

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Amy Sillman, "Spring: Abstraction as Ruin," *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2024

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OPINION: THE FOUR SEASONS

Spring: Abstraction as ruin

By Amy Sillman
with sound by Marina Rosenfeld

March 18, 2024



Amy Sillman is a visual artist known for process-based paintings that move between abstraction and figuration, and engage nontraditional media including animation, zines and installation. She curated the Museum of Modern Art's collection in 2019-20 with an Artist's Choice show called "The Shape of Shape," and a focused overview of her work will open in September at the Kunstmuseum Bern, in Bern, Switzerland. Marina Rosenfeld is an American composer, sound artist and visual artist. Her work has been produced and presented at the Park Avenue Armory, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum.

When the newspaper editor called to see whether I would put something in these pages to mark the seasons, I was flummoxed. I'm an abstract painter, not an opinion writer. All I could think of was a small moving picture, an animated video as ridiculous as our terrible current affairs, something absurdly coming apart at the seams.

What I made is viewable here by playing the video above: a one-minute-long animated piece made up of 300 drawings of a quasi-torso struggling to establish its own outlines amid a bunch of garbled calligraphy, set to a slapstick score by my friend, the artist and composer Marina Rosenfeld.

Maybe a sense of humor won't save anyone, what with a barbaric war in Gaza going on and murders that aren't called murders; zygotes who have more civil rights than women; presidents accessorized with gold sneakers and ice cream cones; trials of faux-Vikings in moose furs who scale the Capitol; high-schoolers toting semiautomatic weapons purchased at strip malls; rapacious men colonizing the world and depositing trinkets on the moon; ice melting and volcanoes firing up while activists glue their heads to the "Mona Lisa." But maybe, in the face of all that (and more), I could respond with drawings of things teetering on the edge of recognition. Could a comic animation provoke one minute of productive confusion? I want these drawings to mirror the feeling in your gut as you turn away from the news and gaze downward in anguish at your own paunch, to portray you psychically trying to get yourself together as you droop, despair and come undone. What if abstraction is not the grand form it's cracked up to be, but something we carry with us, half-illegible, inefficient and shabby?

Perhaps legibility and sense are overrated in this mess we find ourselves in. Perhaps we do need the funny bone for protest. Can an abstraction be read as a form of ecstatic folk art for our comrades? Can we expose, or reverse, our rapid unspooling by the rearrangement of our uncomfortable parts? That is how I have always thought of abstract art in general: the bandaging together of critical thinking and not-quite-knowing, the intimate labor of form that stays close to the body, in your hands, and that includes a sense of humor sutured to doubt, intelligence and skepticism; something for when all else fails. When we are so wounded and angry and sad, can we bundle up all our rhythms, outrage, laments and humor, and fashion them into a form, something to hold on to, as we muddle on?