

GLADSTONE GALLERY

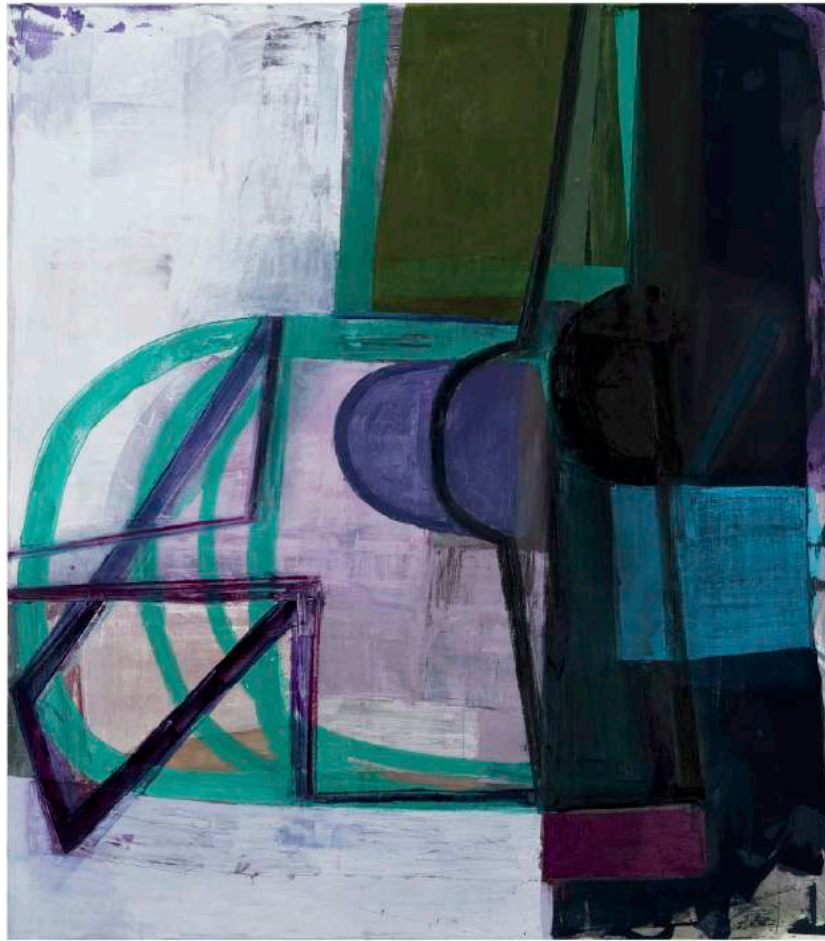
“Amy Silman: Abstract Compressionism,” *Border Crossings*, 2015

BORDERCROSSINGS

46 INTERVIEW BORDER CROSSINGS 2015

Amy Silman

Abstract Compressionism



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Vol 34 No 3 Issue 135



1. Amy Sillman, *Still Life 1*, 2013–14, oil on canvas, 75 x 66 inches.
© Amy Sillman. All images courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

2. *Still Life 2*, 2014, oil on canvas, 75 x 66 inches. © Amy Sillman.

BORDER CROSSINGS: As a contemporary painter are you inescapably involved in a dialogue with paintings that have already been made?

AMY SILLMAN: That's an interesting question and I don't know. I do know that each person has a different relationship to engaging that dialogue. Some people are studious, some are flippant, others are very analytic and methodically work their way through historical positions, as though they were art historians. I think it's similar to how someone reads philosophy. To put the puzzle together you can go from back to front, you can start from the beginning and move forward, or you can just hop around. I hop around. I don't think an involvement with art history is either necessary or unnecessary. There's no mandate either way. But once people start doing something they look more closely at the thing. It isn't all that different from having a dog; once you have a dog you always look more carefully at all the dogs on the street. I'm sure it is the same with babies and cars. You start looking at it in a technical way and you think, How

is that made? Or, Why was it made? It's a form of material evidence. You look at it in a way that I can only describe as forensic.

How would you characterize the way you see other painters? Let me give you a couple of examples. The centre of a painting like *Blue Diagram* has a quality of play in the webbing and netting of line that makes me think of Terry Winters. Or *Bed* has an unmistakable echo of Philip Guston. So I think those are painters you admire enough to take something from. Is that use systematic or haphazard?

Between the two formulations of systematic or haphazard, it would be systematic. Haphazard is too random. You just go out looking at something and start putting the pieces together, like everything else you study, and as you study the material, you become more precise about where the dynamics and the tensions and the surprises and the interest lie. When I was a kid I loved Guston and I've never stopped being interested in him. There are deep reasons for liking one thing over another and they're not always logical.

You have said the thing that interests you most is constant change and transformation.

In my own work, but I'm not looking for it in other people. I'm not looking to reassure myself that it's elsewhere. I don't in any way make a claim that I am unusual because most painters I know have a certain expectation of development and time being buried in the painting. The physicality of painting and the way it can be built and constructed isn't easy to show in other formats. You could say the same thing about writing; what's interesting about it is its physical manufacture. That's why I make an equivalence between painting and writing; it has to do with drafts.

Does that constant need for change bring with it any sense of anxiety?

It's totally anxious-making.

You have also said that drawing is the core of what you do and that people think you're a painter because you disguise your drawings with colour and scale.

Yes, I am a drawer and not a painter. I think painters actually have different ways of approaching things. Drawers figure things out in the planning and

GLADSTONE GALLERY

48 INTERVIEW BORDER CROSSINGS 2015

painters have more of an overview, or they have more of a relationship to methods or systems of construction. There is a "drawerliness" to both Terry Winters and Philip Guston, where things seem to be built at the scale of the hand making the mark. When you construct something that way you have a different relationship to it. I feel that very intensely when I'm looking at a painting which is based on building through drawing, through its line and its smallest increment. Even if you drew it first, took a picture of it, and then set about to figure out how that picture was going to be made manifest, that's quite different from making it happen when the engine is the actual drawing itself.

When you go into the studio do you have an intention to make a painting a certain way, or is the painting always found in the process of it being made?

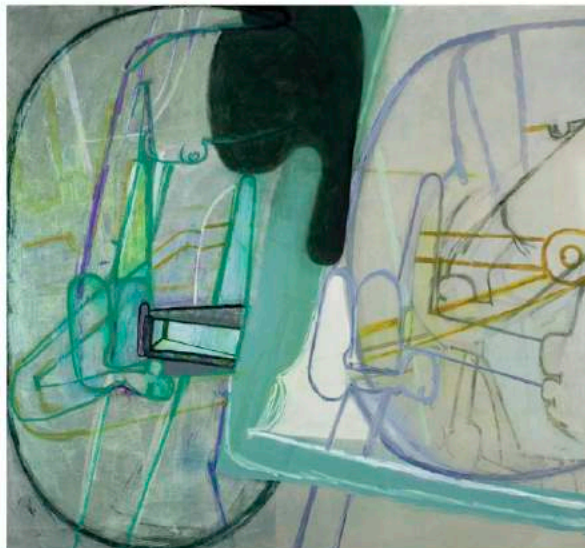
A lot of times I go in not knowing what I'm doing. I've been in Berlin since April and I don't have a studio. I literally had no idea what I was going to do or how I was going to do it. I'm staying in an apartment where I can't make one room into a painting studio. So I discovered the best way to make drawings was to make them in the bathtub because that's where you can be messy. These ink drawings—they were all black and white—have to do with spraying and dipping and pouring and dyeing, and they end up on the abstract end of my art. But you can have an uber-view and you can also force yourself to be surprised, which I think is a great way to work. Actually, being surprised is one of the great things, not just for art, but for life.

I know you've resisted categories and binaries but I want to ask you about the relationship between abstraction and figuration. I look at a painting like *Nut*, 2011, and one section looks like a chair or some piece of furniture; then there is this lavender thing that comes down and becomes a human leg and foot. The same thing happens on the left-hand side where the hanging-down thing becomes a hand and then changes into a piece of furniture again. Do you naturally allow yourself to drift back and forth between abstraction and figuration?

I just think that way. You accurately describe it as a natural drift. I would call it play. For me play is an openness to being mutated. The things that interest me are anxiety, instability and change and I find ways to inhabit those places or set up those conditions in myself. Your description of *Nut* makes me think it's working. That painting turned into this figure with crutches, where the question became figuring out how to walk with a false leg structure.

***Blue Diagram* does the same thing. Those shapes look like prosthetic apparatuses for walking, with feet emerging at the bottom.**

That's true and I don't know why. When I was painting *Nut* I was getting treatment for a bad



foot and I was obsessed with figuring out how to draw someone limping. But I didn't have that foot problem when I painted *Blue Diagram*. Maybe I was presaging it.

You've written insightfully about artists like John Chamberlain and Rachel Harrison, who blur the categories between painting and sculpture. Is that because you don't accept those categories and are attracted towards artists who aren't so easily placed?

I gravitate towards things that are interesting to me for more than narrative reasons. I don't know if this exactly addresses what you're getting at, but on one occasion I was all by myself in Paris and I went to the Musée Rodin. I am a dutiful artist, I am in Paris, so I will learn about Rodin. I didn't have a clue about his watercolours or his plasters and I definitely hadn't seen much in the way of his process. I was thinking Rodin equals giant, bronze, outdoor cast things. They were beautiful but I didn't really get them. I don't think I understood the idea of a statue. I mean, what's a statue for? But I was curious and I knew Rodin was important. So I went to the museum and had this completely euphoric day. I was looking at the work he had done in plaster, things that had little

1. *Drawer*, 2010, oil on canvas, 84 x 59 inches. © Amy Sillman.

2. *Untitled (Head)*, 2014, oil on canvas, 51 x 43 inches. © Amy Sillman.

twigs stuck into them, or sticks that were rising up out of lumpy bases or supports. They are basically abstractions. They look like hunks or rocks and then these legs or people or narrative situations seamlessly move out of the clumps. It all looked



2

so fragile and contingent. I couldn't believe this person had flipped so radically in my mind from the guy with the giant bronze things to the guy who was literally a magician of form. They were white monochromes; they didn't look important and they weren't delineating a classical narrative. They were inventing the way the figure was going to emerge out of a completely formless ground. I was stunned.

For me what was overwhelming was the evidence of his touch and the intensity of his looking in the watercolours.

Totally. The next time I went I saw the watercolours and felt another level of revelatory-looking. There were hundreds of them and they seemed so pre-Matisse and radical; these fields of colour and cutting one figure out from another. I am happiest when something changes from one thing to another while I'm looking at it. I understand it better and those are occasions of pure euphoria. I'm sure everybody has that moment when all of a sudden, you become a sponge instead of a stone.

One of the things you admired about John Chamberlain was that he was attuned to the idea of bad taste. Bad taste is obviously of genuine interest to you.

It is because it is funny. Bad taste is an interesting question in art because people love things even though they're kitsch or stupid or bad. I like the quality of stubbornness around bad taste.

Have you rejected the quest for beauty in your work?

I started painting as a student in the '70s and there was a lot of photo-driven and analytically driven conceptualism around at the time. It was bracing and important to me but it was not exactly what I was doing. I was interested in connecting to a different impulse, for decoration, for sentimentality, or for something that isn't really good. I became interested in historical forms of decorativeness, like William Morris. I looked at a lot of things that weren't necessarily positive-minded art, like jokes and cartoons. Things that may not be important but that must be part of life, otherwise where would all these dish towels and tablecloths come from? In the '80s a different art discourse emerged around issues of commodity. It was the height of the postmodern and I wasn't part of it either. When I started showing at the end of the decade I noticed a lot of discussions were happening around the politics of pleasure and personal experience. I was good with the idea of personal taste and private, almost affect-driven work, and work that was intimate. Then all of a sudden the discussion went from pleasure to beauty and I withdrew. I didn't have words for it; I didn't have a language; I didn't have a very sophisticated political or philosophical position. I remember I just snorted like a horse. This isn't why I'm making things. I'm not trying to make things that are beautiful. The concept seemed really weighted and it was completely the opposite of saying you were interested in something intimate, or that had to do with humour or bad taste. Beauty seemed like this noble genre on top of everything and I had no interest in making something noble.

Does not being interested in beauty necessarily mean that you're interested in ugliness?

I am interested in ugliness because I can work with it. I can't work with beauty. It just shuts everything down; whereas ugliness is more productive because it opens things up.

Is painting also about the cultivation of skepticism?

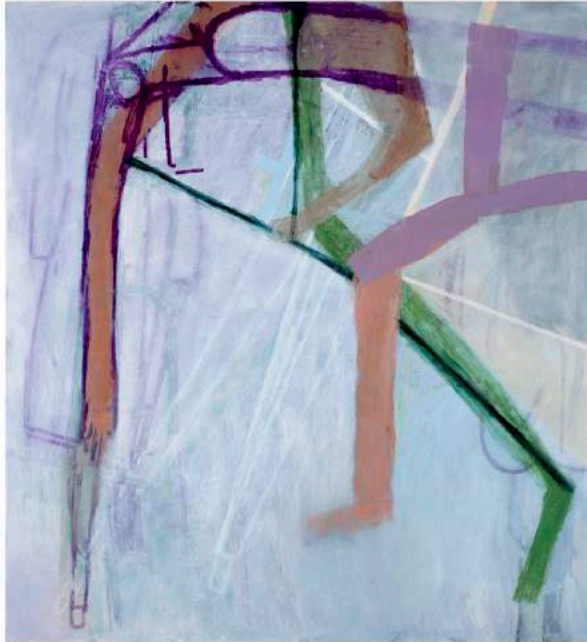
I hope so.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

50 INTERVIEW BORDER CROSSINGS 2015

Is that a philosophical position that recognizes we can't know anything with certainty?

You get skeptical because you realize how hard it is to do something in a state of conscious resistance to tropes and laziness and mannerism.



1. Amy Sillman, *Net*, 2011, oil on canvas, 91 x 64 inches. © Amy Sillman.

2. Cecily Brown, *All Souls' Eve*, 2014, oil on linen, 12.5 x 17 inches. Courtesy Maccarone, New York.

The marching order of Modernism was to "Make it New." Do you still think it's possible or desirable to make something new as a painter today, or does that even matter?

We can't fulfill modernist strategies anymore. So you can't make anything new, but you can do something surprising. I'm sure that even a cynical old shopworn person wants to make something that rings a small bell of surprise.

Your paintings often have a noticeable sense of compression, so there are forms that seem to hold in activity; *Junker*, *Drawer* and *Psychology Today* all do that. Does that occur because you take a long time to make the painting and composition becomes a question of containment? I guess I'm trying to get at the psychology of your composition.

Compression is a good way to say it because they are definitely made from a series of moves and countermoves. It carries over into this thing about newness; I think what is actually interesting is aggression. Aggression is the counterpoint to play.

Play is important but you have to weight it equally with the idea of aggression. Play is an openness to change that is not whimsy and niceness but is formed by a punch in the gut to a surprising place. I'm more interested in those things than in newness or beauty. So if you take play and aggression and surprise and resistance and skepticism, and moosh them all together, those are the feelings I'm trying to compress in a painting. That's how the form makes itself and how the affect and the form are entwined. I'll make a layer and it will look good and then I'll have to find a way to counter it because I know it looks good. I recognize it has a comfortable relationship with whatever I saw over the last year, or with the prevailing aesthetic. I don't want to be satisfied. I think the anxiety of shifting comes partly from the necessity of rebuilding. You have to be willing to destroy it and rebuild it, again and again. A painting is a thin two-dimensional layer on top of another layer, so it's going to have a natural compression. It's like showing slides on top of one another, or pressing layers of glass. You may not see through to the layer underneath but you feel that something was done there. You can see it has been built and you can feel it's trying to be rock solid. It's not trying to be loose and open; it's trying to construct itself. I'm hoping that compression comes through both formally and emotionally.

Is your iPhone animation a way of opening things up?

That's a perfect example of what I'm saying. I started that stuff by accident. I got an iPhone and figured out how to draw and save in a drawing program. I started dumping all the layers into an iMovie and ended up making a movie partly out of drawings at a residency. I didn't have a normal studio set up and necessity, the mother of invention, pushed me to invent a film structure. Which is what I'm doing with my bathtub drawings in Berlin; I'm making this animation about Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. It was very productive to have access to a time-based medium because all of a sudden I could keep a layer, add to it, or make a new one. In painting you can't go back. You can approach a painting with a big fat dripping paintbrush thinking, If I put a thin sheet of white over everything, it might not work. You have to be willing to ruin things to see if you can push them forward. Often they can't be pushed forward, because paintings are like that. They're like mules; they're old nags. Whereas with animation you can go backward, you can go forward, and you can press the reverse button. It's a whole different machine. ■