

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cherry Smyth, "Amy Sillman: Landline," *Art Monthly*, November 2018.



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## Amy Sillman: Landline

Camden Arts Centre London

28 September to 6 January

Amy Sillman's dynamic, complex and bolshie show of recent work enacts a duet and a duel across a range of forms, including painting, drawing, silkscreen prints and video animation. The intimacy of the duet is played out in paintings like *Avec*, 2017, where harmony with the self or another is suggested by two bed-like shapes framing the top and bottom of a central formal set of calmly coloured green blocks or screens. A thin line links the 'beds', suggesting the landline of the show's title, but also an unperturbed connection across an urban landscape or an online existence. The painting is loosely layered, generous and confident, with fruitful tensions between smooth, aqua green and earthbound purple. The duel is, however, at this show's core. It gives its name to a painting of 2011, in which a pair of long gloves hangs suspended over the faint calligraphy of a crowd that seems crammed into an underground train, while the subject has abandoned the struggle. But Sillman doesn't give up without a fight. Throughout the works, protagonist and antagonist appear locked into their versions of each other: the protagonist often presented as a naked, prone female and the antagonist as a Pinocchio-nosed male, spewing vomit. With friction among the genders at a combustible height, Sillman invites us to enter the both funny and appalling stage of these dramas at a domestic and a political level.

In many ways, Sillman could be called a non-binary painter, moving fluidly between abstraction and figuration, canvas and 'zine, hunting down that third or fourth space, complicating the restrictions of polarising definitions. She uses video animation to revisit Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and has fun with the ceaseless demand for the female persona's reinvention, just as poets from Anne Carson to Amy McCauley use classic dramatic forms to reinvigorate feminist poetics. In McCauley's *Oedipa*, for instance, it's an all-female cast but claustrophobic sexual ambivalences are rife: 'I could never get under the / skin of / no / not properly / what is it I'm frightened for / the body's mystery / the bugging muchness of the world ...'

Corporeal mystery and data muchness vie for dominance in Sillman's works where a female figure often navigates the architectural interface of street, bedroom, desk. In *Pink Ground, Face Down*, 2017, a prone figure is slung over a table, its arm inert. Is the inanimate a prop or a trap? The landline has left the land; the treeline become a roofline; painting has morphed into HD; and the body reduced to a state of mechanical hopelessness or redundancy. The painting's compositional layering and scale can't be reconciled. The green portal is not an opening. Nothing holds up, but can't fully collapse. In *TV in Bed*, 2017-18, two horizontal bodies reach across a turquoise expanse towards an intimacy which is deferred or imagined. Are they estranged lovers, or merely a plasma reflection? This theme of failed interdependency is more starkly expressed in *Back of a Horse Costume*, 2015-16, where a lumpy, limp-legged form folds over a box, waiting to be animated and completed. The pantomime over, the truncated figure is immobilised by defeat, or disuse.

The doubling trope recurs in *Dub Stamp*, 2018, a potent series of large, site-specific, two-sided drawings that span the gallery diagonally and build on the force of an earlier sequence, *Rebus for Camden*, 2017-18. On one side, Sillman presents a bleak frieze of portraits in thick black ink, from the figure of the tyrannical, verbal splurger to the demeaned female subject, who crawls towards a disintegrating selfhood, her body shaken into scattered marks. On the reverse, Sillman has silkscreened abstract shapes, blocks of colour, pixelated dots over the outlined figures as if to redeem them, disguise their pain, alleviate the violence. In one image, reminiscent of Sigmar Polke, a figure, head bent at a desk, is infiltrated with tens of black lines, webbing her to a wider set of complications, communications, fraught and monopolising. In another, the prone motif is empowered by red and a suggestion of a clenched fist rises above her. If the verso is the private reality, the recto is the public image to the world, meditating the media, the work persona, the redress of painting itself. To survive, the oppressed subject has to endure subjugation and its denial through defiant process, whether it is activism or art or both. What happens on the coloured, multilayered reverse draws on the wit and vitality of Sillman's 'zines and animations, and celebrates the resonant rescue of art-making. This outstanding sequence coheres Sillman's methods and meanings, leaving a sense of indelible resistance. ■

Cherry Smyth is a writer, curator and poet.

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