

# ELLEDECOR®

warm up  
to  
winter

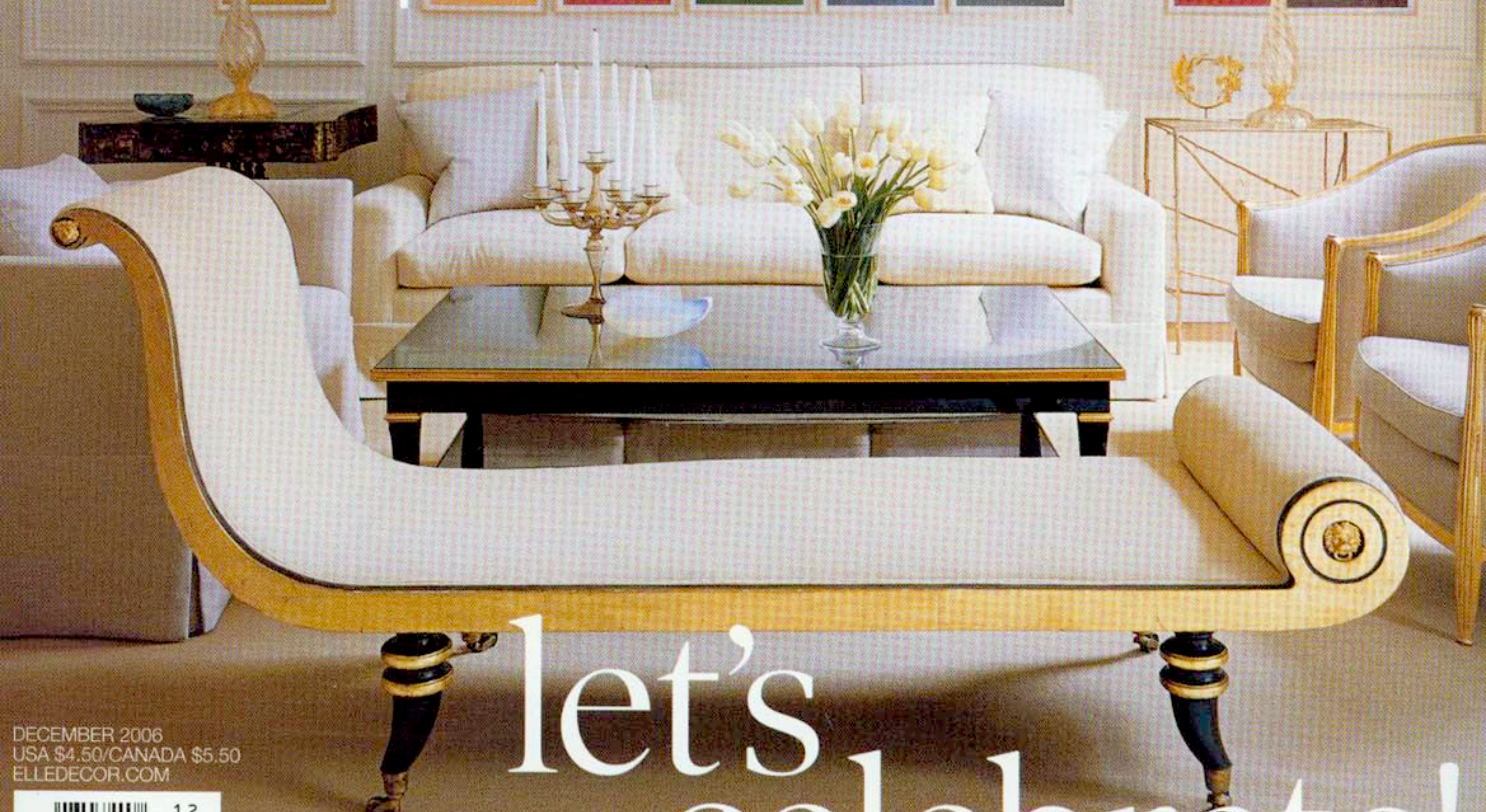
Make a Statement

Bohemian Chic

80 Enchanting Gifts

Building Green:  
A Modern Farmhouse

All About Aspen



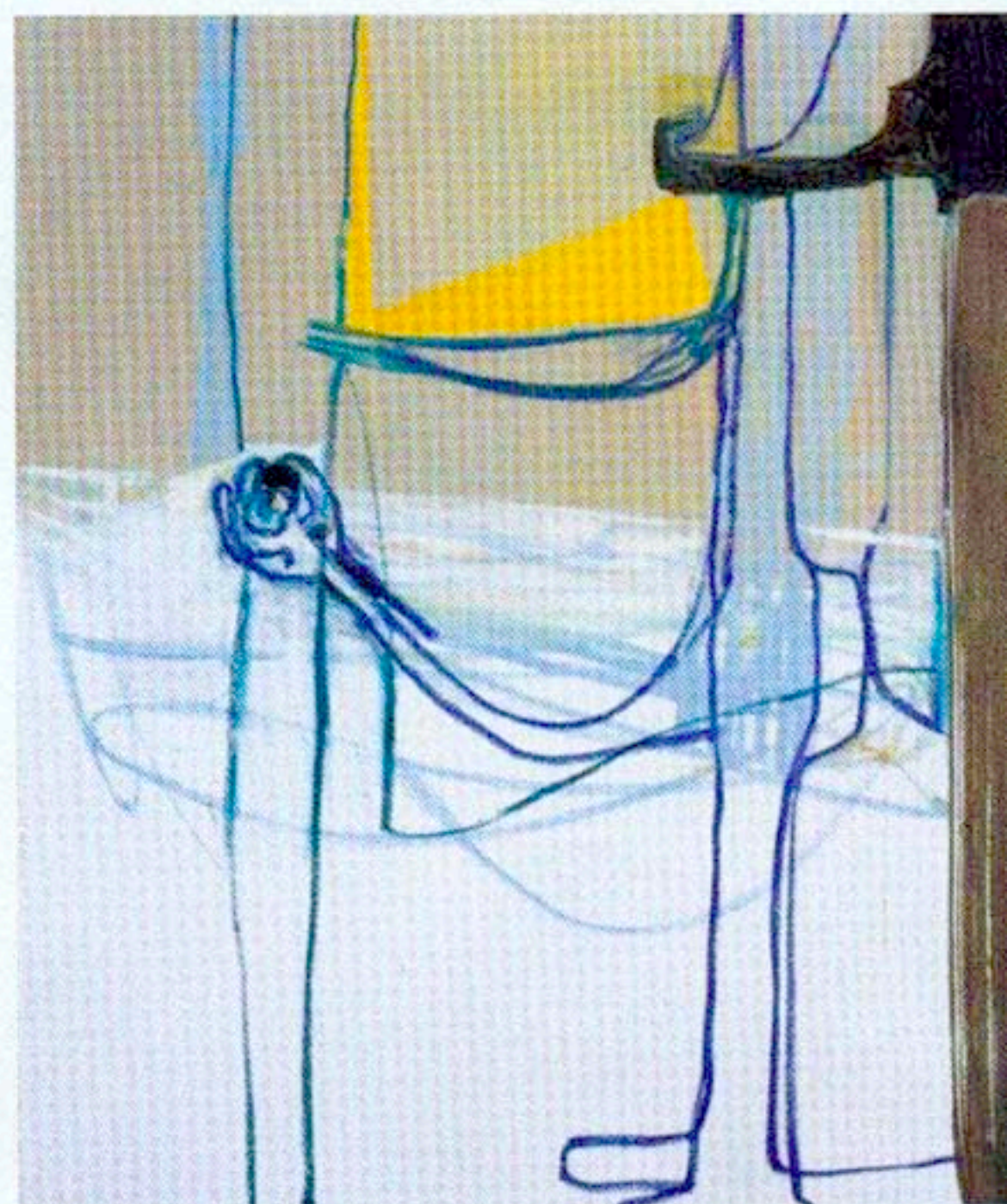
let's  
celebrate!

DECEMBER 2006  
USA \$4.50/CANADA \$5.50  
ELLEDECOR.COM



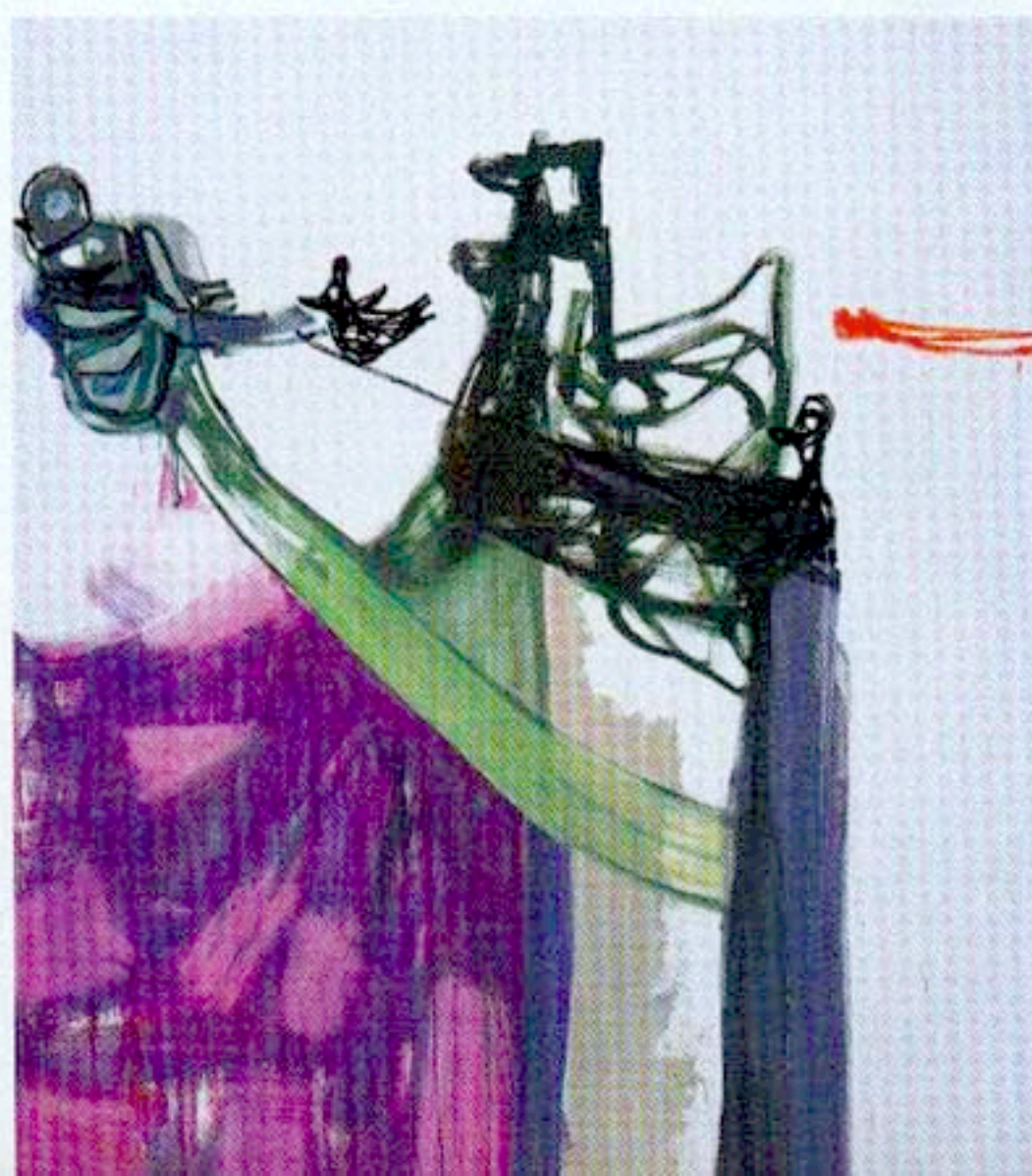


Clockwise from left: Amy Sillman in her Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio. *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 2006. *A Bird in Hand*, oil on canvas, 2006. See Resources.



# Amy Sillman

The New York painter has mischief up her sleeve—slyly populating her gorgeous abstract canvases with humorous figures and creatures. By David Colman



Abstract painting: It's one of those refined art forms that, like blank verse or modern dance or heavy metal, can feel awfully alienating to the uninitiated. After all, the less a painting represents, the less abstract the reaction. So as much as artist Amy Sillman loves to express her primal urges in paint—with dramatic Kandinsky geometries and visceral De Kooning bulges—she can't resist a little representation. Like a poem that comes on with a wink and a joke rather than a series of obscure, hard-to-follow lines, Sillman's paintings aren't looking just to conjecture, but to connect. Why else would they be so, well, funny?

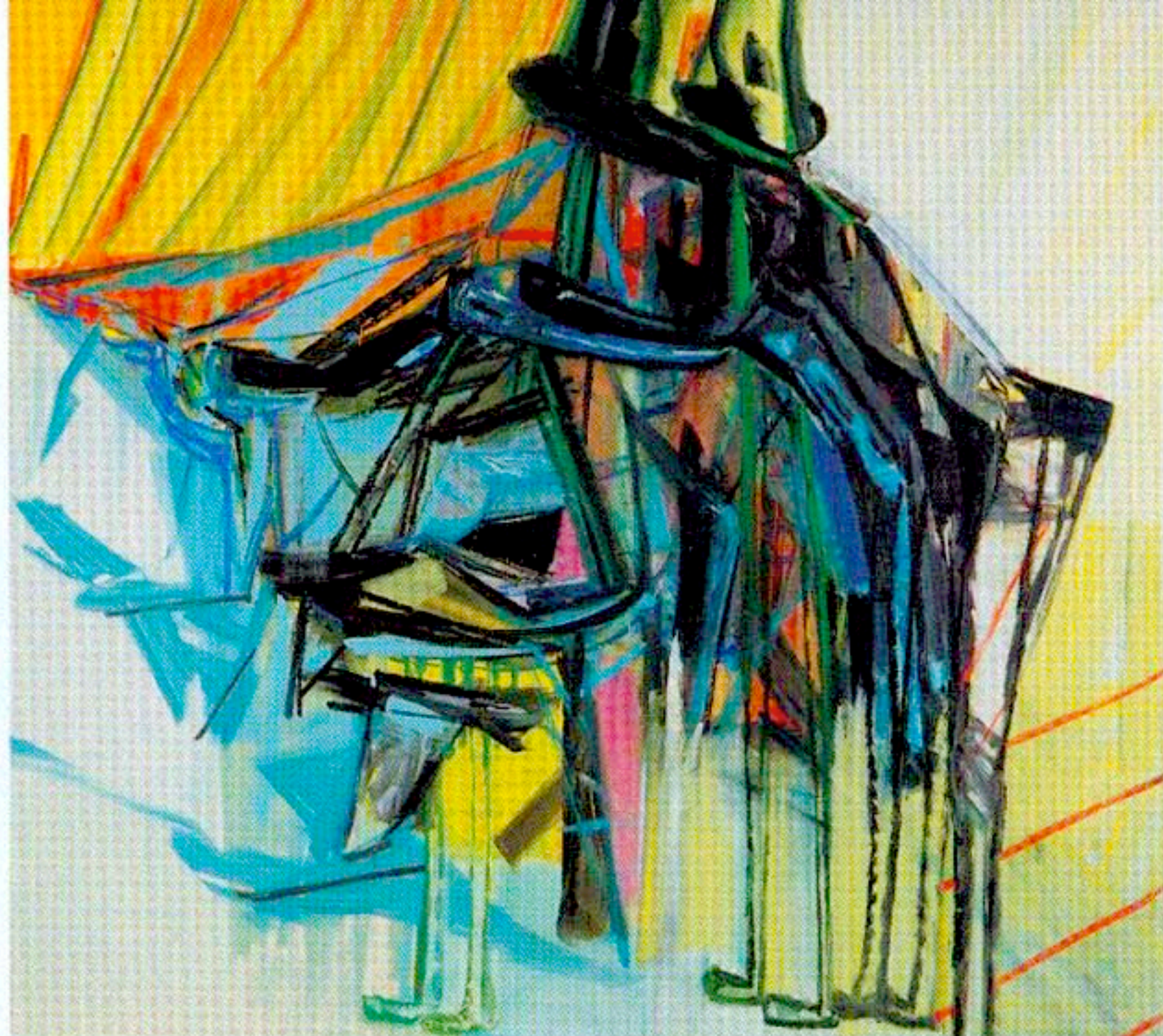
Take one of the lush and gorgeous abstractions hanging in her studio in Williamsburg. Doesn't it bear a more than passing resemblance to a baby deer staring in wonder at some weird little woodland creature? Isn't that the eye and the nose and the ear? "I can't help myself," says Sillman, her dark eyes glinting with mischief, after she confirms that the Bambi-and-butterfly scenario is almost exactly what she had in mind. "I would be an abstract painter," she continues, "except that I >

like narrative too much. I look at a blob and can't help but think it looks like a horse or a man or a bunny."

While Sillman has been toiling steadily for almost 30 years in relative obscurity, the art world is suddenly buzzing about her. Why now? Here's one simple explanation: Her special mixture of tragicomedy and chaos hits the spot. She manages to create an artful tension between the puckish, teenage humor that has infected (with varying results) the work of many in-demand artists, while still delivering canvases of good old-fashioned painterly beauty.

*The Elephant in the Room*, for example, a painting from her exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in Chelsea last April, was all nuanced tones and hues, with an ethereal balance of subtle shapes and passionate scribbles. Its title may cause bewilderment, until one makes out the unmistakable shape of a pachydermal proboscis—a trunk, that is—reaching, in green, across the whole painting. That show put Sillman squarely on the map. It's worth wondering whether she would have had the same impact five years ago. Probably not. Back then, Sillman had not quite perfected her confident mix of the intangible and the antic. "I'm definitely getting more abstract," she says. "I'm almost back to where I started."

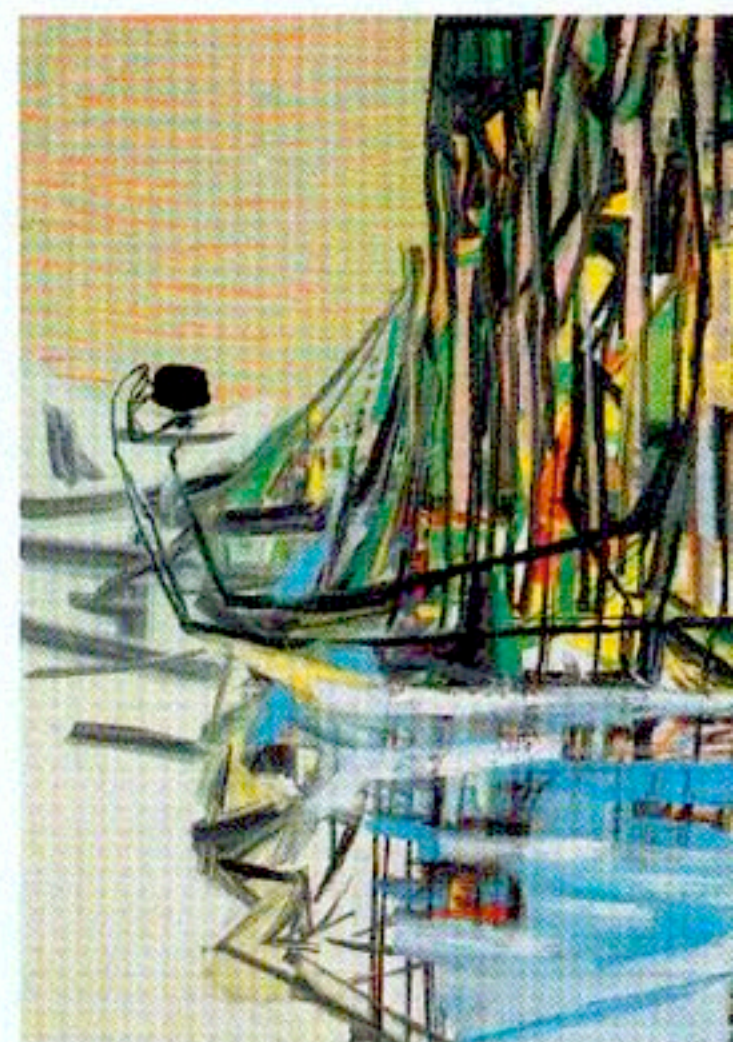
Where she started was New York's School of Visual Arts in the late 1970s, first studying illustration before switching mediums. She was drawn not only to the materials and the process of painting, but to the language of abstraction. Yet by then, that style had become snobbishly distinct from representational art—an exclusionary viewpoint Sillman wasn't that comfortable with. "Teachers were saying, 'You have to make a commitment between the two modes,' and I was like, 'Why?'" she recalls. "I guess it didn't seem radical to them to create a hybrid form."



After school, while Sillman supported herself by working in the art departments of *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, and other magazines, she began to create pieces that were more representational, relying on her easy, approachable flair for illustration. (She still professes her love for the artist Saul Steinberg, who spent six decades drawing covers for *The New Yorker*.) It was when she attended graduate school at Bard College in the mid-1990s, she says, that she began to drift back to abstraction, working strenuously to refine and define her special recipe—one which recalls both the early Abstract Expressionist scribbling of Philip Guston and his late-career paintings of grizzled bums.

But if this suggests a certain canniness on the part of the artist, that would be gravely misleading. Disarmingly confused about her recent success, Sillman grows instantly confident here in her Brooklyn studio, talking about her canvases, glad to hear from a visitor what illusory figures can be grasped or imagined in them. If there's a Rorschach quality to the proceedings, well, that is a tightrope Sillman walks as well, feeling that she wants to express all those great inchoate and noble feelings that abstraction is meant to, while letting the concrete and perhaps even juvenile imagery trespass and traipse right through them like cartoon footprints.

What makes Sillman's art so engaging is, in fact, an uncanniness. She's intelligent and thoughtful, yet displays a lack of sophistication that seems all but extinct these days, and she's frank about what's important to her. "I love painting so much," she says earnestly. "It's physical, like an extension of my arm." In this studio, people are, at best, runners-up. "There's no competition between my art and my relationships," she adds. "The paintings always win." ■



Clockwise, from top: *Your Affection*, 2006. *Get the Moon*, 2006. *Them*, 2006. See Resources.