

**GETTING GOOD AT IT:
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN JOANNE GREENBAUM and AMY SILLMAN
November 2022**

Amy Sillman: What do you think most characterizes you as an artist?

Joanne Greenbaum: “Looks like she’s having a pretty good time.” (laughs)

AS: Lol. But seriously! I’ve known you for a long time, and your work has a very distinctive look... a free unexpurgated way of drawing, letting your marks hang out. Do you think that has something to do with the concept of *play*?

JG: I hate being called childlike. Sometimes writers have written about the “childishness” of my marks, but I always bristle at this because being free isn’t childlike. My work is not scribbling-- I draw both tightly and loosely. Some of my drawings are modeled and scaffolded or structured, others are very loose and watery... it depends on the actual drawing material. Ultimately, drawing is like imagining— a way to stay in the world and also avoid the world.

AS: Is your work a kind of avoidance?

JG: Well, as I get older and look back, I am aware of this feeling that the only place where I don’t feel a kind of shame is when I’m making art.

AS: Shame is an interesting emotion, in that it allows for both concealing and revealing at the same time. Or does shame free you to disappear?

JG: I just have no fear—like a child, I guess, except, when I was a child, I was very fearful. But I don’t have any fear in making art. I’m not precious about the blank paper. So what if I fuck it up? When I start something, it’s a clean slate. I start from nothing, raw, from a feeling that I’m going to start all over again RIGHT NOW. It’s always an adventure when starting.

AS: Yeah, you make SO much work. Look at all these piles of drawing!

JG: Yes, I like to draw especially in series, so I’ll decide on one medium and do that until I’m sick of it. The repetition is very meditative. Right now I’m doing these drawings with thick black ink on Japanese paper. When the ink dries, the paper crinkles and it’s almost like a sculpture. But it’s not about production; quite the opposite. It’s getting deep inside the work.

AS: You get deep inside *through* the body, its surfaces, its marks, stains, traces, urges. The drawing in it seems to come radiating out of the center, but it also seems like a kind of loose mesh or net for *covering* your body. So I’m aware of this glitch between your “*real*” self or feelings, and the *work* you build out of it. Is this glitch akin to a kind of dysmorphia?

JG: Actually, that’s the name of a show I did in Berlin in 2014 (*Dysmorphia*, Galerie Crone). The title comes from body dysmorphia, but it is really about dysmorphia in all aspects of life, how everything is distorted, and the feelings aren’t always real. It’s intensely personal work.

AS: Your paintings make their discomfort visible. How do you get around a feeling of embarrassment?

JG: I don’t get around it, I try to own it. Our paintings *are* about our bodies— however, a painting is also a record of the mind, too. It’s not all feeling. There is also an intellectual force, a conceptual angle, the painting is taking a position. And painting is about solving problems.

AS: This makes me think of a painter I've never thought of in relation to you before, Alice Neel. Neel's work is also dealing with the beauty and ugliness of the body, the inside and outside paradox of being embodied, being seen and looking at other bodies. And she's kind of shameless! But she really depicts the strangeness of body-life. You're also starting from a personal position of discomfort, but you're making something that allows for a physical way to be seen, to be in the world, to *make* a world.

JG: Alice Neel's are also actually totally abstract in a way. They're just a whole bunch of marks, and she doesn't fill in the background. Like in my work, you can see from the start to the finish. You can see the whole chronology in the painting. My process is very particular: I sit with things for a long time, then do another layer. It's additive.

AS: Where in the work do you say NO? Is there a place where you look at your own work and say it's no good?

JG: Yes, it happens. There's only been one painting that I didn't want to put in the group for the show in Los Angeles (March 2023). But most of the time I'll put something away and go back to it when it's unfamiliar. Then I can intellectually understand how to fix it. Or just throw it out. But I have to say, I maybe only throw out one or two a year, at the most.

AS: Do you have a shit pile?

JG: I have a shit pile that eventually goes to the dump in Cutchogue (Long Island). I have three piles, the shit pile, the need-to-be-reworked pile, and the stuff I like. I'll do something structural and then contradict it with marks on top. Or I'll make a really ugly pour with ugly colors and then I'll have something to balance against. I don't really scrape away. I just keep adding until the painting feels like it doesn't need anything more. But there has to be a lot of air in there, otherwise, it's claustrophobic.

AS: I remember when we were younger and there was one time when I hadn't seen your work in a long time, you'd been hiding out in your apartment working, not showing much. I saw this aggressive painting you made, I forget if it was in a show or just in your room. It was a garish orange and green, with these kind of insane marks, more like clawing than stroking, not at all nice. That was the moment when I understood your work instinctually and loved it. Something clicked for me in your drive to repel, not to try to impress me. I remember falling in love with your work right then. I hate paintings that try to overly impress me with their technical ability, they feel craven.

JG: Yeah, "technical ability" and obsession with perfection are the most over-rated qualities in art. Sometimes I purposely use colors or color combinations that are uncomfortable or ugly, and what I love is to then figure out how to make that work. Or I do the total opposite: make a color combination that is purposefully beautiful, then work to make the painting jarring or ruined in some way. I can't just make a beautiful, harmonious painting right away. There really have to be some problems in the process, and the painting has to earn its beauty.

AS: That's exactly where your skill comes in: skill is not just about reproduction. Your skill is partly about contradictions. So which ability would you most like to have as an artist?

JG: The ability to say no more often.

AS: Where are you happiest making art?

JG: Lately I'm happiest on Long Island. And I love to work in hotel rooms on the bed.

AS: Yeah, being this kind of hermit weirdo is somehow a fantasy we both share, about being a weird old lady who makes art in remote locations, away from the regular world. We always wanted to start an

anonymous gallery out in Long Island where everyone could exhibit their secret, “cute” or “norm core” art that would be sold under a pseudonym, which would be their first name but ending in “I”?! Like Ami and Joni.

JG: Or I loved the Pinch Pot, an old shop in Greenport that went out of business, with all these handmade ceramics displayed on shelves.

AS: Now you have time to work out in Long Island. Is there a downside to time?

JG: Not really, though only being in the paintings continually can pose a problem. I never stop thinking about them, especially if I’m in the middle of one. So then it’s a problem to be in the regular world, naked, without the painting.

AS: Along with piles of drawings, there are piles and piles of books in your house. What are you reading right now?

JG: I’m reading this great book, *Writing in Rage*, the letters and rantings of the Swiss artist Miriam Cahn¹. I love that each letter is her refusing an exhibition or telling someone off. Here’s an example of a letter she wrote to a curator in 1989:

I am sorry, I can’t participate in your project. I think this sort of feminist exhibition is 5-8 years too late. It doesn’t mean to me that feminism is out of art—on the contrary. But today is today. After 20 years of very much working by feminist and women artists it is high time for museums to include women in their programme with the same normality as men-artists, and not “let’s do a feminist art-exhibition”—and then over the years again nothing moves, because we had our minority exhibition. And it is high time for us women artists to be more demanding about shows and not to be glad about everything we get—just because we are women and have to be grateful about everything we get—just because we are still discriminated against.
Sincerely yours,
Miriam Cahn

AS: There she is, our fantasy woman: a cranky old refusenik lady who makes art in remote locations! So, on the other hand, what is your idea of the nightmare review of your work, or worst possible claim about you by an art historian?

JG: Woman artist, abstract expressionism, using childlike scrawls, graffiti. I generally resist the woman description, though at other times I embrace it. If there is one book that changed my thinking, it was Lucy Lippard’s *From the Center*,² which I read in my early 20s. Her premise may have been flawed on a few counts —I rejected her essentialist characterization of women’s art as having a central vaginal shape. I felt that to be taken seriously by the male artworld you had to reject that. But I break my systems all the time, and at some point, I said fuck it, and made paintings with central images radiating out. Anyway, it was a mind-bending book for a young artist to read.

AS: Do you call yourself a feminist? Would you be in an all-woman or “feminist” art show now?

JG: It’s complicated. I definitely call myself a feminist and I reserve the right to be in an all-woman or a “feminist” show. I see the lists of all-male shows or a show of mostly men, and one or two token women

¹ Miriam Cahn, *Miriam Cahn - Writing in Rage* (Hatje Cantz, 2019)

² Lucy R Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (Dutton, 1990)

("we just couldn't find any"!!!!) and I count how many women, like everybody does. That said, I'm wary of the ghettoization in all-women shows. I understand why and how they exist, but I still get really uncomfortable about being in most of them now and will consider carefully before saying yes or no. Minus the recent Venice Biennale, which was mostly women, the venues of all-women shows are kind of awful.

AS: Does this bring you back to the shame/pride question?

JG: Partly, but it's also about anger, the anger of being left out of a certain dialogue. This is also complicated: we might feel shame for being a woman (artist) and at the same time, feel proud of the shame. Years ago, it was a detriment to be a woman starting out in the art world for my generation, so that stays with you even if things have changed. Working and drawing in a shameful state might be productive at times—though I'm always resisting labels, and I want to resist the angry woman or the angry kid trope—I guess I really am angry. It's powerful stuff with which to make art. I've just been lumped in as a "woman artist" so many times that I'm tired of the sexism of that classification.

AS: What would you regard as the lowest depth of misery as an artist?

JG: Dismissal.

AS: If you could change one thing about your work, what would it be?

JG. I wouldn't.

AS: What do you consider your greatest achievement as an artist?

JG: Staying alive and keeping going year after fucking years of painting. And after all these years, I've learned what "getting good at it" means.

AS: What *does* it mean?

JG: Getting good at it means an absence of anxiety in the process of making a painting. During the last few years I felt comfortable experimenting, not really caring about others' opinions. I went off on wild tangents and let myself go wherever the work was taking me. Getting lost is good. These paintings I'm making now, they're all around the room and on top of each other, and there is no expectation of showing them or even finishing them by a certain time, but when I look at them, I have a sense of peace, a familiarity and friendliness with them. Getting good means not always thinking you have to move forward and advance all the time. Looking back but going forward at the same time. Working and trusting your own history in a nutshell. And I like to dirty it up too. Working without a net. Letting yourself fail. These paintings are all about flirting with failure, creating chaos and then seeing if I can get out of a situation. Mucking it up and then trying to clean it up. Complicating things and then sitting with the complications and not forcing the resolution. Sitting with a bad painting and then seeing how it annoys me, and then acting. Sometimes I make it worse. Then it becomes good.