooth. As a result, the drawing that sits on top of the left side meets with more friction than the one on the right, which isn't tied down by so much history. Labour, Drower clarifies, affects time as it is understood in the pictorial world of a painting. In another example, time, via memory, cuts away at information rather than causing it to accumulate: for a 2007 series of drawings, Sillman asked couples to pose for her and then drew them once from life and again, later, from memory. In this case, the details fall out over time, while the moment referenced by the drawing becomes more generalized, edging the picture toward abstraction.

For work that is so frank about its own process and development, what is surprising about seeing this chronological arrangement is that the material actually feels so simultaneous in spite of it. The exhibition spans a quarter of a century and, although some of the earliest works can be a bit rogue, dates seem mostly irrelevant. It's not that 'One Lump or Two' doesn't draw an arc over Sillman's career to date, which it skilfully does, or that the work isn't constantly pushing its own discourse. It points instead to a 'painterly' quality of Sillman's practice as a whole, which builds up and self-effaces not only within the bounds of single images but also on broader, conceptual levels in ways that seem to want to resist a chronological reading. One has the sense, even, that some pictures could still be taken down and reworked in the studio later. (Thomas Eggerer's catalogue essay explores one actual instance of this not on view, in *White Slot*, 2011, which was exhibited commercially and subsequently augmented.) In that regard, part of the work's charm, and something that distinguishes it from the New York School painters whose language it borrows but whose attitude it rejects, is its lack of inevitability or finality. Even in the potentially serious context of a museum survey, the works retain their open-endedness and read more like propositions than declarations, or maps of a person's thinking rather than visions.

It's noteworthy also that 'One Lump or Two' demands a great deal of its audience's time. The thoughtfulness of the paintings is wrapped up in the laboured process they reflect, and one feels called upon to reciprocate with a proportionate degree of attention. Usually a specific type of viewing is programmed into a painting or drawing – there are the diagrammatic drawings, packed with cramped handwriting, the zines and the cartoons that have to be read, attentively, from beginning to end. There are works, such as 'The Umbrian Line' (1999–2000), that are the composite of many drawings or paintings hung in grids, which scan as a whole but insist on careful, piecemeal examination. The paintings, too, need to be taken in slowly. In an age when images often seem reluctant to sit still, or so it feels, Sillman's remain insistent upon a prolonged physical encounter. Frequently built at book-size, they offer an exchange with the viewer that's almost conversational, with forms seeming to emerge and submerge throughout a period of looking – 'one lump, or two?'

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