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CULTURED

For Amy Sillman, Making an Abstract Painting Is Like Finding Parking in New York: Endless, Improvised, and Torturous

This month at Dia Bridgehampton, the artist takes on a new interlocutor: herself.



Amy Sillman's New York studio is a place of action—all kinds. "I'm a big studio rat; I go all the time and I stay for a long time," says the 69-year-old artist, who moved to the city in 1975. The action in question begins with the usual "normcore" stuff—caffeinating, tidying, reading emails—and escalates to a creative fever pitch that involves "cutting, collaging, transferring, hauling things back and forth, turning things up and down, painting over, erasing, stripping, napping, talking on the phone, reading, getting more emails, walking my dog, [and] making more coffee." It's an entire life's worth of tasks crammed into the confines of a day.

At the time of our interview, Sillman isn't in her studio—she's out at her place on Long Island's North Fork, not far from where she'll open "Alternate Side (Permutations #1–32)," a show of new works at Dia Bridgehampton, on June 28. She's in the middle of a lengthy back-and forth with her handyman, who is there to paint the halls.



Amy Sillman, *Untitled*, 2024

Sillman apologizes for the disruption—but these, it's become clear, are part of her process. Last September, at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the artist opened "Oh, Clock!," her first institutional survey in Europe in collaboration with the Ludwig Forum Aachen, where her work is still on view through Aug. 31. She categorizes these shows as "them on me"—a two-part undertaking in which half the show is dedicated to her work, and the other half offers a Sillman-curated selection from the institutions' collections hung on gallery walls that the artist painted on a whim. "It was not what they were expecting," Sillman says of the improvised action. "I did the whole thing off the top of my head."

Sillman calls the experiment a success. The Dia show will be "me on me"—she'll paint the gallery walls and present her series of recently completed silkscreen and painted works on top of them. "I thought of them like Sol LeWitts—line forms that repeat, just not in a very structured or legible way," she says of the works, which feature her signature method of addition and erasure, but newly systematized. "They're based on a set of terms, like a grammar, a tidy closed circuit." In the weeks leading up to the show, Sillman is making regular pilgrimages to Dia Bridgehampton. The silkscreened works are ready to be hung, but the wall work that will form their backdrop remains a mystery. "I'm having bad dreams about squeezing out of parking spaces," she says of the impending project. "I have no idea what I'm doing. It's really scary and really fun."

Here, Sillman takes a moment to reflect on the headspace that got her there.



Amy Sillman, *Untitled*, 2024

What's in your studio fridge?

Milk and water. I have a tiny fridge, only because my former subletter insisted on it. It's one of those little bitty ones. It doesn't fit very much.

Two of your recent exhibitions—at the Ludwig Forum and the Kunstmuseum in Bern—featured new work alongside work curated from the institutions' collections. For the Dia show, you're presenting entirely new works. What made you abandon your previous approach for this exhibition?

In both of those museum shows, half the space offered a focused look at my work. For the other half, I curated their collection and painted the walls. It started in Bern, and it was not what they were expecting. I was a little light-handed because I wasn't sure what I was doing, and I did it all off the top of my head. When I got to Aachen, I was like, That was great, I'm going to go for it again. I ramped it up by a factor of 20—I built huge walls on wheels that I painted on and situated throughout the gallery.

And this show?

This show is "me on me" instead of "them on me." I'm still going to paint the walls, but I'm pairing that with my own work. It's going to be improv—I literally don't know what I'm going to paint yet.

Can you describe the difference in headspaces between creating a show that is, as you say, "them on you" and one that's "you on you"?

I won't know until I complete the process by painting the walls. The work I made to hang on them is this series of silkscreens with recombinant linear elements that are assembled differently on every sheet, never repeated. They were all one-offs. I would make handmade grounds on paper, then silkscreen, wash, silkscreen, wash, draw over, silkscreen over that, repeating the elements in different combinations. The wall work must be wild, open, and free. It might be incoherent or kind of strange. I want [the show] to feel like cooked on raw—fried egg on salad or something.



Amy Sillman, *Untitled*, 2024

Do you consider this work to be in dialogue with other artists associated with Dia institutions?

Yeah, I've thought about how Dan Flavin is upstairs, and about Dia as a place that sponsored works like Michael Heizer's "hole in the ground," [Robert] Smithson's piles with mirrors in them, or Richard Serra's black and white walls. I thought a lot about the recombinant, minimalist process of iteration here. Flavin's work is about light; he lights the wall like the ground of a painting. There is no figure except the light bulb, which is a tube, not dissimilar to these weird linear forms that I'm bending.

Are you surprised to find yourself in dialogue with those artists?

I was surprised at first by this conversation I'm having with what might be called minimalism. Around the pandemic, I realized the problem with my way of working: It's agonistic. I never know when I'm done—I'm always tearing out my hair; it never ends. So I thought, What if, like a minimalist, I had a system or a process? When the process is complete, the painting's over.

How would you articulate that system, if you had one?

I think it would be gesture, erasure, gesture, erasure, gesture, erasure, print, reprint, reprint, wash, reprint, wash, gesture, reprint, wash, print.

When it comes to the work you'll create on site, you say you've got some ideas, but you don't know how it will come together. How does that feel?

It's terrifying. I'm having bad dreams about squeezing out of parking spaces. When I was speaking with the Dia curators a few weeks back, one of them said, "Hold on, I gotta move my car." I was like, "That's the title of my show—'Alternate Side.'" It's as hard to find a parking space in New York as it is to make an abstract painting. I love the idea that the problem is the provocation, and the work is the response to that disruption.