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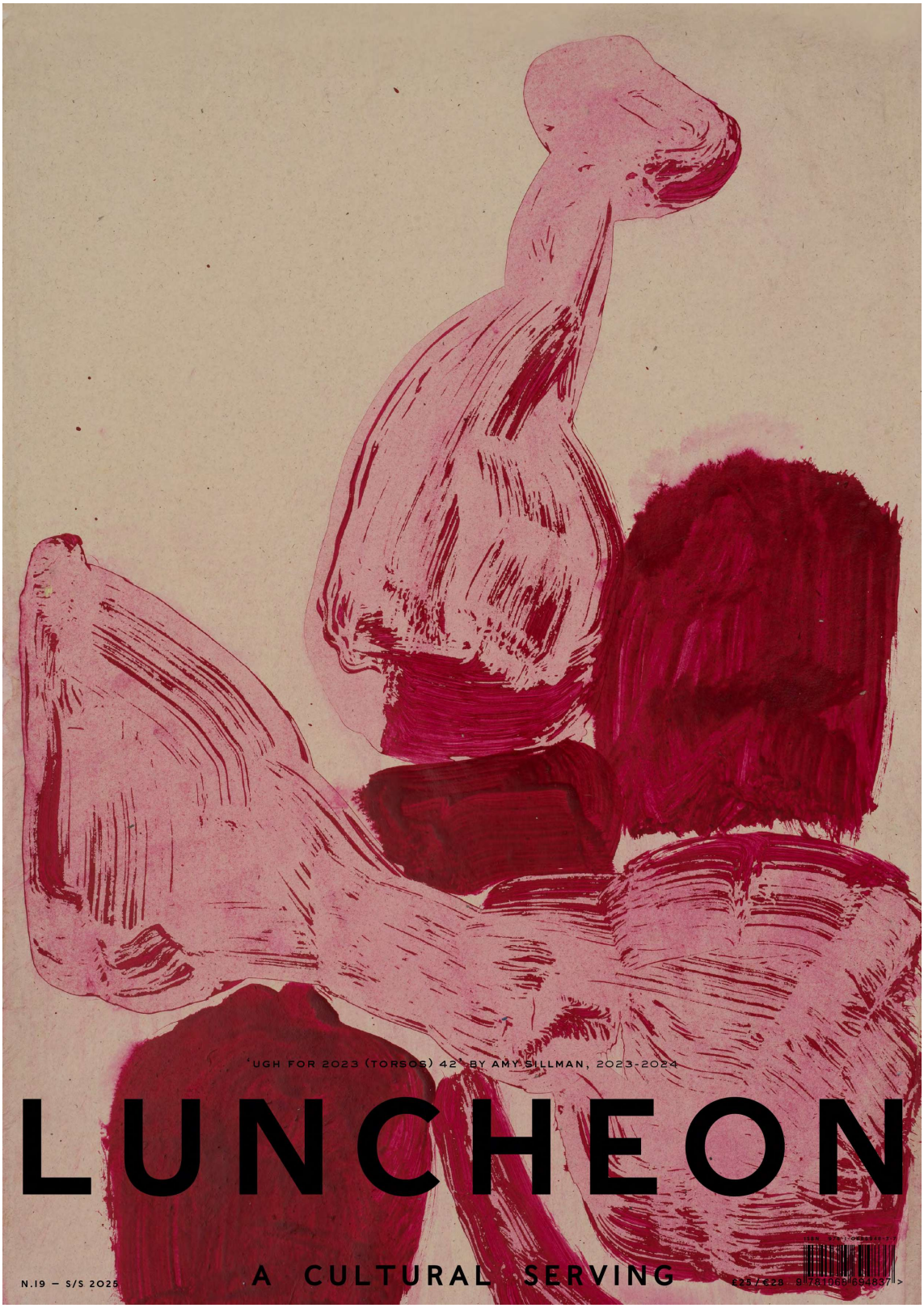

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THE WORK OF AMY SILLMAN

AND A CONVERSATION WITH
JORDAN CARTER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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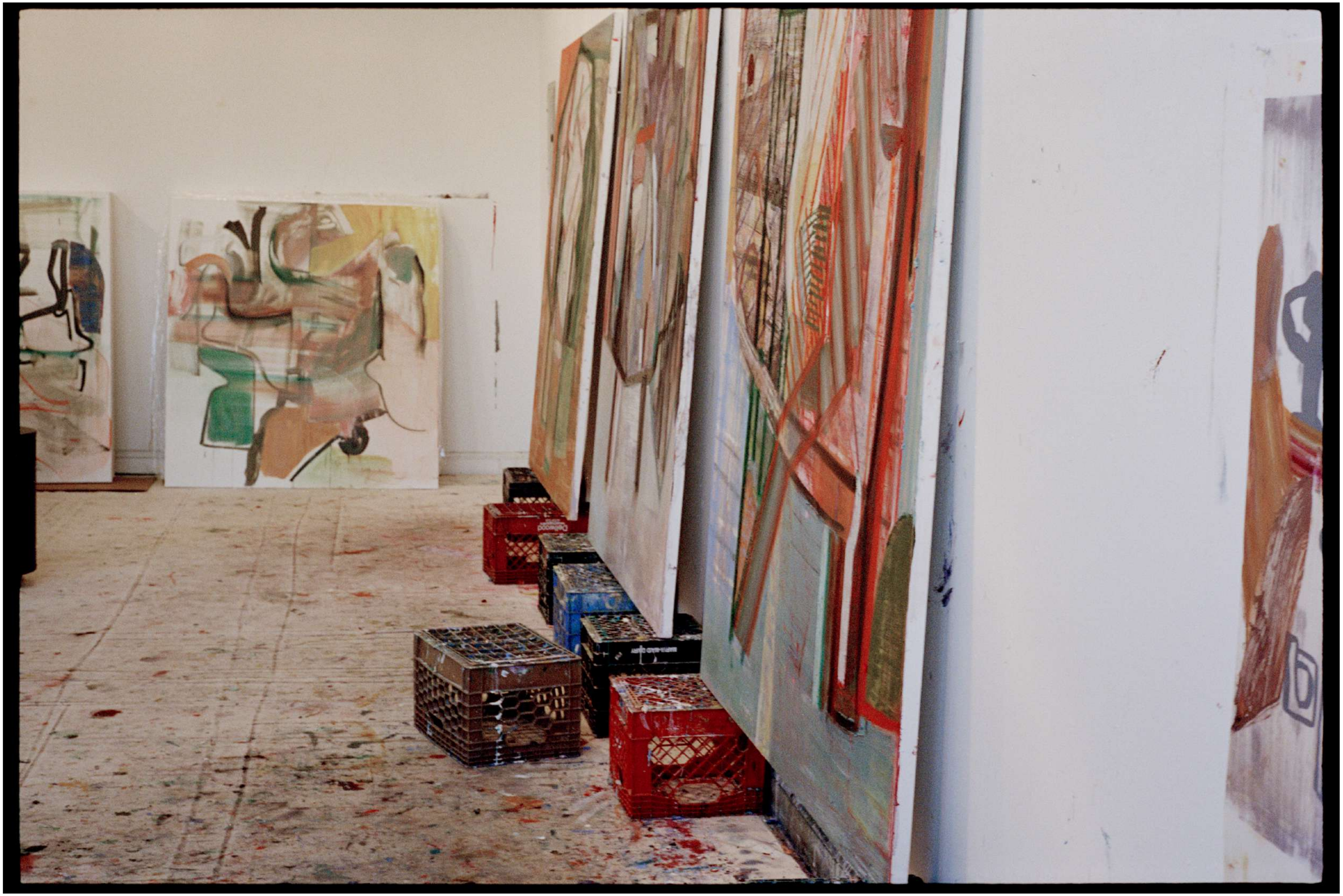
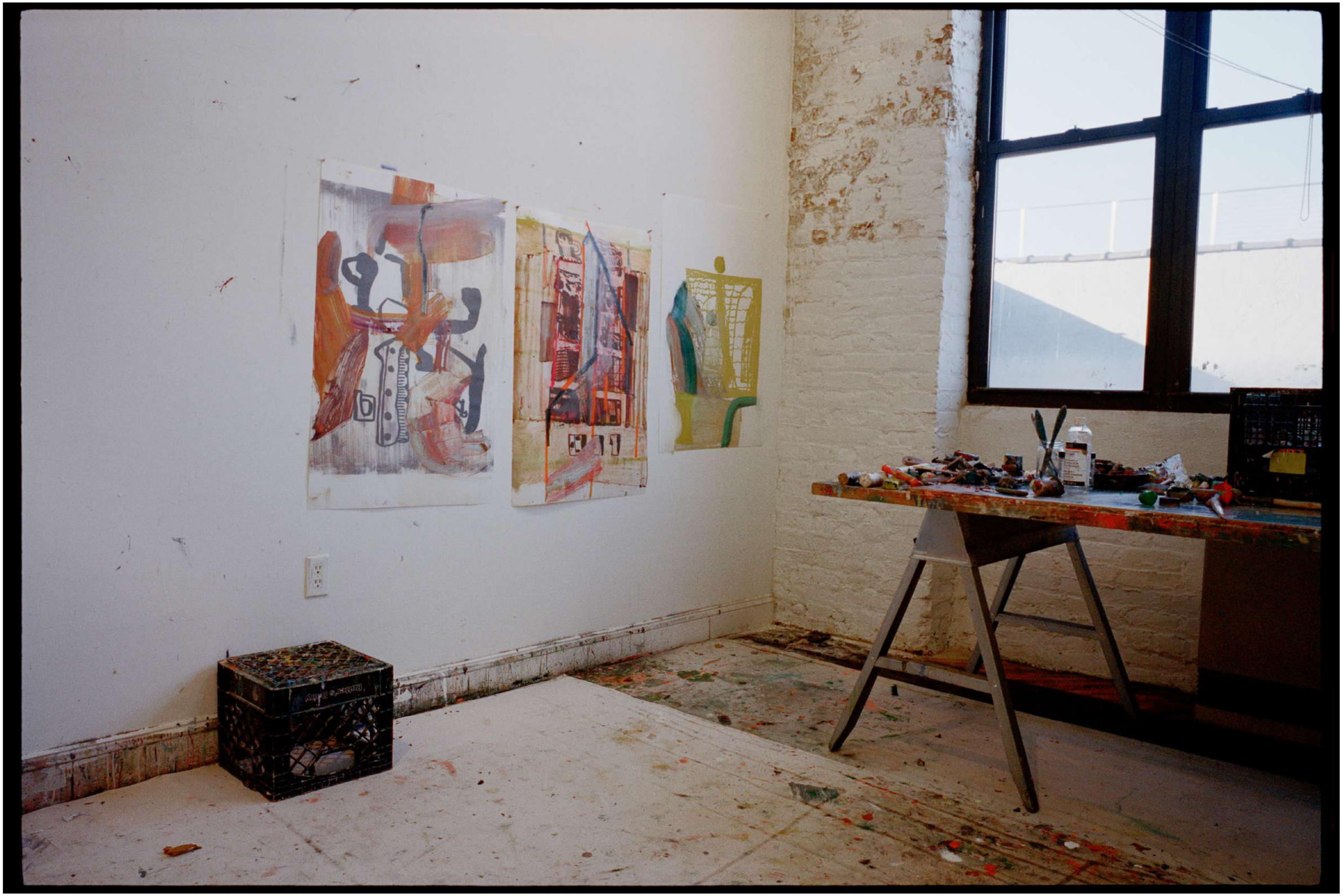



WOMEN
ART STORY AMERICA



JORDAN CARTER: We are sitting in your studio in Bushwick, so maybe you could tell us a little bit about this space: how you use it, how it is organised, how long you've occupied this studio, and how you relate to the neighbourhood.

AMY SILLMAN: I got this space in 2009. I had been living in Berlin, and my friend Thomas Eggerer had a studio down the hall and let me know that there was a studio up for rent on his hallway, so I rented it over the phone from Berlin. Some years later I got the room across the hall and I use that as my office, my storage, for looking at stuff, having people come over, etc. That room is basically the 'clean' room, this room is the dirty room. I make everything in here. Improv is a lonely process for me, but I don't like it when people come over, and I don't have very many studio visits because I get self-conscious. So, I think the dirty room is kind of a haven – a laboratory and a retreat.

I remember listening to the poet Susan Howe give a talk once, and she was talking about art forms that don't have 'wings' the way that theatres do. In that way, there are no 'wings' for improvisors, no backstage area. Painting – in my old-fashioned way of doing it – is lonely and weird, and I'm too private and shy for an observer. I've been asked if people can film me while working, and I usually say no.

JORDAN: To paint for a video?

AMY: Yeah, I say no.

JORDAN: That's interesting, thinking about painting as a private act. How do you see that division between the private performance and what remains?

AMY: I think of my way of painting as being the form for somebody who prefers not to be the actor, someone who wants to displace themselves into their object. This is obviously just very old-fashioned. Like Francis Bacon, Howard Hodgkin, Lee Krasner, Philip Guston, Ed Clark, or Joan Mitchell – whoever you can think of who works in an alone way. I'm completely interested in performativity and theatricality, but those things don't work completely in relation to the kind of obsessive process that I engage in – my emotionally fraught and private way. There's actually a lot of hiding in my painting, and I don't want to make that process entirely public, even though I spend all my time trying to disclose how much drama is there, but without exactly letting people in on the moves. I'm not deceitful, I'm not concealing that it's a big process, but it's private. Painting is often, at least the way I make it, loaded and packed into itself. You wouldn't even believe it if I showed you what these look like before the layers that you are allowed to see. So, there's this kind of psychological dimension of covering up, layering, hiding, waiting, editing, scraping, peeking, digging… All of that stuff is the emotional part of the process of painting for me. The time involved. I think many painters I know, the kind of painters that work alone, are also involved very deeply with all those issues.

JORDAN: One hundred percent.

AMY: It's funny, the other day I pitched an interview with a friend of mine for a magazine (his work is abstract painting) and the editors wrote back and said no to the interview. They said it was because they were more interested in what they described as 'groundbreaking and experimental work.' So I wrote this kind of bitchy letter back because I was upset that they weren't seeing that our interview would engage with what they were calling 'experimental' work. I said to them, 'Emotion and meaning and tenderness and care – is that nothing to do with groundbreaking for you?' I mean, I just think that the 'vanguard', or whatever you want to call it, often does exactly have to do with revealing emotion, tenderness, privacy, care, secrecy, weirdness, personal impulse, drive… Those weirdo things that are part of making art.

All of which I was thinking about when I curated the MoMA show, *The Shape of Shape*. It was not true that everyone turned away from the easel, or from the private space of the studio, to language or to politics. Or that there were no politics in the studio. There's this tremendous realm of, I guess you would just call it the interior, which is not to be confused with the privately-owned or the non-social, but it is where the private self part of painting is tied, as I see it, to the boundaries and forms of external structures, where politics covers both things that may sit on easels and what you would call external affairs.

To me the idea of improv is that part of its risk and demand is that you respond to the micro and the macro, and the external and the internal, on the spot and without an exact pre-known rule. Like in speech – you're working from a known grammar, but you're making up the words as you go along. And by extension, you basically cannot tell anyone else what to do for you because there is nothing you can declare absolutely in advance. There is nothing you can 'pre-order'. I find that to be an important part of art making for me. It doesn't mean I don't love other people's work, who do very different things, who send instructions or declare things or make truth claims, or 'know' what they're doing, but I respond really strongly to the idea that improv is, like erasure, one of the most key things in making a painting, because every time you make a change or wipe something out or test out a new step or put a new layer on, you're deciding to erase the thing that was there below, and you're editing and you're adjusting and you're altering, but you're also destroying.

JORDAN: There is this idea of erasure and this tension between moments of withdrawal and moments of revealing of what is visible on the surface – all of these layers that you're saying are integral to the composition, even if they're not readily perceivable. I want to hear how you think about that in relation to the medium you're choosing and your process.

AMY: The performative appeared for me more and more when I started showing my work, alongside something different – the architectural. Planning for the place that the work will go, both of which I wasn't involved until I was in my late 30s and into my 40s. As soon as I started to know what specific kind of exhibition space I'd be showing in, it was a different set of issues. How the meaning will unfurl in space as people walk by something.

JORDAN: In relation to space?

AMY: Yeah, what kind of space, and what kind of timing and rhythm, and what could still be the performative beat of the work. I want to reveal all of this drama that's packed into the private part, but then there's that public thing to worry about…

JORDAN: That's embedded in there.

AMY: I always *don't* want art to be design, even though, God bless really good designers, they are artists! But I am not a designer. I want to show the clunkiness of the process, how that registers its own problems and how you can see things that are wrong, not just elegant. But also precise. Both.

JORDAN: Aberrations.

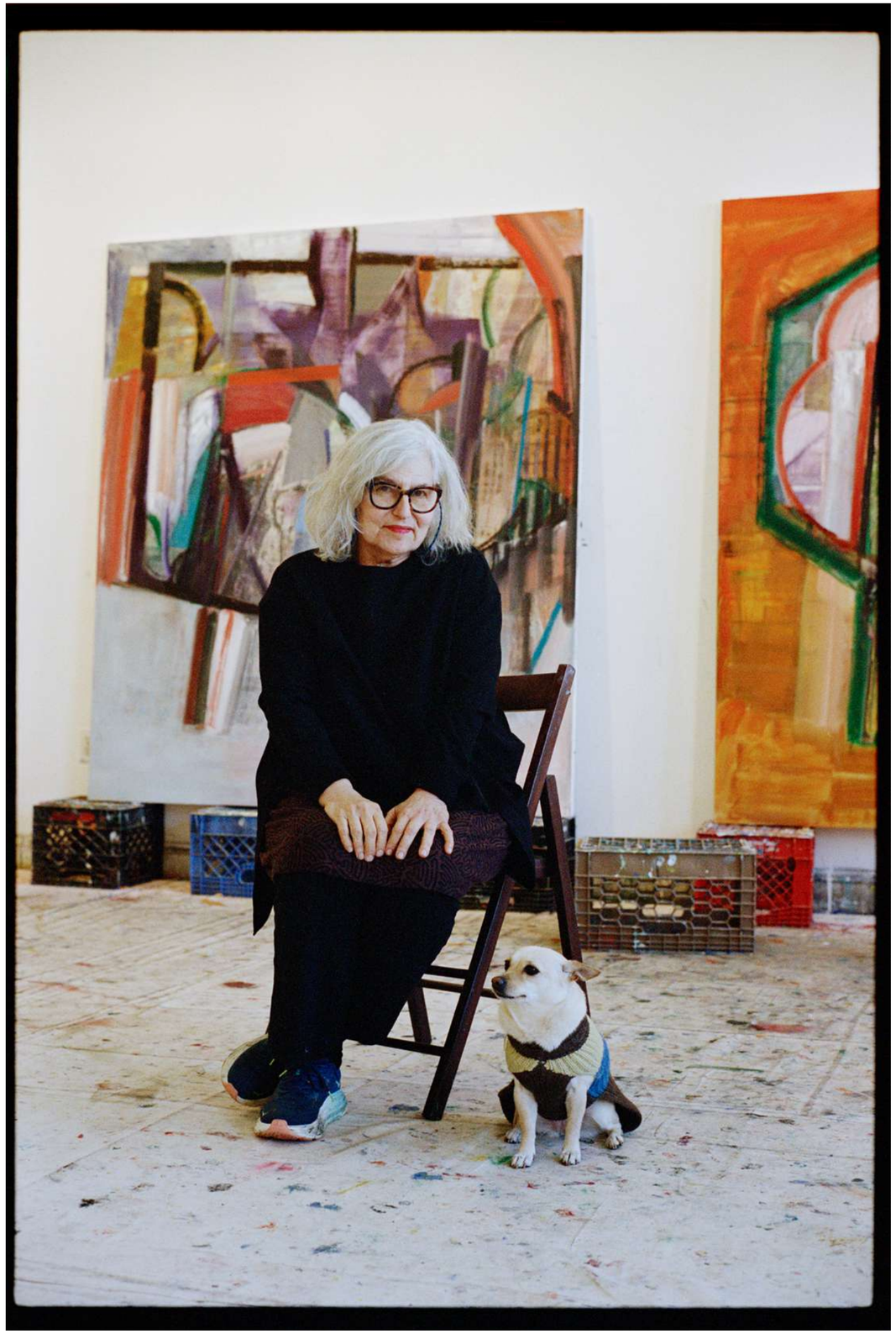
AMY: Yeah, all of that. I don't know how other people look at painting, but I hope what I'm presenting is the arduous decision making, where something doesn't come easily to me or to the viewer.

JORDAN: I like that.

AMY: I think about Thelonious Monk. When I first heard him, before I really knew who that was, I said, 'Does this guy know how to play *really* well, or is this really *awkward*?' I really love art that makes me not know whether the person is really good at it or is really in the dark. It's like being open to a radical thing that you've never seen. It's art about how mutated the overlap of the material and the place where our bodies and our minds meet is, and wanting to expose that really deeply.

JORDAN: That's interesting.

AMY: In a way, I think that's why so many artists (like Robert Rauschenberg and Arnulf Rainer and Robert Morris etc.) were primarily involved in dance. I feel like modern experimental dance is literally *the thing* lying between postwar gestural painting and Minimalism and Pop. That is the canon, but of course not everyone knows about it at all, because there's nothing to be sold



in there. But that whole generation was trying to undo the known message, and the known commodities, and the grandeur, and to strip these things down and weave them into the regular steps you take in daily life (what you read in the newspaper etc.) and make a whole new kind of 'fabric' for art.

JORDAN: The kaleidoscopic view of the everyday, and the systemic aspect of it too.

AMY: I feel like I want it to look beautiful and ugly and weird and old and new and not clear, and…

JORDAN: Innovative and regressive.

AMY: And non-linear. Also, in digital art and in printmaking and in so many kinds of modern painting, you can go both backwards and forwards in time. Time itself then becomes totally flexible and dynamic.

JORDAN: Nothing's final.

AMY: Finality is not my interest. I want a painting to show its troubles and to arrive at a good place and to look like it had a lot of problems along the way. Which I think is partly about wanting to see something, not at its high points, but at its high, middle and low points all at once.

JORDAN: I'm curious about your relationship to Abstract Expressionism, which you've spoken about in the past. In this event of painting, in these layers and these gestures, do you feel you are imparting an emotion, or do you think that the emotion is happening elsewhere, compositionally? Where does that emit?

AMY: That's such an amazingly great question, because I don't know. I want it to emit out of its own physical presence, but I don't think, honestly, that people who don't have any experience looking at art would necessarily feel that when they see an abstract painting. I'm aware of that problem, and I'm trying really hard all the time to unpack what that formal language is, in a perhaps desperate attempt to explain something to people – strangers – who might stand in front of abstract art and just say, 'That's something about money, or something I don't know how to talk about.'

JORDAN: People who find it alienating.

AMY: It is alienating, in the same way that abstraction in poetry is alienating when you first encounter it. That was a lesson I learned at Bard while doing my MFA, working with abstraction in media that I did not know well enough at first.

JORDAN: You raise something quite interesting that I think about a lot, which is the accessibility of abstraction. I'm curious about your relationship to figuration and your integrations and conflations between these two modes.

AMY: I'm interested in the fact that in certain places – like Eastern Europe or South America – abstraction appears and it's not the same line of thought that you got from the art history classes I took as a student in the US. It's not the Russian or the French way of unfolding, exactly, but a different step. It's doing something with a language that apparently makes sense to artists in such places as Venezuela or Poland or Romania. So why is there Romanian abstraction or Czechoslovakian abstraction or Polish abstraction and Venezuelan, Brazilian and Argentinian abstraction? I don't really know the answer to that yet. I need to read Irene Small's new book on Brazilian art, *The Organic Line*.

But at one point I said to a friend of mine, while looking at something at MoMA, 'Is abstraction actually the most democratic form, exactly useful for people who *didn't* go to an academy and learn perspective?' Maybe abstraction is the language for everyone, and figuration is the fancy thing that was developed in Italy in the 14th century. I'd have to discuss this with my art historian friends. I wish I could talk about it more knowingly, but I've become interested in this question as an artist.

JORDAN: You have a very high-level sense of perception, more about the idea of improvisation and gesture in abstraction, but as it is implemented via systems.

AMY: Well, personally, I absorbed methodologies of gestural painting as a student in the 1970s because it was mostly gestural artists from the 1950s and 1960s who got teaching jobs in the 1970s in NYC. I learned to energetically erase from my first drawing teacher in New York City – an old Ab Ex-er.

JORDAN: Really? At The School of Visual Arts?

AMY: Well, first I went to NYU and studied Japanese, because I wanted to be a language interpreter, but I was détourned by an art class. Then I went to SVA and had teachers, many women especially, like Susan Crile and Pat Steir and Elizabeth Murray and also this really wonderful old man named Michael Lowe, who was looking at Mondrian, and John Borofsky, who was like, 'Do whatever'…

But I've been thinking about Michael Lowe lately because I remember that in my first crit he said, 'You are building a language of form.' I was so young and so naive that I'd never heard those words put together before. I didn't know what 'language' or 'form' even was, really. I still remember being blown away by how straightforward and available that was, because even having studied language a bit by then, I still hadn't considered painting a 'language of form'.

But across the years of my development, including the very recent past few years, I started thinking about other trajectories than gestural painting. Like how minimalist methods might work for me, asking different questions about presence and about when you declare you're finished with a work, for example. In one case, for example, I gave myself a set of rules for paintings, a kind of algorithm I guess, but maybe a wrong-headed version of that.

JORDAN: Yes, an algorithm.

AMY: I started using my own systems to think about painting, related to music or dance.

JORDAN: We're thinking about time.

AMY: Yes, I think it's an inheritance from dance. What are instructions? What is rehearsal? What are pauses? What are the differences between a drawing and a written musical score? I don't claim to know the answers. But these are some questions.

JORDAN: I like this idea of painting as a rehearsal, which almost sets up the idea of finishing the painting as a place you'll never actually reach. It almost precipitates the next painting as another rehearsal.

AMY: Yes.

JORDAN: There's this sense of it always being an exercise. What about language or the alphabet as a 26 unit system? Let's go back to your time as a student. You were studying Japanese, and you've remarked about how calligraphy collapsed the idea of image and language. How do you see your gravitation towards systems in relation to this vocabulary of forms that you came to identify with?

AMY: I think a lot about spoken language and improv, as we've already talked a bit about. I think about how the better you know the underlying system, the more you can be free with the actual vocabulary, as happens when you learn a language and start to play with it as you speak. As poets teach us! And I think about these pictures of Willem de Kooning surveying his many drawings that are lying all over the ground of his studio, and how I don't think he necessarily knew what he was doing either. It was all experiment and cutting. You can see in his drawings that he's cutting paper and appearing and disappearing figures.

I think the disappearance of a figure is a deeply emotional thing. I think disappearance is a sad event. To some extent, the work is always emotional at its heart. I want to propose a structured space in painting so that it looks like you could almost put your hand in to grasp something, or you could go in, of course with your eyes, to enter a complicated space, to try to grasp something that keeps shifting. That shifting is very frustrating. Sometimes it's frustrating for the viewer, and I know that. I think I understand that, but I think I'm trying to work on an edge where things just don't make sense and can't be conclusive.

'I mean, I just think that the "vanguard", or whatever you want to call it, often does exactly have to do with revealing emotion, tenderness, privacy, care, secrecy, weirdness, personal impulse, drive… Those weirdo things that are part of making art.'

– AMY SILLMAN

JORDAN: I want to situate us within Dia Art Foundation. What are the aesthetics and the values that constitute Dia in your imaginary? Which of the 1960s and 1970s generation of Minimal, Conceptual, even Land artists, that are associated with Dia have you metabolised?

AMY: Well, it's about the experience of encountering it. For example, it was a huge revelation to me to see Dan Flavin in Marfa. As you walk from building to building, the iterations are revealed but you have to walk through these sequences. At Chinati, I found out how a sequence of proposals work to accrue greater resonance as you experience them. I really respond to the whole experience of sequence, so seeing Flavin as a flaneur in those buildings in Chinati sequentially, the penny really dropped for me. Same with the amazing piece I saw there by Robert Irwin, in which the sun set as that kind of experience was taking place. The connection between earth and time and sensation.

JORDAN: There's something you said earlier about the idea of an edge in your painting that makes me think of Flavin. He once said that you could use a fluorescent tube to 'destroy' a corner. Flavin is someone who had a self-imposed system – he would only use 10 colours. Maybe you could speak about how the chromatic operates in your work.

AMY: It's hard to talk about. I draw. That's really what I do – I put lines down and wipe them away. I just use a lot of crayons and wipers and colour becomes part of the system. I was thinking about a system of colour at Two Palms, the print shop where I worked all year, because there you have to give communicable instructions – literally, the printers ask you, 'What colour do you want to use, Amy?' And you say, 'I don't know. What kind of greens do we have?' And we spent an incredible amount of time experimenting and testing out the colour and also the shine, the density, the drying time, and the mixing of layers. You couldn't just say to somebody, 'Print these two discs in that particular brown-grey with this much gel.' You had to feel it and see how it all worked. And it was often a total question.

JORDAN: These new prints that you've made are kind of like drawings because many of them are unique monotypes.

AMY: They are unique monotypes, all of them.

JORDAN: Even though they're prints, they're not necessarily reproducible.

AMY: No, we don't know how to make another one.

JORDAN: I'm curious for you to reflect a little bit about how you view printmaking and what drew you to engage in this residency at Two Palms last year. What took you away from the canvas?

AMY: Printmaking literally kind of strips your process down to its underwear and makes it visible, to study the moves and repeats and to analyse the whole procedure. I made my Venice Biennale piece in 2022 out of silkscreen at a great shop in Brooklyn called Kingsland Studios, owned and run by a woman named Sarah Gates. That was the first time I'd really *worked* with printing; before that, printmaking was like, you get invited to make a version of your drawings or paintings, but I was not inventing anything. But at Kingsland I worked for two years and really got into it deeply. At first, I was just about the idea that printing is how you can get back to the original surface and reiterate it. In painting you can erase and scrape away, but it's going to look like there are layers. But I've been working with digital video for years – very lo-fi works – but I've done enough to know that what interests me in digital video is that you can go backwards as well as forwards in time, and find an element that you want to salvage and then potentially have it again to reprint endlessly. I guess the iterative part of my work finally clicked with silk-screening.

JORDAN: I have more one more question. Dia in Bridgehampton was a former firehouse that turned into the First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton. Flavin's permanent installation is located where the congregation used to gather. Could you reflect a little bit on the relationship between art and spirituality and your relationship to that idea?

AMY: I think that there is a leap of faith that you take in being in this world, and that what you might call faith can come out in a number of different ways. One of them, a non-dogmatic one, is to think that art is where you can really have faith in serious and thoughtful and emotional and earnest experiences that will change your understanding and therefore change your life. I don't know any other way of thinking of it. I remember very clearly, at the very end of the core part of the pandemic, I noticed that on Yom Kippur (the day of the holiest Jewish services) I happened to go to the *Cézanne Drawing* show at MoMA. I'm not a religious person at all – I don't observe holidays or go to temple, but that day I went to MoMA, and I had an out-of-body experience looking at his work. I went kind of nuts. I think it was because it was the end of the pandemic. I wrote an essay about it in *Artforum* where I said that I had taken a drug called 'C' and that I'd had a truly hallucinatory experience, because it dawned on me very deeply when I looked at his works that there was no such thing as what he was doing, but he was doing it anyway.

The bravery and the loneliness of that pursuit really resonated with me that day. I think at the highest moment of art loving there are these occasional ecstatic moments, where you just are so deeply moved by something you've seen that the world makes sense to you for a second.

I don't imagine that my work is doing that necessarily, or that I set out to do such things. I'm not a preacher or a shaman, but I definitely think it's there for you if you are deeply involved in art. And if so, you might have that experience anywhere. You could have it at the Met looking at Sienese painting, or in Paris looking at Monet, or in Brazil looking at a work made of stone, or in India in front of a giant ancient cave sculpture. You are changed, and then you feel a bit different, and you recognise that true change has occurred. I think that's the closest I can get to religion.