

Chasing dogs

In Amy Sillman's iconic lecture on colour, she used a series of images to show how much one of her paintings can change over the course of its studio life.ⁱ In the beginning, a handful of soft-edged geo forms in violet and cadmium green take up the picture plane. They are staunch, uninterrupted by smaller shapes or the artist's characteristic calligraphic line. In the images that follow, the composition changes relatively consistently as specific colours and shapes swap roles in the work's push-pull dynamic. But then something wild happens: Sillman scumbles a grey miasma across the entire surface of the image and the painting gets lost. At this point she lets us know that nothing else can be done to save this picture. The painting that underwent all these dramatic twists and turns, garnering giggles and gasps from Sillman's audience as they watched on, has exhausted its options and ends up in the bin.

In *Potential Images*,ⁱⁱ Dario Gamboni argues that ambiguity is a quality that exists in images innately; that images require an open relationship with a viewer, which calls upon the unstable functions of memory and imagination, which, for him, makes them indeterminate phenomena. Yet, some paintings feel easy to look at and possibly to make, whether the latter is true or not. There is a directness to them: colours are innocent and bright; gestures live without much intervention. Unhindered by murk or density, these pictures stay fresh, daisy-like, surface-y, as if they arrived in the world as fully formed, happy babies. Other paintings, like Sillman's, are birthed in a much more fraught way, wrangled through processes of tangling and untangling – like a hyperactive dog weaving its leash between legs at the park, tripping other dog owners, complicating the connection between figure and ground.

The paintings in Tinieka Page's exhibition *Dog on a Leash* are the ambiguous kind. Colours and shapes are hurled into perpetual motion by some unknown external force. In one painting, circles swerve in zigzags. In another, an abstract snake-and-ladder formation half builds itself and then disintegrates. Spirals unfold into other spirals which open into apertures, like eyes. The speed at which elements spin, collide, and miraculously pass through one another is both impossible and hypnotic. These paintings belong to an understanding of the world as uncertain, chaotic, aggregatory and anxious. In *The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art*, Raphael Rubinstein argues that there has been a marked shift in contemporary painting towards an aesthetic that is "casual, dashed off, self-cancelling," with "A growing number of younger artists... entertaining the idea of impossibility in painting. This has led them to reject a sense of finish in their work, or to rely on acts of negation."ⁱⁱⁱ Page may be negating the possibility of creating a stable vision in times defined by horror, great power imbalance, deep and needed change.

But back to dogs. Remember Italian Futurist painter Giacomo Balla's glossy black dachshund with its blur of legs running at a million miles an hour? Page connects this work from 1912 to German contemporary painter Charline von Heyl's description of painting as "a dog on a leash," as "something she is always chasing and almost falling behind; as something that she cannot control, neither emotionally nor intellectually."^{iv} This idea, reflected in the title of Page's exhibition, speaks to the astonishing and torturous goose chase of making abstract paintings, where a whole new world opens up just as the image threatens to close itself down. Where rectangles have the potential to hold worlds within worlds, like Michel Foucault's heterotopia,^v as physical and mental counter-sites that exist alongside ordinary space. Page's labyrinthine paintings could be thought

about in this way – as dynamic, untethered spaces that symptomatically mirror the chaos in their peripheral view.

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Tinieka Page, Dog on a Leash exhibition, Schoolhouse Studios, Melbourne, June 2024

ⁱ Whitney Museum of American Art. “Seminars with Artists: Amy Sillman | Live from the Whitney.” YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Stk38nsVyos>.

ⁱⁱ Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (Reaktion, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ Raphael Rubinstein, *The Turn to Provisionality in Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), p. 23.

^{iv} Tinieka Page, “Dog on a Leash: Painting in Uncertain and Unstable Times” (Honours thesis, RMIT, 2020), p. 13.

^v Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.