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*Little Sister* rediscovers the excitement, discomforts and the absurdity of growing up as a girl. There is one girl who dictates this story. She is the little sister, and she is the inspiration within my newly created world. She is the version of myself who escaped her reality through fantasy and believed in an unknown, imaginary force that kept her safe when she needed it most. When remembering this younger version, I embrace bodily comforts, found in a wide range of materials such as canvas and fabric, and soft, round, inflated forms that drift on and off the rectangle, creating a condensed imaginary realm.

What does it mean to be safe? This is a question that I continue to ask as I revisit themes of destruction and protection, experienced through the eyes of someone who is driven by her own neuroses. She seeks her grandest desires, and sometimes she succeeds. Sometimes she stumbles and falls. In this exploration, memories of trauma overlap with distinctive, lush fantasies, resulting in hybrid paintings that celebrate both the uneasiness and the fantastic reveries of girlhood.

LITTLE SISTER

by

Zoe Sasson

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Zoe Sasson has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Barbara Campbell Thomas

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
Christopher Cassidy

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jennifer Meanley

\_\_\_\_\_  
Andrew Wasserman

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## PREFACE

*My fate was sealed at age three. One of my older brothers placed a pencil in my hand and snickered as I tried to draw for the first time. As I was not very close with my older brothers, who had their own secret society, drawing was the first hobby that I had in common with the boys. I was filled with pride, suddenly edging slightly closer to a respectable status.*

*When engaging with a piece of paper I had the power to draw my own reality, honest and unadulterated by my surroundings. My life was consumed with obsessive desires and passions. Having discovered a love of the human form early on, I was also made uneasy by what it represented and afraid of how it interacted with other bodies. It was the 1990s. In my realm of the real, dictated by media such as MTV and Seventeen Magazine, I felt betrayed by my own feminine form and hated its inevitable narrative.*

*My reality differed from the reality of other children who grew up with me. Early on, I was forced to acknowledge my escapist tendencies, as I shifted in and out of a dream state and “the real world.” More often than not, social situations made me feel trapped in fear, anxiety, and self-hatred. It was much more emotionally satisfying to escape into semi-conscious fantasy.*

*There were both positive and negative effects of daydreaming. There was satisfaction that I found in dreaming about the impossible. I had another socially awkward companion when I was young who turned me on to Jewish comedians such as Mel Brooks, Gene Wilder, Danny Kaye, and the like. The Producers by Brooks was my personal savior, the story of a frustrated hero, burdened by neuroses, who eventually*

*conquers his fears and claims his fate! Film and cartoons gave me the freedom to celebrate weirdness, dysfunction, and humor without boundaries and they gave me a much needed escape from shame and my burdening anxiety.*

*The negative side effects of daydreaming were isolation, a lack of connection to my surroundings and to my peers, and a reliance on fictional characters and narratives, including those that I invented. Imaginary friends became common and cartoon drawings of my creations invaded my every waking moment.*

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CHAPTER I  
THE UNKNOWN

*Little Sister* explores perplexing forms in an invented realm, where the unknown is transformed in a series of trials and errors--material risks and mishaps--until characters emerge, proudly proclaiming joy while poking fun at their own existence. The evolution of the fragmented paintings into familiar entities begins first with a drawn mark, often in a sketchbook. As shapes and patterns repeat themselves, their lived environments become more identifiable. Their environments support and celebrate their unique personalities. From paper to fabric, and then to canvas, the characters become distinguished within a turbulent mismatch of materials. Within their condensed painted environments, they exist in conversation with one another, often self-doubting, and sometimes assertive.

The series takes from a visual language developed during childhood and delves into adolescent investigations, channeling the awkwardness felt about one's body, as well as a child's unrestricted displays of joy. I often refer to the language of painter Amy Sillman. As someone who pays tribute to the silly and often clumsy nature of abstract painting, her work is a hybrid of drawing, painting, cartoons, and video. The all-at-onceness of this material exploration is something that I strive for. The culmination of many techniques in my paintings should be evident in raised surfaces, crevices, and pockets of materials. (See image 1).

In *Scraped Up*, burlap is stretched over wood and then disguised as painted marks. Latex paint eventually coats the burlap like a skin. The bumpy painting holds muddled paint on the surface of the burlap, revealing the highlight of a tree or bush shape. A dark, ambiguous space emerges. When creating paintings that are stretched on a frame, I consider all of their flaws and absurdities during the construction. In *Scraped Up*, I allowed knots in the burlap to emerge and strands to hang off of the edges of the wood. I intentionally try to disrupt the technique in some way to cause a little chaos on the surface, in the texture, or within the colors. (See image 2).

In these imagined spaces, characters strive for balance and fail. Something is always out of place, which can never be helped. The paintings cannot manage to clean themselves up because they know that they will never remain clean, and they know that they will never exist very far from failure. They intentionally reflect the physical awkwardness of my persona, seeming to gain self-worth in every scenario that they're in.

When searching for this unknown entity, color becomes increasingly important. Amy Sillman talks about her specific palette found in R&F oil crayons: "...a lot of them look like the colors of sports jerseys or 1980s outfits. It's an interestingly weird, bright, but garish color palette" (Saunders). Her colors, like my own, dominate the paintings with intimate specificity. I choose my colors based from aesthetic desires that I have always had. These desires speak to wanting to be both a boy and a girl. They speak to wanting to be tough and sporty. They speak to wanting to be feminine and sexy. Because of the human qualities that I strive for, the colors should strike discomfort, and at time, ugliness. "Ugliness is a way to describe the uncomfortable or difficult," says Sillman as

she rejects notion of what is traditionally beautiful. “Saying I value what is ugly is a shorthand for being willing to accept discomfort and embarrassment and all the adjacent feelings that come with doing something you’re not quite familiar with. Strangeness is the goal” (Saunders). (See image 3).

The encompassing theme within my constructed spaces is the illusion of fantasy, as I consider “the fantasy of undoing time: of going back to the beginning and manipulating the outcome” (Ammer 71). This is the way that art historian Manuela Ammer narrates the paradoxes that surround the figures in Amy Sillman’s paintings. The undoing of time, as Sillman explores in her ever-evolving body of work, provides the inspiration to start anew, build perplexing relationships between figure and ground, and create unique power dynamics for my searching, unknown characters. Though the paintings are driven by my personal identity, their shifting personalities allow for intimate and sometimes dysfunctional relationships between them and between themselves and the spaces in which they exist. They talk to each other, passing jokes and secrets back and forth.

## CHAPTER II

### PAINT, DEFIANCE, AND HUMOR

*When I was young, I enjoyed doing what was not expected of me. While other little girls were dressed as princesses for Halloween, I wanted to dress as Harpo Marx. When I decided at age three to not to be a girl or a boy, but rather, to be an androgynous unidentifiable gender, I enjoyed not fitting into a label and I reveled at the chance to be different. Being different took its eventual toll, and by age nine, I decided to wear dresses again to avoid unwanted attention.*

In my current painting practice, I acknowledge and celebrate my past and current tendencies toward subversion and defiance. I am reminded of my mini-revolts through the years, ranging from crude jokes made at inappropriate times to having constant tears and stains on my clothes, to bursts of excessive aggression while playing women's rugby. Defiance is identifiable in my painting process, too. *Little Sister* engages with my younger self and thus speaks to a child's inclination to act and to not think about it. This sentiment is prominent within the work of both Amy Sillman and the late Elizabeth Murray, and as Murray remarked about the carefree nature of children in 1998, "They just make their mark and it's immediate. They're not judging themselves constantly" (Hagedorn). Both Sillman and Murray control their own narratives with a type of defiance that I can only recognize as female.

Their paintings display an intense physicality, taking particularly from the childlike, “low-art” form of cartoon-making and they dominate space with a deviant, rebellious spirit. In interviews, Murray described the physicality of her paintings’ coverage of color, which feels at times like a child squishing paint out of a tube (Hagedorn). One can experience the wonder and joy that both Murray and Sillman possess in their drawn and painted marks. While Murray’s are especially confident, they still at times strike an uncomfortable chord, similar to Amy Sillman’s paintings. (See image 4).

*Fresh Grass* is a painting that emerged on yellow fabric and that reveals recent liberations from my doubts and fears, particularly fears that prevent an openness about my physical desires. Sensational, childish acts such as rolling in the grass, and feeling earth between my toes should be represented by soft materials, as a representation of outdoor, wild space. *Fresh Grass* also blends interior and exterior spaces, as the frames dissolves and the landscape emerges assertively into the foreground. Cuts and drawn marks should represent the immediacy in which I seek these small pleasures. (See image 5).

Presently, my paintings push against expectations that I put upon myself that strive for normalcy. When developing *Little Sister*, I questioned my motivations and allowed all conscious and semi-conscious fantasy and repressed desires to come into play. All mediums, forms, and colors have defiantly developed their personality and curiosity about sex. Both embodied and ambiguous, the paintings strive to find a unique space of existence, separate from social norms.

Through the exploration of raised canvas and chunky paint in *Who's Who*, I learn more about my desire for the tactile and for the sensuous application of paint. I first approached the painting determined to create a support, a wall, or a home for a body, as a representation of safety and restraint. As I built up ridges with canvas and acrylic mediums, I dreamt of glossy, almost sticky layers of paint, washing over the edges of this imaginary boundary. This red, gummy paint felt dangerous to me. All at once, I wanted the space to feel contained and also, to spill out. A singular hand (belonging to a greater, ambiguous force) motions forward, as if to move the structure out of the way. Including a bodily gesture in this painting also felt like a mode of defiance within my work, as it combines elements from purely abstract and representational imagery. (See image 6).

Though more confident than ever before, my paintings strike an odd balance of assuredness and awkwardness. Artist Amy Sillman reflects on this dilemma and others in her essay published in *Frieze*, titled "Shit Happens." She speaks of the awkwardness in her paintings as a way to exaggerate clumsiness or strangeness of the human form, an active questioning of the body in its modern environment. "Just having a body is a daily comedy," she says (Sillman). My work frequently references this sentiment, since the characters within the frame never seem to quite fit. Like the awkward characters within Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, their personalities sometimes repel their physical environments. They push against edges, sometimes becoming condensed and squished, like in *Who's Who*. Sometimes, they hang off or stick out, never fully committing to their rectangular shape. Though, there is always a part of them that wants to commit. This is a dilemma that I find quite humorous.

The mishaps that occur in my process of painting, cutting, gluing, and sewing echo the slapstick occurrences of everyday life, and they often refer to my personal desires to conquer my destiny and defy shameful or passive behavior. There is evidence of a more assertive approach to materials in frayed edges, bumps and blemishes in the paint, and in stuffed fabric that is lumpy and erect (See image 7). I strive to make paintings that give us the permission to laugh. This can be accomplished when unabashedly revealing body parts in juxtaposition with strides of thick, luscious paint.

While Amy Sillman disrupts traditional painting spaces, flipping patriarchal codes of male viewing, she distinctly paints “what it feels like to be a girl” as Helen Molesworth summarizes (Molesworth 48). She is constantly in dialogue with this neurotic figure who sometimes tries to be seen and more often, hopes to never be seen. Especially in her early paintings, Sillman provides a universal voice to an embodied female in her paintings, stuck in moments of tension and looking for resolve. This is her own feminist critique acted out in abstract paintings, as “...it comes from witnessing a dilemma that feels particularly close to home,” says Molesworth. (Molesworth 48).

As someone who has been looked at and judged my entire life partially for being a girl and for being a woman, I feel the need to explore the absurd reality of a woman and all of the comedic messiness of her everyday life. The paintings’ comedy is my own comedy, and I hope to unearth a hilarious, inner world of female humor.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE UNKNOWN ON THE SURFACE

In *Little Sister*, I investigate my materials until the unknown reveals its personality to me. Burlap tells many stories throughout the series, as a ragged, out-of-place character, perhaps disguising itself as something extravagant or worthy of attention. Paint wraps over its surface, and the two materials exchange visual information. The relationship that builds is fluid, even though it condenses, bulges and squishes. This visual relationship is evident in both paintings, *Scraped Up* and *So Becoming*. The development of *So Becoming* taught me how to become comfortable with the natural sagging of burlap and how to eventually celebrate it. The painting gets dressed up in stripes, polyester fabric, and thick swashes of periwinkle paint. (See image 8).

A question that I have continuously asked myself while developing *Little Sister* is *why do I paint?* Why do I identify myself as a painter before anything else? Throughout these past two years, material exploration has given me the most insight into my methods as a painter. Extraneous media have allowed me to take more risks with the physicality of my paintings. For instance, cutting into large pieces of felt and piecing it into pools of paint feels rebellious in *Snarly*. (See image 3). Textural exploration has given me greater expectations for the surfaces of my paintings. They should no longer just exhibit bold color and viscosity but should also build up walls of paint, as much as they should make

paint disappear into deep folds of fibers. Another example of this assertiveness in materials can be found in *Lie Down*.

*Lie Down* was created last in the series and it began by sewing a blanket. I sewed it and immediately knew that it needed the presence of a human form. To return to my questions about the unknown, it exhibits a human relationship that cannot be claimed in a realistic space. This experience should frame the excitement and confusion of adolescence, as a body rests in its turbulent world. I needed to paint the dizziness of the moment, and so, I turned the blanket on its side. I then created a surprising and opposing force, a lime-green felt pocket that obtruded in the center of the painting. (See image 9).

As *Little Sister* claims its identify in paint and fabric, it focuses on a metamorphosis of the body. The paintings know that they must grow with their environment, and so, they explore new tools and experiences, continuing to question and evolve. Throughout my process of making, I allow for unexpected occurrences in the paint. I imagine sometimes that I am dismembering these already fragmented forms, as I cut in and layer over and over again—mutating them from the awkward into the transcendent. The paintings, again similar to Amy Sillman, avoid the truth by concealing their origins (Ammer 72). There is a desire to change and conceal within this group of work that speaks to my need for fantasy and escapism.

*Lie Down* does allow for an escape from reality, as it takes bed sheets and felt and transforms them into paint. It takes a body and creates a spinning motion around it, until the body manifests into its surroundings. Curious about this comical process of

transformation (of materials, and of the body), *Lie Down* allows the body to live in an ambiguous space, which feels oddly familiar to me.

CHAPTER IV  
FRAGMENTATION AND DISCONNECTEDNESS

Always connecting with the ideologies of Amy Sillman, I am seduced by her question about the relationship between abstraction and figuration. Her paintings engage in a “visual conversation of sorts,” referring to the combatting forces of drawing versus painting, or vision versus touch (Lajer-Burcharth 83). The dialogue that takes place within each painting is confrontational, often with two or more opposing forces. This is a form of “radical disconnectedness,” as Ewa Lajer-Burcharth states, as she discusses Sillman’s figuration and abstraction in dialogue together. Sillman makes these modes compete and sometimes impersonate each other (Lajer-Burcharth 88).

What is especially challenging when framing an ambiguous, fragmented space is coming to a place of clarity, or at least, to closure. In each painting in *Little Sister*, there exists a culmination of different material practices, from sewing, to collaging, to painting. This kind of “crossbreeding” can only stir up more confusion (Bois 141). However, what remains constant in this series is a review of my past and present life: of humiliation, of fear, of joy, and finally, the mastery of my story’s loose ends (Ammer 75). Using whatever I have around me, I must continue to reflect on memory. And the nature of memory is that it is inconsistent, fragmented, and fleeting.

Since my expectations of the invented spaces within *Little Sister* changed as I created them, I can expect my relationship to the paintings to change long after they are finished. Perhaps, underneath layers of marks and various fabrics, I will find new relationships between shapes, and between bodies. Perhaps, these explorations will require a reworking and a disassemblage, so that they can still claim space as awkward, imperfect intentions. What is evident is that this work can never be truly tidied and fully resolved. As I move forward onto future paintings, I ask myself, “how does one continue to live in the world, in their present configuration? And how can I paint it humorously?”

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## CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

Image 1. Amy Sillman. *A Shape that Stands Up and Listens #31*, 2012. Ink and chalk on paper, 30" x 22.5."

Image 2. *Scraped Up*, 2019. Oil paint, latex, and crayon on burlap, 26" x 22."

Image 3. *Snarly*, 2019. Oil paint, fabric, and crayon on canvas. 26" x 22."

Image 4. Elizabeth Murray. *Do The Dance*, 2005. Oil on canvas on wood, 9' 5" x 11' 3" x 1 ½."

Image 5. *Fresh Grass*, 2019. Oil paint, oil stick, and crayon on fabric, 25" x 24."

Image 6. *Who's Who?* 2019. Oil paint, oil stick, and fabric on canvas, 24" x 20."

Image 7. *Honey Pot*, 2019. Oil paint and fabric on canvas, 17" x 18."

Image 8. *So Becoming*, 2019. Oil paint, fabric, crayon, burlap, and canvas, 25" x 24."

Image 9. *Lie Down*, 2019. Oil paint, spray paint, and fabric on canvas, 70" x 69."

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