Rachel Haidu, "Amy Sillman: Camden Art Centre," *Artforum*, December 2018

ARTFORUM

Amy Sillman

CAMDEN ARTS CENTRE, LONDON

Rachel Haidu

BY TITLING HER NEW EXHIBITION "Landline," Amy Sillman might seem to suggest a longing for the past. But no one would accuse the artist of nostalgia. The show—organized by Martin Clark and containing thirteen paintings, several groups of works on paper, and two animated videos—is set firmly in the present, and makes it clear that our politics are ruling, invading, colonizing Sillman's mood.

The show's first room features *Dub Stamp*, 2018, a suite of twelve double-sided works on paper hung on a wire cutting diagonally across Camden Arts Centre's large, street-facing second-floor space. Some of the panels—made with silk screen, ink, and acrylic—portray a rigid, bent-over figure; others layer silk-screened brushstrokes over Benday-style dots or washes, shapes, cutouts, and outlines. Appearing as if in a sequence, the figure seems to grovel across the room, her vomit pooling on the ground but also plugging her mouth with its inky force. But she doesn't get out—at all. The last image, at the far end of the gallery, is a partial one; the figure is cut off at the hips. She's not going to recover anytime soon.

"Landline" is unusual relative to Sillman's recent exhibitions, in that it actually features paintings in their most classic format: paint brushed onto canvas. Lately, she has tended to apply pigment as one stage in a complex, mutli-layered process and as spills or stains. *Panorama*, shown in 2016 at Portikus, Frankfurt, was a massive installation of twenty-four large ink-jet prints on stretched canvas of digitally magnified drawings, layered with thin washes; in "Mostly Drawing" at Gladstone Gallery this past winter, Sillman cut up, magnified, collaged, and washed off drawings in paint, repeating the process enough times for the line between print and paint to be essentially obliterated. The generally large-scale paintings in "Landline"—all but three are from 2017–18—don't directly involve all that "process work," but its effects are there, and several of the groups of works on paper on view remind us of the dialogical but also overlapping relationship between these bodies of work. The paintings in "Landline" are deliberate and precise, their surfaces thickened not only literally but with the kind of dread that oozes from *Dub Stamp*'s shaky crawl. The marks in these paintings imply neither expressiveness nor immediacy; rather, painting, for Sillman, has become a mechanism for contending with the distance between canvas and subject.

In the zine accompanying this show, Sillman points out the importance of *shape* in her recent thinking: "I love shapes for their anachronism, their permissiveness, their ill-fittingness," she writes. In fact, shape might be the very figure (as it were) through which we can think further about how distance, subject, and process function in her painting. In her works on paper, shape acts as a generative structure: Submitted to scale-shifting, montage, copying, and fragmentation, it engenders new forms and a state of multiplicity that thwarts any sense of specular wholeness. In the paintings in "Landline," by contrast, shape operates as a kind of drawing with paint. But here, too, Sillman dismantles specular wholeness: Her line conjures restless movement, the unfolding of the painting surface into multiple internal surfaces, subdivisions of the nonliteral spaces that a painting surface opens up.

There is a recurring trope in the new paintings: doubled figures. Clark, in an excellent essay, notes that these recall the "mopers" Sillman described in some drawings from 2015. But it's the spaces *between* the figures that drew my attention: Over and over, fields of broad scrapes or short strokes contravene the narrative implications that would otherwise subtend the emotionally charged motif of two bodies lying face-to-face. Such fields (or their busier counterparts in the figureless paintings) almost evoke Cubism's prismatic investments in space. But we are (artistically) a long way from 1908, and Sillman knows that the disrupted, disunified painting space will never seem as radical as it once did. If anything, she paints us past not just claims for radicality in art but the ideologies that have long undergirded such claims. To adopt a hoary art-historical cliché: The internal logic of the picture once correlated to the interiority of the individual, the breakdown of the one entailing the collapse of the other. But this understanding depended in some way on the presumption of clear distance between the canvas and the painter. Sillman's broken-up, magnified, and displaced shapes step into the breach of a world de-constituting itself as objective reality. They index not modernist shock or withdrawal but the slipperiness of a reality that is increasingly ungraspable, one in which the space between things is quickly evaporating. In that world, the relation between canvas and painter is as precarious as any other. Sillman consciously stops short of offering any resolution. □

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"Amy Sillman: Landline" is on view through January 6, 2019.

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Left: **Amy Sillman, *Dub Stamp*, 2018**, acrylic, ink, and silk screen on paper. Installation view. Photo: Damian Griffiths. Below: **Amy Sillman, *Lift & Separate*, 2017–18**, oil on canvas, 75 × 66".