

Amy Sillman: Oh, Clock!

BR brooklynrail.org/2025/03/artseen/amy-sillman-oh-clock

By Astrid Dick de Mareschal

March 13, 2025



Installation view: Amy Sillman: *Collection Intervention*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland, 2025. © Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Rolf Siegenthaler.

Oh, Clock!

Kunstmuseum

Sep. 20, 2024–Feb. 2, 2025

Bern, Switzerland

The night after seeing Amy Sillman's exhibition *Oh, Clock!*, I woke up from a dream in which her paintings were talking to me, emitting utterances as in a syncopated chorus. They were announcing that they are about to change.

Sprawled across two floors, Sillman's retrospective overviews the last fifteen years of her painting practice and connects it with a selection from the museum's collection. Often playing an important role in the installation of her shows, Sillman painted the walls of the

museum in swaths of reds, yellows, blues and greens combined with various shapes, and installed a long and thin wooden diagonal structure to cut through the main space and display prints.

Sillman is well-known for sturdy and sensual compositions with color and line where unnamable shapes and body parts or figures coexist, and where every element is often organically and heavily worked to revert any figure/ground expectations. What struck me in my dream is that despite the paintings being solidly 'built', they converge to a kind of uncertainty. Take the large-scale painting *The Banana Tree* (2023), a heavily drawn painting with scoop-like gestures repeated like a pattern over most of the surface, with bright yellows (bananas?) coming through as if behind a stained glass or the interlacing on a mosque window, with edges of chalky white and light blues. Does it not feel like the light is about to shift to a different set of 'cells' on this multicolor window labyrinth?



Installation view: Amy Sillman: *Collection Intervention*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland, 2025. © Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Rolf Siegenthaler.

Or consider the medium-sized painting *Oh Clock* (2023), where a central triangular shape in transparent browns, greens and white is encased by ruler-like, vertical, bright red lines in oil stick as well as opaque edges of orange, green and grey. Does it not seem that the triangular shape is about to roll to the right and along with it all those red lines in a

flickering manner or like a succession of hurdles in a horse race? These paintings seem to be about painting as potential, the fusion of the “already” and the “not yet.” The best of Sillman’s paintings seem to be about to move.

Sillman’s embodied process-based approach creates a wondrous trip for the eye. There is a kind of syncopation of surprising off-beats present in her paintings and her drawings. This is evident in her installation of 120 large drawings (*UGH*, 2023-24) of mostly pinks and reds along with gibberish words and onomatopoeias in black and white which intermittently interrupt a flow of painterly marks. The drawings suggest a sequence from minimal marks to layered composition, but the eye quickly travels in multiple directions. Another room is filled with small drawings on a ticker-tape like band of painted blue above a series of larger drawings.



Installation view: Amy Sillman: *Collection Intervention*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland, 2025. © Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Rolf Siegenthaler.

The long oblique table displaying serial drawings UV-printed on small aluminum supports gives the viewer a precious peep into the artist’s inquisitive mind. Her six animated films based on her drawings offer immense visual play and sometimes linguistic thoughts. Her zines add another dimension to her work.

There are several paintings in this exhibition I had seen in her show at Gladstone last year. I remembered them well—I studied *Afternoon* (2024) in detail, coming back to see it multiple times. It made me think of a monumental body, in kinship with Christina Ramberg’s fueled-up ready-to-kill machines, but also with the voluptuousness of an ancient Venus and with a vibrant light palette of transparent orange, red, blue on a white background. Her opaque to glazed obfuscations in the form of geometric, organic shapes and curtain slits of disclosure and non-disclosure labored through layers of time, excite the eye and feel integrated, never a strategy or an afterthought. There is no distance here. The analytical eye is, one, with the guts.



Installation view: Amy Sillman: *Collection Intervention*, Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland, 2025. © Kunstmuseum Bern. Photo: Rolf Siegenthaler.

As I approached *Afternoon*, I felt that I was meeting someone I knew well but who had gone through a significant transformation. I was suddenly reminded of a passage from *Seeking Air* by Barbara Guest “you were still only rectangular to me and I wished to seize the opportunities of our supper party. Now you are more like a pebble. Your sides do not match; you are neither round nor square, yet you are beginning to have a promising shape.”

The second floor is a joy ride of eclectic works from the early 20th century to the present, mostly paintings and drawings, but also photos, installation, sculpture, and video, spread over two long rooms and connecting hallways. There are works by E.L.Kirchner, Irene

Schubiger, Louise Bourgeois, Sigmar Polke, Meret Oppenheim, Suzan Frecon, Michaela Eichwald, Jutta Koether, Lady Churchman, and Thomas Hirschhorn. Sillman selection is anchored by her iconic painting *Fatso* (2011), a massive, humor-filled, self-deprecating green figure—presumably a self-portrait—which she placed in the middle of the largest hall on the floor and on top of a fresco-like wall painting of dark green and circular shapes of bright primaries.

Importantly, across from *Fatso*, she has placed a large painting by Maria Lassnig of three hands painting the outline of a torso-like shape; and nearby an installation by Franz West consisting of an ample couch covered in a gorgeous burgundy carpet and a little TV across playing “Directions for Use”—where an actor tries to figure out how to use a piece of plaster which might as well be a body part out of one of Sillman’s paintings. In her book *Faux Pas* (2020), Sillman tells the story of regret stemming from one night in Vienna when she refrained from introducing herself to Maria Lassnig and Franz West—even though she was sitting right across from West and right next to Lassnig on a couch, all three alone and in silence. Lassnig and West both died soon after that evening. In *Oh, Clock!* Maria and Franz are once again in the room with her, hanging together, couch included, very close by.

Astrid Dick de Mareschal is an artist.