

Streams of Consciousness

*Amy Sillman's paintings
are quirky fusions of
figuration and abstraction,
humor and pathos. Each
tells a meandering tale*

BY GAIL GREGG

If Amy Sillman's career path were plotted on a graph, following the line of her early years would be as challenging as disentangling a single pink drip from the skein of color looped across a Pollock canvas.

Rendered in words, the twisting line would read: graduates from high school in 1973 in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park. Heads north to Beloit College, Wisconsin. Tires of school in first year and heads farther north—to work in a cannery in Alaska. On a whim, hops across the Pacific to live in Japan. Within months, returns to Chicago to work in feminist silk-screen factory. Lands at New York University in 1975 to train as a Japanese interpreter for the United Nations. Enrolls in fine-art class and is advised by professor to limit aspirations to commercial art.

At last, the pink drip line breaks free from the maze of color: Sillman transfers to Manhattan's School of Visual Arts and discovers the painting department. "I realized there were other girls

there who wore black T-shirts and read Sartre and were depressed," she recalls. Not only had she found soul mates but also the passion that would transform her career graph into something more akin to Agnes Martin's sustained, hand-drawn lines than Pollock's complex tangles.

Not that her career trajectory immediately headed upward. Sillman, by her own account, spent a decade making paintings in obscurity, giving them away to the experimental filmmakers and punk musicians who were her friends and neighbors in the East Village or tossing them out when she didn't like them. Paying her rent with one-week-a-month gigs doing magazine pasteups, she was content with "learning how to make paintings—just working, not showing."

"I was way off the radar screen," says Sillman, an ebullient yet earnest woman with a cap of dark unruly curls. But now, at 45, she has emerged into full view on the New York art scene and the international circuit, and is frequently compared with Philip Guston, Joan Miró, Francesco Clemente, and Carroll Dunham. She mounted two successful shows at the Casey Kaplan Gallery in Manhattan in 1996 and 1998, and her show at the Brent Sikkema gallery in April 2000 sold out, with paintings priced from \$9,000 to \$12,000. *For Bruno Schultz*, a large gouache done on tinted rice paper that marries a strong abstract grid to miniature psychological narratives, was included in P.S.1's 2000 "Greater New York" exhibition of established and emerging artists. Next month, Sillman's work will be in a group exhibition at the Ghislaine Hussenot Gallery in Paris, and in the fall, she will be featured in a solo show at the Marabini gallery in Bologna.

Sillman has described her work as "partly cartoon, partly lament, partly grudge," and her quirky fusion of figuration and abstraction, humor and pathos—larded with unblushing references to folk art, Indian miniatures, and Surrealism—has attracted a wide and varied audience of critical admirers. "Sillman is a painting lover's painter," wrote critic Peter Schjeldahl in a 1998 review in the *Village Voice*; *The New Yorker* recently touted her "radiant paintings and works on paper that conjure grief and joy in equal measure"; and *Frieze* reviewer Shonagh Adelman delighted in the way Sillman "imbues paint with anthropomorphic zeal."

In September, Sillman and her boyfriend of five years, Michael Smith, a video, performance, and installation artist (whose mother, coincidentally, lives across the street from Sillman's mother back in Chicago), left their SoHo apartment and moved



Sillman, here in her Brooklyn studio, describes her work as "partly cartoon, partly lament, partly grudge."



JOHN BERRENS

Sillman's recent paintings, such as *Film Strip*, 1998, are structured almost like stills in a film loop, or paragraphs in a letter.



STEPHEN BARKER

William Morris #3, 1990. Sillman has returned to using narrative elements in her work after forsaking them a decade ago to make pattern-and-decoration pictures.

to a quiet Brooklyn neighborhood closer to the modest Williamsburg studio where she has worked since 1982. The demographics of her new neighborhood are companionably middle-aged; and Felix, the rambunctious white Chihuahua that accompanies Sillman to the studio every day, undoubtedly prefers the 20-minute stroll through Brooklyn to a subway commute. "I have this intense Joseph Cornelian fantasy of never leaving my neighborhood," says Sillman.

Lately, she has been intent on simplifying her life. "I'm trying to hone down my life to making my work and seeing my friends," she says. She is curtailing her teaching load at Bard College (where she earned an MFA) and has given up involvement in the Four Walls exhibition space in Williamsburg, which she had run since 1990 with fellow artists Mike Ballou, Adam Simon, and Claire Pentecost.

Just as Sillman is reducing her commitments, she is reclaiming and refining the themes and concerns of her early work. In the 1980s, language and narrative took center stage. In such works as her 1987 mixed-media pictures inspired by a trip to India, tiny graphic characters and snippets of language wander across the surface in full view. "We live in a forest of language," she says. "I like the idea that I might be making up a foreign language, that to visit my work you have to come to a foreign country." Over the years,

abstract shapes and washes of color obscured these narrative elements; and for several years in the early 1990s, she sublimated the narrative altogether, making elegant pattern-and-decoration pictures, like *William Morris IV* (1991), based on Morris's Arts and Crafts-era designs.

Recently, however, Sillman has stripped her pictures of their veils of glaze and scumble. "I just got rid of the top," she explains. Her friends observe that her new work has become more personal, reflecting her wide-ranging interests—feminism, film, love, art, politics, music. "Her mind is not exactly linear," says artist Fred Tomaselli, a close friend and neighbor. "The more she stays with it, the more her work becomes true to who she is."

Imagine fragments of conversation and activities you might pick up on a city bus and you'll have an idea of the narrative structure of Sillman's paintings. Two old ladies in front of you discuss their new church dresses; the guys behind compare notes on their sex lives; an older man across the aisle gives full play to his facial tics; the girl next to him reads Proust. The pieces never cohere, yet they add up to some kind of whole: a New York experience; Sillman's experience.

Her most recent pictures, painted in gouache on sheets of brilliant white Arches paper, are constructed almost as paragraphs in a long letter to her viewers, or stills in a film loop. Each little event portrayed—a finger touching a nipple, a grasping hand, a paddle-wheel boat, a reclining female rendered as scientific illustration—is meant to provoke an association that eventually coalesces into a meandering tale. Sillman herself is uncertain of



COURTESY BRENT SIKKEMA

Sillman manipulates abstract and figurative elements to tell her own winding stories. Here, *Valentine's Day*, 2001.

the story line and plans to shuffle the segments once she nears completion of the 100-painting series. "They've got a lot of humanity in them," says David Humphrey, who collaborated on paintings with Sillman and Elliott Green as the artist group Team ShaG. "They have all the complexity and nuance of personality."

In a recent untitled suite, a blue praying figure is partly obscured by a woman with possibly a mermaid tail between her legs whose open abdomen is filled with, perhaps, water, which leads to a fantasy tower—or is it a rocket ship? It segues into a diving headless body, then a red square, then splayed legs (is that a hand where the foot should be?) cleaved by a glowing, orange-red vagina watched over by five tiny contemplative heads, punctuated at the right by a large male figure, encapsulated in a watery, saclike shape (a uterus?), walking away from the viewer while being joined by his shadow.

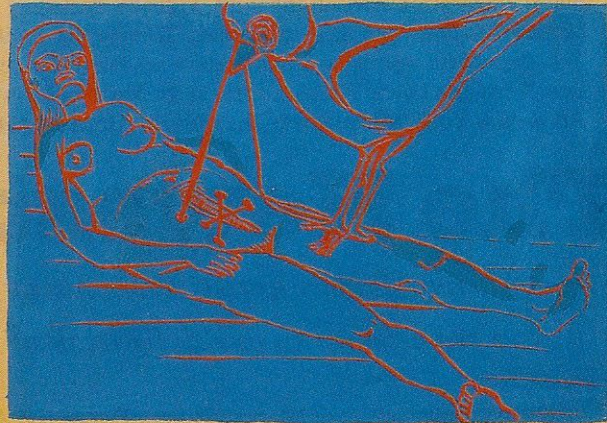
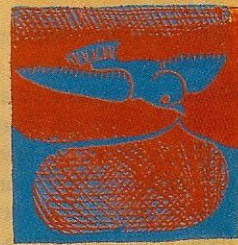
Ever since an art-school professor opined, "You can be abstract or figurative—but not both," Sillman has set out to prove him wrong. While it is easy to become preoccupied with deciphering the idiosyncratic narratives in her pictures, the pure painterliness of her work has an interest all its own. In *Skirmishes of an Untimely Nature* (2000), for instance, she obsessively constructs an abstract passage of brushstrokes that has antecedents in Klimt, Guston, and even Ryman. And besides adopting a graphic vocabulary from Indian miniature painting, she has also experimented with the genre's radiant palette, as in *Miniature Illinois* (1997), in which a mini-Rothko hovers over the picture-scape, rendered in luminous pink and yellow-ocher reminiscent of the East.

Sillman fearlessly takes on other dichotomies: emotional versus intellectual, funny versus serious. Figures cavorting upside down; "impossible body stuff"; giant insects, waves, clouds, trees—the very juxtapositions of the seemingly random elements, the doodling lines, and the cartoonish renderings all conspire to make the viewer smile. "I'm a comedy freak," she says. But that hardly means her pictures are funny; many, in fact, are pervaded by a sense of melancholy or disturbing presentiment. "We all sort of walk around all day with this jumble of thoughts," Sillman muses. "My paintings are proposals to viewers to examine their own."

Filmmaker Peggy Awesh, with whom she collaborated in a 1998 installation called *The Secret Charts*, admires the "high-low" quality of her work—that mythological elements exist right alongside the scatological: "To understand Amy Sillman, you have to have read the Upanishads and Rabelais, know Hieronymous Bosch and have seen Douglas Sirk movies."

To be sure, Sillman's inspirations are as varied as the narrative elements that populate her paintings: Siennese painting, Fragonard, Bosch, Indian painting, Flemish painting, Sung-dynasty painting, all Belgian painting, Monet, Bonnard, Matisse, Chardin, Watteau, Guston, Miró, Rothko, Arp, Roman wall painting, Greek sculpture, folk art. "I'm drawn to anything intimate," she says, adding that she also is passionate about Abstract Expressionism. "That's where I got my process from." Contemporaries whom she admires include Sue Williams, Jonathan Borofsky, Chris Ofili, Ellen Berkenblit, Tom Burckhardt, Robin Winters, Terry Winters, Cecily Brown, Inka Essenhigh, Nicole Eisenman, Rachel Harrison—the list goes on. "I like all the girl artists—my peers," she says.

Sillman's painting method is painstaking. It can take months



COURTESY BRENT SIKKEMA

For Bruno Schultz, 1999–2000, was recently included in the "Greater New York" exhibition at P.S.1 in Long Island City.

or even a year to complete a single work. "If I'm in a hurry, all is lost," she says. She generally keeps several projects on the front burner—one at the "exuberant" beginning stage, one at the "really bad" middle stage, and one in the "confusing" throes of completion. "I try not to tinker," she says. "If it's not done, it needs to be overhauled." Before her last show, Sillman admits that she camped out in her studio for months on end. "A lot of it was about doubting and erasing. I tried to pretend I wasn't having a show," she says.

During a sabbatical from Bard last year Sillman painted for two months in Umbria, courtesy of the Civitella Ranieri Foundation. (She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pollock-Krasner and Joan Mitchell foundations, among others.) Returning to New York, she finished up her sabbatical by taking philosophy courses at the New School. She fantasizes about immersing herself in study again, dipping into psychoanalytic theory and anthropology.

To Humphrey, Sillman's paintings have "magical potential—as if by naming all her fears, or her wants, she can have mastery over them." Painter Rochelle Feinstein sees Sillman's work as "animations—an animated stream of consciousness and unconsciousness." Sillman's own summation of her work is self-consciously modest: "I see myself as a Jewish folk artist," she says—a tuned-in Grandma Moses who knows how to schmooze and how to paint. ■

Gail Gregg, a New York-based artist and writer, last wrote about Brice Marden in ARTnews.