

Notes from Bern: Winter 2025 — Curator

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January 2025

Notes from Bern by Sascha Behrendt

Amy Sillman, *Oh, Clock!*

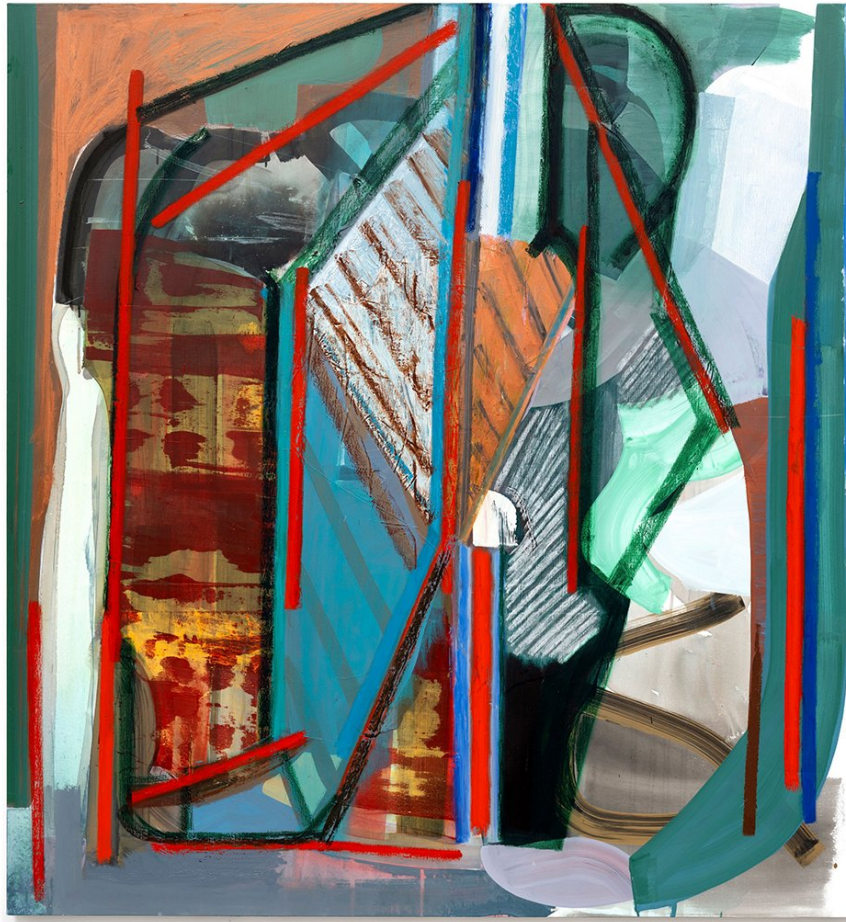
Installation view Courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

Art Freed from the Canon's Cage

“The history of art is told very differently from the point of view of painters than that of art historians”

–Amy Sillman

Amy Sillman’s exhibition *Oh, Clock!* at the Kunstmuseum Bern, boldly disrupts the museum space and ways of looking at art. Vivid interventions on architecture, a radical remix of the museum’s collection, alongside Sillman’s selected paintings, drawings, and animated films from fifteen years, brings a passionate, exciting New York energy to her first major solo exhibition in Europe.



Oh, Clock!, 2023, Courtesy of the artist. Private Collection. Photography Annik Wetter

The title of the show, *Oh, Clock!* refers to the unspooling of time, process, and physical labor in Sillman's art. Behind the restless bold shapes, and colors, lies a ruthless, lengthy practice of experimentation, editing, and starting over.

Sillman has established a pointedly different approach to abstract gesture and expression, post-1950s male-dominated AbEx, and has played an important role in redetermining contemporary painting, along with artists such as Laura Owens, Charlene von Heyl, Jacqueline Humphries, and Nicole Eisenman. Informed by her feminist, punk, DIY, and poststructuralist sensibilities, and a deep knowledge of art history, she portrays with humor, human frailties and emotional states, whilst exploring the liminal possibilities between formal abstraction and figuration.

When she was young, she had wanted to learn a foreign language that was not alphabet based. "I liked the challenge of one that was ideogrammatic." In New York as a student, she had planned to learn Japanese, with perhaps the idea of becoming an interpreter at the UN. It was only when she dropped by chance into a School of Visual Arts painting class, that she realized that it would become instead her primary life's work. At that time painting was out of favour, and she explains, "Going to art school in New York in the 1970s I absorbed the people, lessons and scenes that had ingested the grandeur of the New York School, but had then detoured from it. I understood that intimately from being

there, but that's not what you [officially] learnt." She says, "Painting is a roll of the dice. It's up to you to figure out the rhetoric, the grammar, the context, the syntax. It's like inventing a language all by yourself."

Sillman is a fantastic writer, it is also a part of her art. She is able to describe from the rich, physically tactile perspective of an artist what it *feels* like to make a work on a technical and emotional level, in an extraordinarily visceral way. Her essays on color and paint, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and even the pompous Delacroix are revelatory and sensory experiences of the mind. She writes regularly for *Artforum*, *Frieze*, artist's catalogues, and has a seasonal column for the *Washington Post*. She has always retained an interest in words and language, "Even though I make this very messy work, I believe I think like a conceptual artist because I am very linguistically attuned."

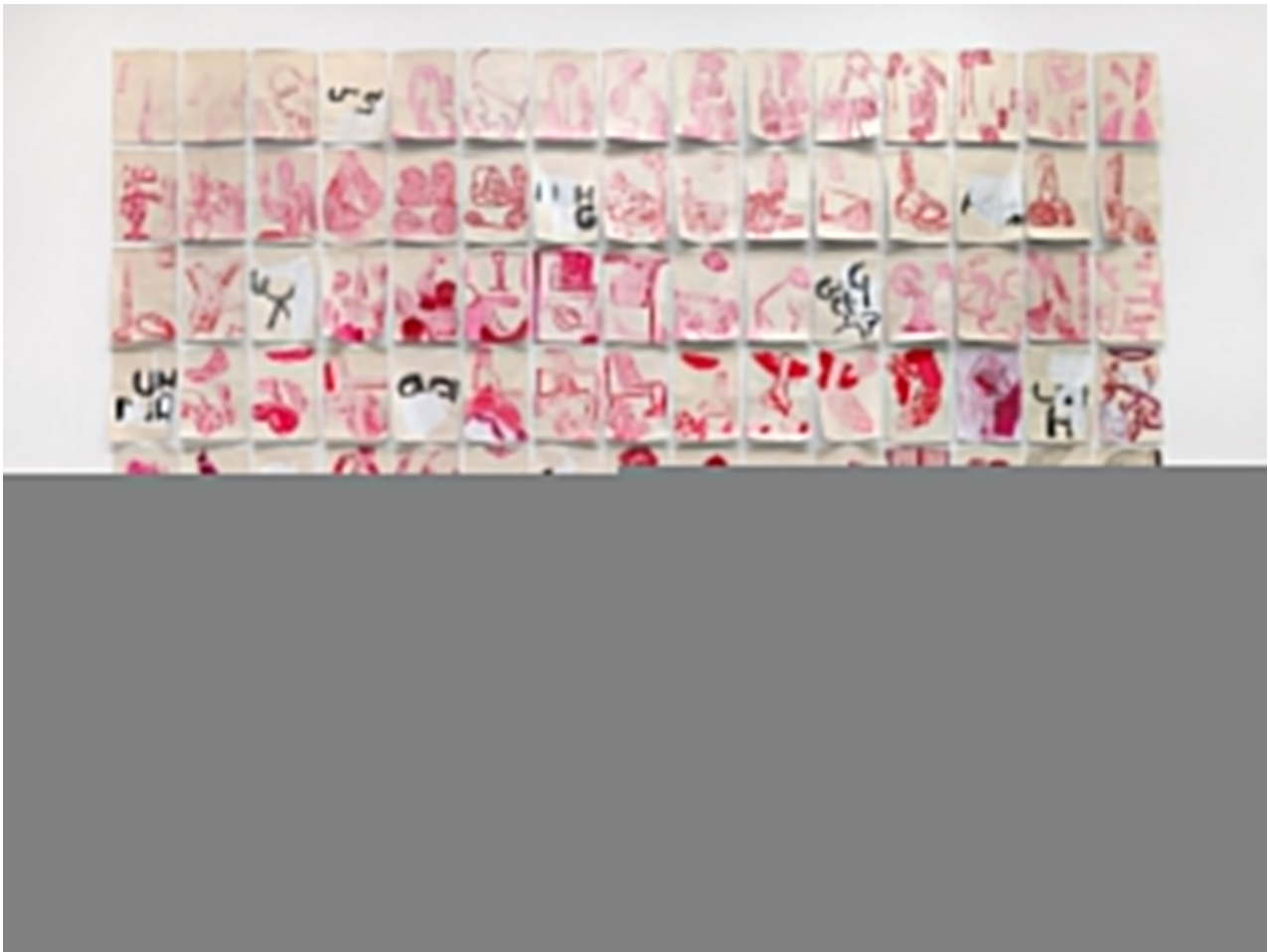


Installation view Courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

Sillman describes her paintings as 'handmade poems' and like poems, they contain allusive fragments packed with potential associative meanings.

In the main hall of the museum's exhibition, she seems to push this to the limit, where on a vast wall, two hundred paintings on paper *Ugh for 2023 (Words) 2023-24* and *Ugh for 2023 (Torsos) 2023-24* are presented pinned as on a grid, shifting from pinks to darker, intense colors.

Each paper shows urgent brush strokes of shapes and utterances, as if gestural notation marks of changing moods and thoughts triggered by mental and bodily states. Grouped together, they appear diaristic, an overview of guttural internal experiences at the threshold of language, the subconscious, and our animal bodies.



Ugh for 2023 (Words) 2023-24, Ugh for 2023 (Bodies) 2023-24, Courtesy of the artist and Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter



Little Elephant, 2023, Courtesy of the artist. Acquisition of the Kunstmuseum Bern and Verein der Freunde

Sillman also reshuffles at the edges of awareness, shapes, forms and spatial planes — with history and humor. She winks at the famous fleshy *Large Reclining Nude*, 1935 by Matisse, all male objectification and tropes, with her cheeky painting *Little Elephant*, 2023, and its variation *Afternoon*, 2024, its shifting figurative/animal trompe d'oeil refracting in glorious scarlet.



Installation view *Temporary Object*, 2023 Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photography Annik Wetter

In *Temporary Object*, 2023, diagonally installed to dramatically interject between rooms, Sillman lays bare the high stakes, emotional rollercoaster process behind each painting. Here, a series of printed aluminium panels records each stage of one painted canvas, revealing Sillman's building up, changes, and drastic erasure of forms, patterns and ideas. With progress captured digitally as she worked, it enabled a winding backwards and forwards as she reviewed and chased flickering possibilities. She explains, "I don't feel like I have an image-based practice. The drama of production is what I am interested in, not the final result. In fact, the final result can be sort of ugly." For Sillman, each painting requires a wrangling with the unknown, her critical thinking and intuition in a constant improvisatory dance. "Dread, the excitement of anticipation, or the grief of having ruined it. It's awful and I hate it."



Detail of Temporary Object, 2023 Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery New York, and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photography Annik Wetter

Sillman's interest in words and experimental film comes from her rich cultural experiences in 1970s downtown New York onwards, and it shows up when she collaborates with favourite composers and poets to create digital stop-motion films. In *Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video*, 2012, Sillman reads Lisa Robertson's poignant yet blistering feminist poem from her book, *Magenta Soul Whip* with spoken word and Sillman's high key colour digital paintings evolving side by side in rhythmical loops.

'A young women looks openly out of the picture.'

'*A young women looks openly out of the picture.*'

'Her experience of scale is always paradoxical'

'*As for the unconscious, she is breathing in its Latin.*'

'Philosophy comes comes from her having difficulty.'

'*Her experience of scale is always paradoxical.*'

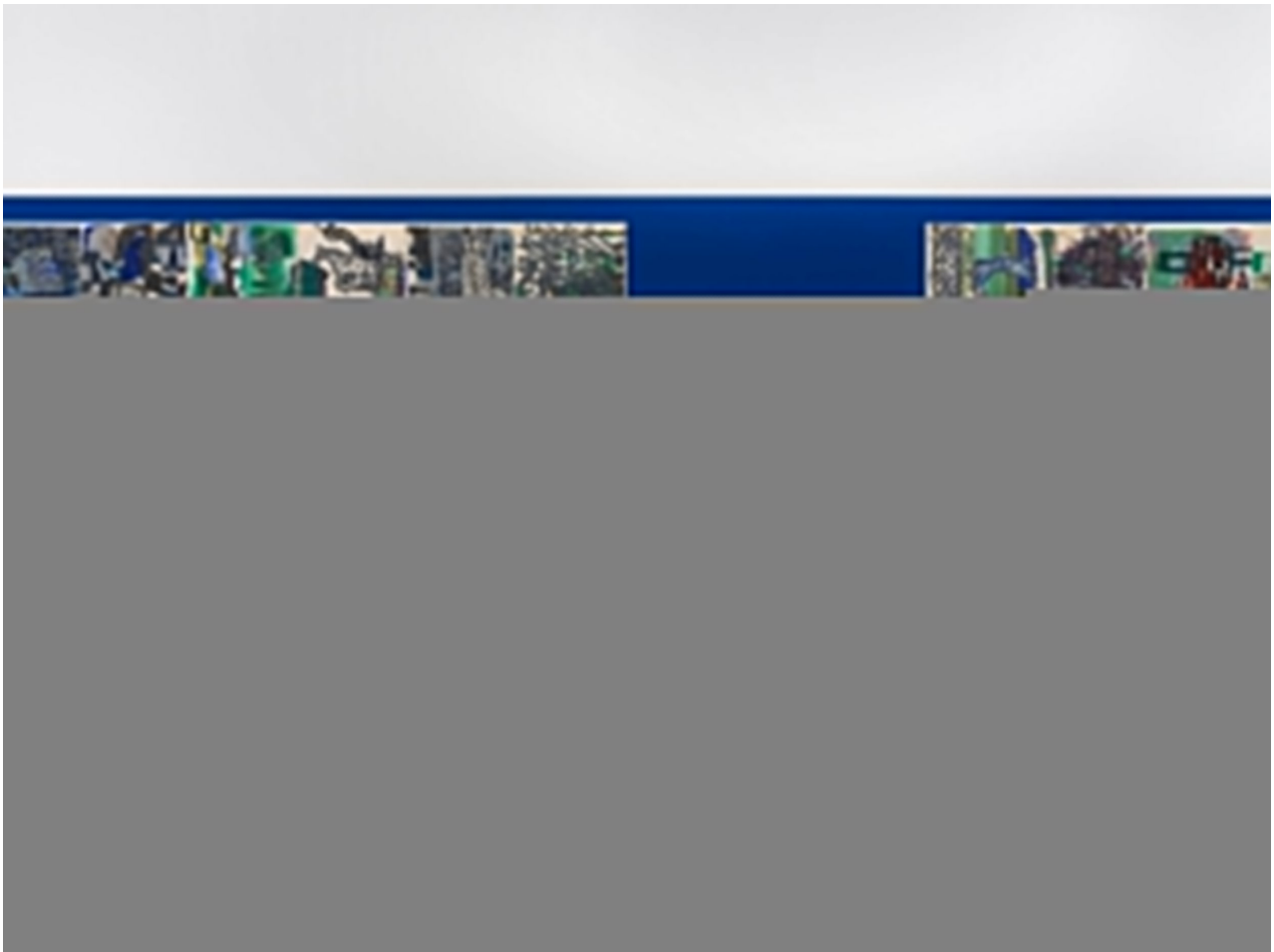
'When girls were flowers this wasn't true.'

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Draft of a Voice-Over for Split-Screen Video, 2012, Video, color, sound, 6.07 min, Loop, Poem by Lisa Roberston, read by Amy Sillman, Courtesy of the artist.



Untitled (Frieze for Venice), 2021 Courtesy of the artist and Kunstmuseum Bern.
Photography Annik Wetter

Visual repetition and looping also appear in her *Untitled (Frieze for Venice)* 2021, an installation shown at the *Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Screenprints, drawings, and paintings in lavender, grey, apricot, and bursts of green, portray furious riders with lances on spotted horseback, flowers, a mouth, half-glimpsed kneeling figures, in a panorama of large hung works with smaller variations repeated above, as if an analog film or cartoon strip. Here it feels like a collision of history and art, textured, messy, violent, and beautiful. There are hints of Guston, Ida Applebroog (who taught her), even some Rauschenberg (screenprints) coming through.



Installation view *Untitled (Frieze for Venice)*, 2021 Courtesy of the artist and Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

Installation view courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

Song Cave, 2017, Private collection. Courtesy of Tajan SA and the artist.

Sillman is not afraid, and in fact has made it an important aspect of her work, to show and share the abject, difficult and contingent. She can be bold and graphic, but paint marks may also be loose, unfinished, hesitant, in acknowledgment of unresolved realities and feelings.

Two large paintings, *Song Cave* 2017 and *In Illinois*, 2017-18 are particularly painful to stand in front of. They recall Edvard Munch's expressionistic *The Scream*, 1893, but more intense. Sillman portrays anguish with bright, beautiful color fields, whether electric yellow and blood red (*Song Cave*) or softened strata of fuchsia, blues and pink (*In Illinois*), the jarring contrast between form and emotion arousing a prickling alarm.

In Illinois, 2017-18 Courtesy of the artist and the De Ying Foundation

Clubfoot, 2011 Courtesy of the artist, the Tate Modern, London and the North American Acquisitions Committee 2013

But Sillman also has a tender and nuanced painting side, seen in her work *Clubfoot*, 2011. Whilst reading the Roman poet Ovid, she was inspired by the discovery of the 'choliambic' meter, a 'lame iambic' that created an awkward beat at the end of a poem's line, so it was on the 'wrong' foot. Read aloud it created a blundering quality and was used to satirical effect by poets. In her painting, a purple drawn bent leg, has a foot with bulbous cartoon-like heel (a glimpse of Guston) facing the wrong way, by a delicately rendered space glowing with pale yellows, bluish whites, lilacs and hints of green. An open mouth and outlined arm float. Within this luminescent field of subtle fades, she adds light grey lines to add an illusion of depth and perspective. This is so difficult to pull off. Many of her paintings possess complex compositions, color, and humor, yet this one stands apart with all that, in its lightness.

Installation view courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

For the top floor of the exhibition, Sillman curated a selection of artists' works from the Kunstmuseum's vast archive collection. She arranged historical and contemporary pieces based on color, shape, and compositional relations instead of chronology or subject matter. The choreography of works merged with Sillman's swathes of improvisatory color and patterns painted on the walls, to form a *Gesamtwerk*, blurring and dismantling the boundaries and preconceived notions around how we see and physically experience art.

Installation view courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

Using paint from previous museum installations, Sillman says, "I drew on a wall with a yellow sponge, got excited, and kind of lost my mind."

Within her unorthodox and intuitive approach, wonderful, meaningful connections occur. Amy's side-eyed green *Fatso*, 2009 painting alongside Fernand Leger's *Mechanic-Fragment* 1943/1944. A figurative plaster *Avalanche*, 1890 by Auguste de Niederhäusern next to a Sigmar Polke photo. Meret Oppenheim's sculpture *Regenbogen* 1974 hangs next to Maria Lassnig's painting *Untitled Hände*, 1996, or a fabulous Lee Krasner painting alongside Swiss colorist, Cuno Amiet. Leidy Churchman's video, *Painting Treatments no.2*, 2010, includes Sillman (his former teacher) and others being subjected as canvases to a spa experience involving dirt, smeary paint, flour and tree branches. The whole show is a kaleidoscopic, joyful feast of texture, concept, and contrast.

Installation view courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wette

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Sillman has curated an important remix of the past before, with her exhibition, *The Shape of Shape*, 2019 at MoMA, New York. An 'Artist's Choice' installation, it spanned different time periods and brought to light, unseen works and juxtapositions. Just like this one, it was a dense, intense, deeply satisfying show, where Sillman used her practical art knowledge and sharp-eyed skill to critically re-assess and rupture aesthetic, material and historical relations. In recent years, there have been important group exhibitions curated by artists and writers (especially in New York) Hilton Als at David Zwirner with *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*, also in 2019, Rashid Johnson's Hauser and Wirth, *Et in Arcadia ego* highlighting Leon Golub, and Peter Doig's *The Street* at Gagosian gallery, both in late 2024. It is noted most were in commercial galleries, and by men.

Overlooking the Aare River, the Kunstmuseum is set amidst the UNESCO medieval city of Bern, capital of Switzerland. From here, one can see the snow-covered Bernese mountains in the distance. The museum's director, Nina Zimmer, and chief curator Kathleen Bühler manage a collection spanning the Middle Ages to the present day, both committed to creating fresh perspectives between the past and the present. Their solo shows have featured artists such as Meret Oppenheim (in-depth), Miriam Cahn, as well as Amy Sillman. Upcoming exhibitions will include Marisa Merz and Carol Rama.

Amy Sillman: *Oh, Clock!* was a collaboration between Kathleen Bühler, the artist, and director Eva Birkenstock of the Ludwig Forum Aachen, Germany, to where it will travel and open March 21, 2025.

Installation view courtesy of the artist and the Kunstmuseum Bern. Photography Annik Wetter

Solo show, "Amy Sillman. Oh, Clock!" Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland, September 20, 2024 - February 2, 2025

Collection show Kunstmuseum Bern (top floor) Kunstmuseum Bern, continues on view till November 2, 2025

Solo show, "Amy Sillman. Oh, Clock!" and a new installation working with the Ludwig Forum Collection, opening Ludwig Forum Aachen, Aachen, Germany, March 21, 2025 – August 31, 2025

Editor Sascha Behrendt is a writer with an in-depth knowledge of arts and culture in the US and UK. Interviews and profiles include artists Stan Douglas, Arthur Jafa, Sakiko Nomura, Walter Van Beirendonck, Francesca Woodman and Wolfgang Tillmans. She writes for the Sasson Soffer Foundation in New York, and is currently working on a comedy thriller novel.

