

ArtSeen

## Harmony Hammond: *Material Witness, Five Decades of Art*

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by Meredith Mendelsohn



Harmony Hammond, *Bandaged Grid #1*, 2015. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 44 1/4 x 76 1/2 x 2 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges.

Ridgefield

### The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

March 3 – September 15, 2019

In this long-overdue career survey, Harmony Hammond proves, if there were ever any doubt, that abstract art can be politically charged and bursting with content. A pioneering feminist artist, curator, writer, gallery co-founder, activist, and scholar of contemporary lesbian art, Hammond, who is still busy in the studio, at 75, was instrumental in carving out a place for women in the male-dominated contemporary art world of early 1970s New York and beyond.

Curated by the Aldrich's Amy Smith-Stewart, *Material Witness, Five Decades of Art* includes more than 50 works, dating from the early 1970s to 2018, culled from public and private collections as well as the artist's own holdings in Galisteo, New Mexico, where she's lived since 1989. It's Hammond's first major museum survey, with numerous rarely exhibited gems. Over the course of 50 years, we see Hammond creatively layering meaning in her painting-based abstraction through materials and processes, incorporating everything from textiles and rubber latex to vernacular architectural debris and her own blood. What emerges is a striking visual component to a pathbreaking feminist mission that is still going strong.



Harmony Hammond, *Presence VI*, 1972. Acrylic, dye, cloth, rope, metal, wood, 80 x 33 inches. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Eric Swanson.

Raised in a planned postwar community on the edge of Chicago where conformity ruled, Hammond was lucky enough as a teenager to escape regularly into the halls of the Art Institute of Chicago. She studied art in college for a few years before marrying Stephen Clover, a fellow artist. In 1969, the couple moved from Minnesota to New York City and soon separated. (He was gay but not out.) Hammond soon discovered she was pregnant and went on to raise her daughter, Tanya, on her own, making ends meet while making her art and connecting with like-minded women artists. In 1972, with 19 others, she co-founded A.I.R. (Artists in Residence), a cooperative woman-run gallery that became (and continues to be) an important springboard for women artists. Hammond then went on to co-found the Heresies Collective (with artists Joyce Kozloff, Pat Steir, and critic Lucy Lippard, among others), which produced the influential quarterly *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* from 1977 through 1993. And in 2000 she published the award-winning *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (Rizzoli), the first survey of its kind.

For Hammond, equality was (and still is) largely about “claiming space” in a patriarchal system. We see her doing that across mediums and dimensions with a refreshing disregard for art historical conventions. Her works can operate between two and three dimensions, don’t always have a back and a front, or an inside and outside. Content spills over the edges of her surfaces, and painting comes off the canvas and off the walls. She uses a brush, but also punctures, stitches, scrapes, binds, ties, and frays her materials. No surface is sacred.

The show offers a rare occasion to see seven of Hammond's life-size *Presences* (1971–72) assembled together. Dense accumulations of paint-drenched fabric scraps, sewn together onto a hanger and strung from the ceiling, they take over a gallery space with a commanding, almost regal invincibility. Primal yet eloquent, scrappy but exquisitely constructed, they suggest strength in numbers while invoking the gritty urgency of the creative community of downtown New York in the 1970s. We are in their space, not vice versa, and they might seem intimidating if they weren't installed at angles, as if in conversation with each one another (and with us). They claim space, yes, but they also invite others into it.

Hammond's way has always been less about intimidation than infiltration. In her series of rarely exhibited *Floorpieces* (1973)—one of the stunners of the show—five circular textiles with concentric rings of color seem to bubble up from underground like hot springs, stealthily penetrating the space of the museum. Made from braided, coiled rags, which Hammond then partially painted, they read more like floor paintings than sculptures. They clearly share a lineage with the domestic handicraft of the rag rug, but here the notion of "women's work" seems more about the labor of love of making art and getting it seen. Hammond also seems to be riffing on Carl Andre's Minimalist floor sculptures from the late 1960s, but the artist's hand is integral to the work rather than stripped away. She has referred to braiding as a "lesbian" activity, with like strands coming together to become stronger, and she recalls sitting in the center of her *Floorpieces* while making them, working her way out as the spiral grows—a process she likens to the circular movements of aikido and tai chi, martial arts that she practiced for decades.

Hammond has largely avoided representing the body, pictorially, and there is no sign of the male gaze here, as in much other feminist work of the 1970s and '80s. But the body is everywhere. She has painted on discarded canvas tatami mats from her martial arts dojos, "charged with body contact," as she's described, while her *Wrapped Sculptures* (1977–84), merging a corporeality with upholstery, consist of an armature, or skeleton, wrapped with cloth (flesh), and then covered with coating of paint or rubber latex, or "skin," a term she's used to describe paint.



Harmony Hammond, *Floorpiece VI*, 1973. Acrylic on fabric, 65 inches. diameter. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges.

That metaphor might suggest vulnerability in some hands. But for Hammond, the body is resilient and skin, or paint, a protective barrier, even when punctured, scraped, or bound, as suggested in her ongoing series of "Near Monochromes," which she's been working on since the early 2000s. Here, she allows all kinds of content to infiltrate a tradition—the Modernist monochrome—that traditionally forbade it. Tiny bits of color seep up through fissures and sutures, for instance, while laces and straps collaged onto the surface and embedded under the paint disrupt the would-be pristine surface with a blatant suggestion of bandaging and binding.

At times these works bring to mind Alberto Burri's scarred and burned abstractions from the 1960s. But for Hammond, there is always more of a sense of repairing, restoring, and connecting. As she told an audience shortly after the exhibition opened: "A bandage always implies the wound. A bandaged grid implies a disruption of utopian egalitarian order—but also the possibility of holding together, of healing." That's the Harmony Hammond that is still articulating a quietly reassuring fierceness through her abstraction, 50 years after she first found her voice.

## Contributor

Meredith Mendelsohn

covers art and design for a variety of publications, including the New York Times, Architectural Digest, and Artsy.