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Zack Hatfield, "Amy Sillman," *Artforum*, October 21, 2019

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

AMY SILLMAN

October 21, 2019 • Amy Sillman discusses "The Shape of Shape" at MoMA



View of "Artist's Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape," 2019–20, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

For "The Shape of Shape," a rollicking salon-style exhibition drawn from the holdings of New York's Museum of Modern Art and part of the newly expanded museum's "Artist's Choice" series, Amy Sillman has selected around seventy-five works that, regardless of medium, movement, or period, share a fascination with shape. Like MoMA's newly rehung collection galleries, the installation, which opens today and runs through April 20, 2020, reconstrues modernism through wide-ranging, unlikely juxtapositions. And

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like Sillman's own paintings, it is intelligent, risky, and giddily perturbed, brimming with wit and optic pleasure. Below, Sillman reflects on the ideas behind the show.

I'VE HARDLY FOUND ANY BOOKS TO READ ABOUT SHAPE. There are centuries of ideas about color, but really barely any literature on shape. My actual starting point for this show was research I did on a painter who works a lot with shape, named Prunella Clough, an English postwar abstract painter. Her work and her context were really interesting, but she was part of a whole group of artists who were swept aside with the ascendancy of Pop, and artists who worked more with language and media, work that is conventionally taken to be more “radical.” Prunella was a fierce, freethinking, uncooperatively personal sort of poet-inventor, and she worked intimately with composition and shape, but those things just got labeled as really OUT, fusty stuff, so after she died, she seemed to just disappear. That made me mad. So I started looking at shape as I looked at Clough, as a structural problem. And realized there was nothing much good to read about it. I wondered if shape, as the basis of everything you see, was too vast a topic for people to even address, too big for a theory. Anyway, this spring, when Ann Temkin invited me to do an artist-curated show at MoMA, I finally had the chance to take these combined ideas on, shape plus historical assumptions, and look through MoMA's permanent collection to see if there really was a prohibition against shape, or if that was just my imagination.

I only had about three weeks to see if I could come up with a room. I started by making lists of all the works in which shape prevailed. At first I ruled out images, words, bodies, grids, systems, and arrived a list of about eight hundred works. I asked MoMA, “How much can I fit in this room at a bursting

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level, just ridiculously stuffed?” Michelle Kuo and Jenny Harris, the curators I worked with, said, “Probably eighty, but definitely no more than a hundred.” So, tasked with cutting seven hundred works from my list, I realized I had to finesse my criterion. Also, I needed the shapes to propose something: I needed tension, and skin, and subjectivity, anxiety, discomfort, crisis. The eight hundred shapes alone weren’t really that interesting.

I wanted viewers to love this modern art in all its weird variety, and to know how it might be deeply linked to the feeling of disaster that so many of us have right now.

After many sleepless nights, I had a kind of eureka moment: that *shadow*, not shape, could be my portal. Shadows *are* shapes, but they’re tacked to you, you can’t get rid of them, just like you can’t get rid of your subjectivity; they’re literally pinned to your feet, coming out of you. They go wherever you go, they are light, positionality—but they’re also twilight, night, death, otherness. And they’re in constant flux. Your shadow is like your mundane twin, an essential twoness, but also not there: They’re flat, without volume or tactility. They’re illusory, uncertain. They represent both presence and absence. So, finessing shape to shadow, I made another cut and arrived at a list of nervous works with more specificity, ambivalence, flesh *and* psychology, a kind of trouble in them. It was important to me to relook at my list with the perceiving body as the key to the form. I also wanted the installation to involve the whole body, not from the eye but the feet, the ground up. I thought the work should be packed in on shelves, almost like bleachers, not addressed optically but almost like other people sitting looking back at you. The exhibition designer Aimee Keefer came up with a brilliant way of adjusting the tilt of the works, so that they sort of sweep up from the floor onto the wall. I wanted a room that teemed obscenely.

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View of “Artist’s Choice: Amy Sillman—The Shape of Shape,” 2019–20, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

I didn’t know much about what MoMA was doing with their rehang while I was doing this—only that they were going to open and refresh the permanent collection galleries, which naturally I was down with. When I first talked to [Ann Temkin](#), I had a lot of questions, like why doesn’t MoMA collect and show more works (like [Prunella Clough](#)) that artists like me really love? Researching the collection, I realized I was right: A ton of stuff I wanted wasn’t there, and other stuff I picked had literally never been shown. I’ve also had longstanding questions about the term “non-composition” specifically, and in general about why certain ways of working seem to fall outside of that discourse of what’s important. This is nothing new, it’s Politics 101, questions I got from feminism, queer theory, Black Lives Matter, postcolonial studies, etc.—but I was really aware that as a painter, even the weird ’70s painters I LOVE just didn’t seem to rate in art history, to fit the correct teleology. Art historian friends who saw my list were like, “*Who are all these people?*” I was

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like, “*Are you kidding?* Everyone on my list is well known to painters like me.” That’s usually the fault of who tells the story, and makes the evaluations, not the artmaking practice. But magically, these complaints of mine seemed to connect with issues the curators at MoMA were working with, so there was an alignment between what they were trying to do with their permanent collection and what I wanted to do in my room.

Everything in my room was done by feel. I don’t think and feel separately. I was yearning for anxiety to be in the room because we’re living in a crisis right now. I wanted the exhibition to be tied to people, their lives, their feelings, even though it’s not a narrative show about politics. I wanted viewers to love this modern art in all its weird variety, and to know how it might be deeply linked to the feeling of disaster that so many of us have right now. The instinct to keep wanting to make things is partly recuperative. You find a way to make an object that holds together your sense of self in crisis. Tenderness and intimacy are required for this, as well as a bristling diagram of wild unrestricted visual intelligence, one thing leading to the next chaotically. But in this room I didn’t want to “recuperate” some idea of greatness or modernism: I just wanted you to come out fucking LOVING painting and modern art, to recognize it as a form of wrestling with content, grief, justice, to recognize the complexity of our current situation in it, to love the art both in spite of and in addition to having politics, problems, and questions. I want these things to be posed *within* modern art. My show is about love and it’s also about trembling with anxiety.