

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Aruna D'Souza, "Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise," *4Columns*, May 24, 2024

||| 4Columns

Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise

Aruna D'Souza

*Riotous color, crisp compositions, and a continued defiance of
figurative-vs.-abstract binaries.*

Visual Art

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Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen. © Amy Sillman.

*Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise, Gladstone Gallery, 515 West Twenty-Fourth Street, New York City,
through June 15, 2024*

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At some point in the history of Western Modernism, people decided that abstraction and figuration were polar opposites: if an artwork contained any hint of representation, especially that of a body, it was not

truly abstract. (This discourse might have reached its apogee with Clement Greenberg’s proscriptive mid-century writings on Abstract Expressionism but hasn’t gone away by a long shot.) How bizarre that such an idea has continued so persistently. Bodies are an utter abstraction when you’re living in one—the connection between parts, the operations of systems, the wholeness of our ambulatory bags of meat and bone are unimaginable, really, from the inside. I, at least, can only picture my corporeal self as a series of discontinuities and contradictions, no matter what a mirror tells me. And bodies make paintings, after all—in most cases, it is a sweep of the arm or an almost automatic muscle movement or a flick of a wrist or a dance around a support or a continual back-and-forth (a delicate, close-up touch, a step away to assess its effects) that gets stuff onto canvas, whether it results in a non-referential arrangement of line, shape, and color or a realist rendering of the world.



Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen. © Amy Sillman.

Amy Sillman’s show of new work at Gladstone Gallery, *To Be Other-Wise*, is a virtuosic lesson in how silly and unimaginative the binary understanding of abstraction versus figuration really is. This has long been a theme in her work, as has the question of how one relates to the Modernist history that insisted on the split in the first place. In one of my all-time favorite pieces of art writing, “Ab-Ex and Disco Balls” (*Artforum*, Summer 2011), Sillman talks about the way Abstract Expressionism was available—

ripe, even—for recuperation and reinvigoration by queer artists who absorbed it through the lenses of camp, vulgarity, and a politics of the body, even if those old white guys in the Cedar Tavern would never have seen it that way. The following passage always stops me in my tracks:

If you want to make something with your hands, if you want the body to lead the mind and not the other way around, you may likely end up in the aisle of the cultural supermarket that includes painterly materials and AbEx delivery systems: canvas, oil sticks, fat paintbrushes, rags, trowels, scrapers, mops, sponges, buckets, and drop cloths. And it's not that you're going to be working "like" an AbExer, but that the tools themselves will mandate a certain phenomenology of making that emanates from shapes, stains, spills, and smudges.

Looking at the pieces on view—seventeen paintings; *minute cinema: Spring*, a video animation with sound by Marina Rosenfeld; and *UGH for 2023 (Torsos and Words)*, seventy-four works on paper installed in an enormous grid on the back wall—I wonder if one could make the same argument about figuration in Sillman's practice as she does about the inevitability of the appearance of AbEx gestures: that as long as the body is leading the mind in the studio, figuration is as likely as not going to coexist in some way or to some degree with abstraction, not because one sets out to introduce the figure per se, but because the body moves in ways that reproduce or at least suggest its form.



Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen. © Amy Sillman. Pictured: *UGH for 2023 (Torsos and Words)*, 2023–24. Acrylic and ink on paper.

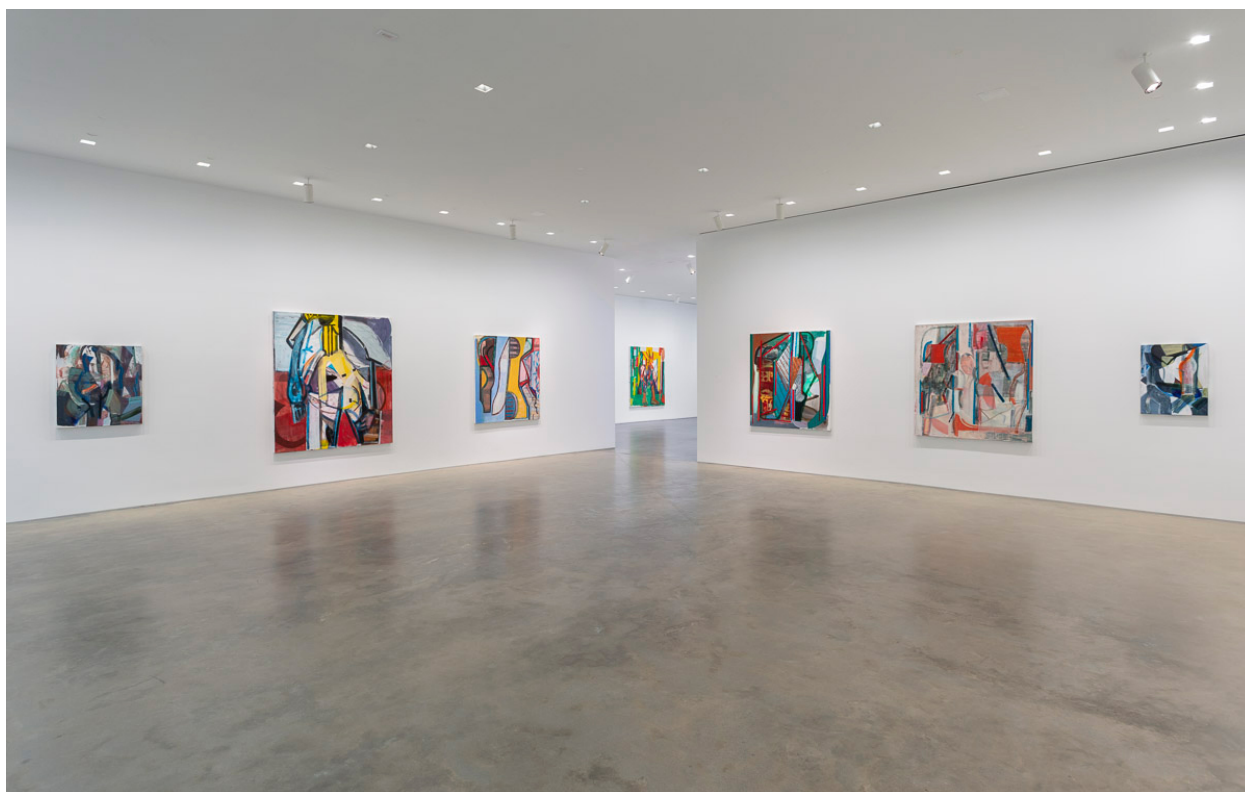
Sillman is a process painter—her canvases develop, layer by layer, over time, with each intervention responding to the last. You could call this intuitive, but it’s at least as much a result of muscle memory and a color sense honed by years of practice. For over a decade, she’s underlined the importance of process in her videos, which often show, via stop-motion animation, a single canvas in several different states. In the case of *UGH for 2023*, serial drawings rendered in watered-down reds, browns, blacks, and whites, we are not shown the development of a work, but temporality is still front and center, thanks to the repetition and morphing of shapes and lines. There is a stuttering quality, too, in Sillman’s use of language here: some sheets introduce words—*agh*, *meh*, *feh*, and other short, guttural utterances—overpainted with a not-quite-opaque-enough wash of white and the addition of black lettering, repeatedly transforming them into “ugh,” as if all enunciation these days could be distilled into a generalized exhaustion with the world. (Same, girl, same.)



Amy Sillman: To Be Other-Wise, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen. © Amy Sillman. Pictured, left to right: *Ravenna*, 2024; *Little Instrument*, 2023-24; *Afternoon*, 2024; *Little Elephant*, 2023.

The elusive and shifting figuration in Sillman’s paintings is not buried by layers of pigment as she works on a canvas—rather, it surfaces from those layers, like an ever-developing Rorschach test (make a mark, look at the mark, respond to the mark with your next mark). With a painting like *Ravenna*, it’s easy to imagine how this might happen: what if the startlingly representational, paw-like hands that appear to be grasping black lines—the legs of a vague stick figure—were a flight of fancy that came about when

Sillman realized her gestures had resulted in, say, something that resembled a curve of a belly or a spine, which she then developed into the armature of a body, which she then saw as a sort of cage to which the paws then clung? Or take two other canvases that share, roughly, a common motif: a red form composed of a triangular bit at the top left and another at the top right, connected by a blobby rectangle with a thick line dangling from the bottom left and snaking around the lower edge. The fact that the shape repeats, it occurs to me, is not so much because Sillman set out to do so, but because that is what happens when she moves her arm and shoulder, now trained by decades of practice, when standing in front of a canvas, holding a thick brush. One of these works she names *Little Elephant* and the other *Afternoon*, which may reasonably lead you to see, in the first case, an adorable pachyderm and, in the second, a landscape or a view through the window; in both I also saw, in addition to these things, Matisse's *Large Reclining Nude*.



Amy Sillman: *To Be Other-Wise*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery. Photo: David Regen. © Amy Sillman.

Sillman's previous show at Gladstone, in fall 2020, featured a reduced but still-lush palette; big, sweeping, enervated brushstrokes; and a kind of visual openness and airiness even as the mood was a bit quiet and even mournful, suitable for our post-pandemic lockdown, post-George Floyd and Breonna Taylor moment. (And flowers—there were lots of flowers, too.) In *To Be Other-Wise*, we have something quite different. The color is intense, even riotous—there are the reds and pinks and blue-grays that she deploys so frequently, but also high-keyed greens and yellows and an aqueous array of blues.

The compositions are wonderfully dense, sometimes even crisp, and occasionally Cubist, thanks to Sillman's use of thick black contours, parallel hatchings, and the division of the surface into geometric-ish, grid-like space. And her mark-making seems to gather up the whole history of abstraction onto a single surface, from Picasso's scumbly opacities to De Kooning's raw, oily energy to Gerhard Richter's squeegeed scrapings to much more besides. None of this feels much like quotation per se. On the contrary, it strikes me as a demonstration of her premise that Modernism is available to be broken down for parts and reassembled to evoke the body other-wise—as an abstraction rather than a form of coherence or wholeness; it's not a given, it is there to be made and remade.

Aruna D'Souza is a writer and critic based in New York. She contributes to the New York Times and 4Columns. Her new book, Imperfect Solidarities, will be published by Floating Opera Press this summer.