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Helen Frankenthaler and Amy Sillman:

The Anatomy of a Search for Diversity in a Major Art Museum

With the reopening of the National Gallery of Art's East Building in 2016 after three years of interior renovations, the Gallery's display of its permanent collection of modern and contemporary art has never looked better nor been more accessible to the public.¹ As with many major arts institutions today, the majority of the East Building's permanent collection now on display is by predominately white, male artists. I suppose that this could be the result of an attempt to display artwork from an accurate historical perspective, and with the opening of the East Building's newly renovated spaces, there does seem to be a recent push towards programming and temporary exhibit instillation that is an attempt to rectify this imbalance.² But it does still seem that many major museums' permanent collections on display continue to represent this uneven demographic, even if their collections in storage are far more diverse.

It was with this thought in mind that I went to the National Gallery last week in order to see if there was a painting from a contemporary female abstract painter hanging on their walls

¹ The East Building of Washington, DC's National Gallery of Art was closed for three years in order to construct 12,260 square feet of art exhibition space within the existing footprint of the I.M. Pei-designed building, which was originally opened in 1978. The East Building is mainly dedicated to the museum's modern and contemporary art exhibitions and programming, and when they reopened in September 2016 the renovations included the addition of a roof top sculpture terrace and two new tower galleries. The updated gallery space is devoted to displaying important pieces from the museum's permanent collection. "Press Release March 13, 2013" *National Gallery of Art*, 22 Sept 2018, www.nga.gov/press/2013/eastbuilding.html.

² For example, the National Gallery just opened a large exhibition by the English sculptor Rachel Whiteread that will be on display on its Concourse Level through January 2019; and Glenn Ligon, a contemporary African American painter, has his painting *Untitled (I Am Man)* hanging in the permanent collection there, along with a few notable women artists such as Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and Georgia O'Keefe.

that I could study in order to write this comparative analysis. I was looking specifically for an Amy Sillman painting that I could compare to the Helen Frankenthaler abstract that I already knew was hanging in the collection, and I will admit that I did not have high hopes for finding one of Sillman's works there. As a matter of fact, I had plans to go by the Hirshhorn Museum—which put on a solo exhibit of Sillman's work in 2008—immediately after seeing the Frankenthaler at the National Gallery, hoping to find a Sillman hanging there. And if all else failed, I thought I could go downtown to the National Museum of Women in the Arts to see if they had one in their collection.

After exploring the Upper Level of the East Building, which houses the modern art collection from 1910 through 1980 and stopping to study and take notes on the seminal Helen Frankenthaler painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952). I finished up my tour of the galleries on that floor hoping to spy a Sillman painting. When I rounded the corner going out of the last gallery, lo and behold, there it was. Tucked away in a corner of the hallway outside of the main galleries, over by the elevators was *Blue Diagram* (2009) a large canvas by Amy Sillman. Could this be a sign that the institutional culture really is shifting when it comes to artistic diversity in museums? I think that the Amy Sillman painting hanging in the National Gallery of Art definitely represents progress! Although, it is clear from the location they chose to display her work, this museum hasn't quite figured out how to incorporate these changes seamlessly.

Blue Diagram (figure 1) is a large unframed abstract, with a color palette of lemon yellow, navy and cerulean blue, on a muted green gray background with touches of pink, purple, and mint green showing through the layers of the work. Splatters of bright green paint off of the top left side give a suggestion of movement. The imagery that makes up the composition is not pure abstraction, there also seems to be a partial figure on the right edge of the canvas and what

looks like disembodied aspects of another figure (could it possibly be something phallic even?) in the lower left corner. The lines and figure shapes suggest movement, depending on how you view it, either across or possibly off of the canvas going in opposite directions. The riot of calligraphic blue lines in the middle of the painting suggest tension or maybe friction between the two elements on either side of it. There's a story going on here, and it makes you want to take a longer look in order to figure out what that story is all about.

Indeed, Amy Sillman is an artist who is known for the symbolic use of imagery in her work, and lucky for us, she is kind enough to sometimes provide the viewer with a handy guide in the form of a “zine” or a diagram that “with dark humor, point to the artist’s avid interest in philosophy, feminism, and mythology” among other things (Sillman 15). Curious to figure out what some of the imagery in *Blue Diagram* meant, I studied one of Sillman’s diagrams, *Key to Test Strips*,³ that was reproduced in a book I have about the artist. It turns out I was right about some of the figurative imagery in *Blue Diagram*, as the artist references similar “Phantom Limbs” and “Severed Legs” in her diagram (Sillman 7–13). But while it is possible for the viewer of Sillman’s artwork to read this form of mark making as an attempt by the artist to deal with dark impulses or emotional baggage of some sort, I’m not convinced that this is what Sillman mines for her inspiration. In an interview with Fabian Schöneich, Sillman explains her process this way:

[D]iagrams have a seductive and flexible form; they are “polymorphous” in representing multiple vectors, such as time and space, or in my case humor *and*

³ *Key to Test Strips* was a charcoal wall drawing that was originally made for the exhibition *A Movable Feast—Part XIV* at Campoli Presti, Paris in November 2014, and was reproduced in the book entitled *Amy Sillman the ALL-OVER*. The book was produced in conjunction with an exhibit by the same name that took place at Portikus, Frankfurt in 2016. It contains a preface and an interview with Amy Sillman by Fabian Schöneich; an essay by Sillman herself and essays about the artist by Manuela Ammer and Yve-Alain Bois; along with images of some of her paintings, animations, diagrams, and zines produced from 2014–2016.

something else. What I really love about diagrams, though, is how they try and fail. They're optimistic but ultimately hopeless attempts at representation. A diagram can never *really* explain anything about emotions, art process, or thinking—nothing about one's inner life can really be boiled down to this visual theorem—even though we always want to *try*. This tragicomic situation is totally my sense of humor. To thwart things. (Sillman 46)

Still, we know that humor can be a way to explore and to perhaps mask deeper truths, so it can leave the viewer to wonder what that “something else” is in Sillman’s gestural strokes and the graphic elements embedded in her work. If her marks aren’t the stuff of personal narrative, could they instead represent the repressions and anxieties of our current culture? It is hard to know for sure, but I speculate that this is what makes her work so compelling. As for her diagrams, I appreciate how they are an example of the artist’s astute ability to observe human nature and to see the humor in much of it.

In contrast to the Amy Sillman painting, Helen Frankenthaler’s *Mountains and Sea* (1952) is prominently on display in the gallery devoted to the artworks from the 20th Century Abstract Expressionist movement. One of the few women artists who are on display in many major museum collections today, Helen Frankenthaler is an example of a powerhouse artist in her own right who, while influenced by other artists of her day such a Jackson Pollock, was still able to put her own unique spin on the expressionistic techniques that helped launch the American Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1950s (Cooper 27). *Mountains and Sea* is the painting that put her career in motion and is a pristine specimen of her signature “soak stain” technique (Cooper 27). Harry Cooper, a curator and head of modern art at the National Gallery, wrote “of all the post-Pollock painters, Frankenthaler was the first and arguably the only one to

demonstrate that Pollock's work could be extended or completed on the most material level—in other words, that Pollock's basic technique could be used to make something other than a Pollock." (Copper 27)⁴

Mountains and Sea (figure 2) is a large painting framed in simple wood, and in a way some of its color palette is similar to Sillman's painting. However, Frankenthaler's palette is considerably more muted due to the solvents that she used to thin her paint in order to pour it directly onto the canvas which then soaked the paint into the fiber more easily (Cooper 27). The paint was thinned with solvent to the point that, to me, the colors appeared pastel-like and more similar to watercolor paint in coverage than oils. The colors range from an orangish red with a few spots of dark almost crimson red on the top left and lower right corners, to a light hunter green, sky blue, and a more saturated brighter cerulean blue. There are a few places in the center of the canvas where a yellow ochre paint was used and a few places where a darker greenish gray color emerges. Some of the abstracted shapes are outlined in charcoal and one area in the upper right corner forms an organic triangle shape in a very pale blue that looks like the paint resists the canvas, as if there was wax on it. All of the paint is transparent with little evidence of layering or texture. In the areas where there was no paint dripped or poured onto it, the canvas either had a very light wash of color applied, or the existing paint spread and was absorbed throughout the unprimed canvas.

Unlike the Sillman painting, there is no obvious figurative or subjective imagery in Frankenthaler's work. It is abstraction at its purest with much of the movement and color radiating outward from the center of the painting. The shapes are amorphous and organic, and

⁴ See the exhibition catalog *Make It New: Abstract Painting from the National Gallery of Art 1950-1975. Make It New* was an exhibition at the Clark Center in Williamstown, Massachusetts in 2014 of works on loan from the National Gallery of Art during its renovation of the East Building.

where Sillman employs humor in her work by inserting the figurative elements, I get the sense that Frankenthaler was all serious. The reason may be obvious: Wasn't she competing in an art world where the "macho Abstract Expressionist ethos" ruled? (Cooper 27) Still, the delicately thin paint application and muted color palette read as feminine to me. This is something that I consider to be a positive attribute upon viewing it in 2018, but I am aware that this was definitely not always an element in art that was desirable when *Mountains and Sea* was made in 1952. Harold Cooper, in *Make It New*, gives us a good idea of what the attitude was back then when he quotes the critic Harold Rosenberg:

"The artist is the medium of her medium; her part is limited to selecting aesthetically acceptable effects from the partly accidental behavior of her color...she is content to let the pigment do most of the acting." Here, Rosenberg is lamenting (without quite saying so, but note his insistence on female pronouns) the absence of virile action and substance... (Cooper 28)

There were critics though that didn't see her gender as a negative and instead saw virtue in the more feminine aspects of her work and "these included Fairfield Porter, who saw in it 'a thinness of substance and a freshness of the open air' and James Schuyler, who observed that the colors were 'pale (not weak)''" (Cooper 28). Clearly Helen Frankenthaler was one of the few women artists of her generation to gain the critical attention that she deserved, and the fact that *Mountains and Sea* is hanging in the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Art (just one of many major arts institutions in which her work hangs) is a testament to that.

There is one more aspect that the Amy Sillman and Helen Frankenthaler paintings have in common, and that is that even though fifty-seven years elapsed between the making of the two works, there has not been much significant change in many major arts institutions when it comes

to the work that is represented on their gallery walls. Let's hope that some of the positive steps to rectify this inequity that I have started to notice over the past few years will continue to gain momentum, and that all artists who deserve recognition will get their chance to be viewed by the public.

Works Cited

Cooper, Harry. *Make It New: Abstract Painting from the National Gallery of Art 1950-1975*, contributions by David Breslin and Matt Jolly, Yale University Press, 2014.

"Press Release March 13, 2013" *National Gallery of Art*, 22 Sept 2018,
www.nga.gov/press/2013/eastbuilding.html.

Sillman, Amy. *the ALL-OVER*, contributions by Manuela Ammer, Yve-Alain Boise, and Fabian Schöneich, Portikus, Frankfurt, 2016.



Figure 1. Amy Sillman, *Blue Diagram* (2009). Oil on canvas, 90 ¾" x 84 ¾"

Promised gift to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

From Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz

Photo: Anne Barnes 2018



Figure 2. Helen Frankenthaler, *Mountains and Sea* (1952).

Oil and charcoal on canvas, 86 3/8" x 117 1/4"

On extended loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

From the collection of the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, Inc.

Photo: Anne Barnes 2018