

Overview



Re-E, 2007. Color soft ground etching with sugar lift and soap ground aquatints. Paper size: 35 x 28"; image size: 26 x 20". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

AMY SILLMAN

From May 21 to June 2, 2007, New York painter Amy Sillman worked for two weeks making etchings in the Crown Point Studio in San Francisco. By telephone on August 20, Crown Point's director, Valerie Wade, interviewed her.

Valerie Wade: Before your trip to San Francisco, I visited your studio in New York and you showed me a series of black and white drawings. As I understand it, the drawings were done this way: you asked friends of yours, couples, if you could draw them from life at home together. Then you went back to your studio and made the drawings again from memory. After that, you've said, there was a third step, taken when you brought the drawings to San Francisco to make etchings based on them.

Amy Sillman: When we met, we talked about how I am trying to develop the part of my work that exists in between figuration and abstraction, to expand that vocabulary. You were really encouraging, offering Crown Point as a laboratory space where I could take something that I had only started to crack open and crack it open further by translating it into this medium that I'm not used to working in. Which was a good idea, I think, for two reasons. One is because etching, in and of itself, especially the way that you guys work at Crown Point Press, is so spare, you know? I was shocked when I found out there were so few plates in a color etching. Six, maybe. And that meant that I would have to parse out a lot of steps that I would ordinarily either leave in or cover up. So, very specifi-



O&N, 2007. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching. Paper size: 35 x 28"; image size: 26 x 20". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

cally, etching was a way to analyze what goes on within the developmental process.

The other reason is that just doing anything unfamiliar is a way of refreshing your gaskets. It's like doing a three-legged race or something. I'd never spent much time in San Francisco. I'd been there, but I had never really gone out there and worked on anything. And I hadn't worked much with other people. And I hadn't worked in etching, I hadn't worked at Crown Point, and I hadn't done much work on paper that relates to what I was fleshing out... But in all my work, I kind of take it for granted that I'm working between two languages, a recognizable language and an unrecognizable language.

VW: Did it take courage to set yourself up in a situation where everything was unknown?

AS: Well, I don't think it was courage—it was just taking a dare. Going to see what would happen. And you were very clear: if it turns out a disaster, we won't run it.

VW: Of course, we wouldn't, but it wasn't a disaster. It's great! It is true that the etching process has its own nature, not exactly like painting.

AS: It's not like painting at all! I never did anything more foreign in my life. There was a floundering quality to the first week that was scary. I still don't know what I'm doing, but by the middle of the second week I started to get the hang of it a little bit, and I thought, oh, I can see one step ahead in this chess game. Maybe not anything more than that, but even seeing one step ahead means that you can start to understand what on earth is going on. But I want to come back and do it again.

VW: You learn a different way of mark making.

AS: All I really did was start to understand two different kinds of etching processes. One was—what's it called when you paint the acid on the plate?

VW: Spit bite.

AS: One was spit bite, and the other was soft ground. I never even drew hard ground lines at all, the lines that are supposed to be normal etching lines. I was so interested in what could happen with spit bite first. I became really fascinated with what could happen by accident. That was really exhilarating. And then the next thing I got interested in was what happens when you apply what looks like a pencil line on top of something that looks out of control. This kind of line was like a dull pencil, not a very fine tool. I never got involved in anything fine. I was dealing with the grosser tools.

VW: Even so, there is a lot of variety. Just look at the weight of the different lines combined with the areas of washes, some very opaque and some very delicate.

AS: I would have to do it about six more times before I felt like I knew anything. I didn't really figure anything out, but what I did was open up ways of working that I can take back to painting, I hope, and use backwards. Not that I would know how to do it in etching, but I can see that something good comes out of the brute ignorance of a person who should know what she's doing but doesn't. I've been painting this summer, and the paintings are related to the etchings. I wouldn't say that they are like the etchings, but the experience is in my hands. Any way you can get at that kind of strangeness is so exhilarating.

VW: Well, it's part of the modernist tradition in a way, tapping into the unconscious.

AS: I do not think of it as modernist, per se, although I suppose that's a line of logic that I can see. It could just as easily be post-modern or it could be something else. But it is getting towards the experience that I'm trying to get to, something that feels outside the boundaries of explanation, so I have to work with some kind of estrangement. If you start to know what you're doing too well, you just become a craftsperson. That's not interesting.

VW: Back to the drawings of the couples and how they found their way into your compositions. You titled the prints after the couples.

AS: I changed the names to just initials.

VW: Right. You brought the drawings out to San Francisco and drew them again on the plates, changing them into the third stage. Was this a method to distance yourself from an emotional response?

AS: I don't know if it was about distance. I think it was more just about pushing something away from what it was originally and into a place where it's not quite knowable. And then also seeing how mistakes start to make their own forms.

VW: In the print that's titled *S&E*, there is a recognizable leg shape that juts up the center of the image, but in general the figurative elements ended up pretty abstract.

AS: It is very satisfying to have a group of works where, inexplicably, one is and another is not abstract, you know? So I felt okay with *S&E*, where the legs and the head stayed, and also with *N&V* where you can't see anything figurative.



Se-E, 2007. Color sugar lift and spit bite aquatints with soft ground etching. Paper size: 35 x 28"; image size: 26 x 20". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

VW: Is doubt something that is consistent in your practice?

AS: Yes, definitely. Another way to say it is that it's process-based work. That sounds kind of dull and '70ish, but it means it's partly about having an immediate formal and psychological relationship with the materials, where changes are the methodology, a kind of a rolling, critical format, where things are constantly being wiped out. This is not special to me. Many people work this way. It's how some experimental film is shot, the kind that you don't necessarily storyboard. You go out and just shoot and then you make sense of the footage in the editing room.

VW: In the art press, there has been a lot of discussion about the way you use color. How does color function for you?

AS: Color is something I find really difficult to talk about. There's just something about color that's deeply intuitive. Helen Molesworth, in a catalog, wrote about my use of pastel colors. She said that these pastels can make you kind of queasy.

VW: That word *queasy* makes me think about a comment made by our mutual friend, the art historian, Robert Hobbs.

AS: That was great. He said when you first see the paintings you might get a flavor that isn't very nice. And then you start to develop a taste for that flavor. I loved it when he said that.

VW: He said it was like eating an oily butterscotch pudding they have in Iran, where he lived for a while.

AS: I'm reading this wonderful book by a woman named Sianne

Ngai, called *Ugly Feelings*. It's a study of the negative or minor affects in literary history. I'm really interested in ugliness, something that feels like it isn't guided by liking or pleasing.

VW: I'd like to read that book.

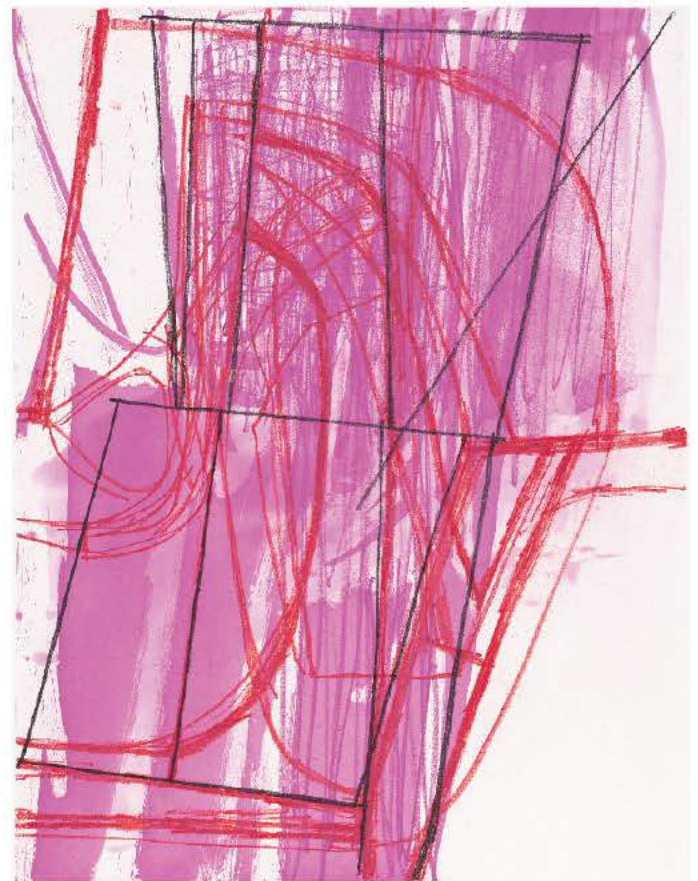
AS: It's fantastic. She writes about disgust and irritation and all those sorts of states. She's locating formal properties that are not necessarily in the nobler aspects of the form, but that get at you from a different angle. That's why I love that queasy flavor thing.

VW: Did you feel the paintings in your recent gallery show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (New York, April-May, 2006) were a breakthrough for you?

AS: I was trying to make work that was more abstract, and it seemed that some people could see it, that it was clear. They could see where I was trying to go, and that was very rewarding and satisfying. Some people couldn't see it, and I think their attitude was like, well, isn't this just kind of like *Ab Ex*? Aren't we going backwards? I could see what the objections were and what the problems were. But, I just kind of had to go there.

VW: It was a good year for you, the cover of *Artforum*, exhibiting and lecturing across the United States and Europe.

AS: Well, I didn't lecture. I don't like lecturing, and I usually say no. I don't like talking about myself in that way. I haven't done a slide talk in a really long time, although I am going to do one at the San Francisco Art Institute soon (Monday, November 5, 2007).



Ne-V, 2007. Color soft ground etching with soap ground and spit bite aquatints. Paper size: 35 x 28"; image size: 26 x 20". Edition 20. Printed by Catherine Brooks.

VW: I'm sure the students will appreciate it, especially the women students. Do you feel that things are opening up for women artists, both young and established?

AS: No, I think things are still problematic for women. I mean, they're problematic in every aspect of life. Oh, women get teaching jobs and lots of women are showing, but there is structural inequality that regularly holds women in place. And there's practically no discussion about gender politics anymore. I'm not so sanguine that I think things will just continue getting better and better.

VW: You received your MFA from Bard College in New York in 1995. And now you teach there part-time. What is it about teaching that you enjoy?

AS: I think teaching is a way you can be involved in a kind of real politics. Teaching is about giving something back, and providing a role model. What if everyone successful fled from teaching? Then students would never meet with people who are still struggling themselves with how their work is seen and interpreted and how to make work, how to go on making work, all the problems.

VW: It's modeling or mentoring.

AS: I think the idea of mentoring is always partly rooted in political action. Also, in teaching you can have amazing relationships with colleagues, which is an opportunity to learn about other areas. Much of what I've learned about poetry and film, for instance, I learned through exposure to my colleagues while teaching.

VW: You were born in Detroit, but you grew up in Chicago.

AS: Yes, I did. I went to the Chicago Art Institute to take Saturday art classes when I was a kid. I would go down on the train. I grew up in the suburbs. I was a messy, scrappy little kid.

VW: You talked about your childhood in a book you made collaboratively with Gregg Bordowitz titled *Between Artists*. Is collaborating something you enjoy?

AS: Definitely. I've done lots of collaborative stuff, collaborative paintings, and books. I collaborated with Jef Scharf who has a

silkscreen shop in New York called K-Rock Studios where he does great rock-and-roll silkscreens. We did some collaborative etchings together for the Lower Eastside Printshop. I didn't really know what we were doing because he had a lot more experience and I left a lot of the etching stuff to him.

VW: At Crown Point, we don't think of what we do as collaboration—it's a printer helping an artist, not two artists working together. Here, you were working with a team of trained printers who were there to give you technical support. What was it like for you to go from the privacy of your studio to working with other people around you?

AS: Well, in the past it's been hard for me to understand how to work in a room with other people. But at Crown Point Press it is so generous and the space is so beautiful and so open. The printers were incredibly sensitive, and you were too. I would come and go, straight to my worktable, probably scowling.

VW: No, we like to call it concentrating. After all, we have a common goal here, which is to create an environment where artists can do their best work. And that attitude, I think, helps our projects stay very alive and exciting. We are happy when an artist wants to come back again.

AS: Oh, I'm dying to come back. I feel like now I could hit the ground running. I definitely feel the only thing wrong with my project was that it was too short.

Amy Sillman: New Etchings

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