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View of “Harmony Hammond,” 2019.

Harmony Hammond

THE ALDRICH CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

Harmony Hammond first laid out a case for abstraction in her 1977 essay “Feminist Abstract Art: A Political Viewpoint.” Building on the feminist maxim that the personal is political, Hammond contended that abstraction is political because repetitive mark-making is a “record of present feeling.” From the early days of her practice, Hammond framed her abstract works as “visual diaries” capable of communicating their maker’s identifications and desires. In Hammond’s formulation, however, abstraction is not a mode of expressing the “real” self or the truths of the unconscious, as had been explained in preceding decades. Rather, abstraction is an explicitly feminist and queer tool for visualizing and exploring the ever-changing textures of subjectivity. Across the five decades of Hammond’s practice, the material strategies of process art parallel the processual formation of identification.

This is nowhere more evident than in Hammond’s first major body of work, a series of sculptures called the “Presences,” 1971–72, made for her first solo exhibition in New York in 1973 at the newly opened A.I.R. Gallery, which she cofounded. In the process of producing and exhibiting the “Presences,” Hammond was simultaneously coming out, in every sense of the word—as an artist, a feminist, and a lesbian. She would come to see

these three designations as inextricable. Rarely shown since their debut, several of the “Presences” from Hammond’s 1973 show were among the earliest pieces displayed in her first institutional survey. They illuminated some of the key political and formal concerns of Hammond’s practice, represented here by more than thirty pieces made between 1971 and 2018, including Hammond’s well-known woven “Floorpieces,” 1973, and “Wrapped Sculptures,” 1977–84; her mixed-media works from the 1990s; and her ongoing skin-like “near monochrome” paintings of the past seventeen years.

In *Presence III*, 1972, hundreds of individual paint-splattered fabric strips are knotted and stitched together to compose a hanging, body-like form. At the time the work was made, Hammond’s crossbreeding of painting and sculpture, like Eva Hesse’s and Lynda Benglis’s three-dimensional experiments, was a direct riposte to Michael Fried’s vilification of non-medium-specific art as being characterized by “presence,” or theatricality. Each piece of cloth additively composing the sculpture appears to be a scrap of a gestural, pseudomodernist painting—Hammond applied the paint mostly by dipping the shreds of fabric in thinned acrylic, allowing them to dry, and sometimes splattering or brushing them with more paint. The results simultaneously invoke Jackson Pollock’s performative drips and the stained fields of Helen Frankenthaler’s canvases. By rendering marks that had widely, and cartoonishly, been linked to virility and to femininity in the same composition (often on the same scrap of fabric), Hammond created a strange new context for these techniques in which their formerly gendered meanings no longer held.

Hammond employed a similar strategy in another little-seen piece, the ten-part work on paper *Blood Journals (Giorno I–X)*, 1994, in which trickles of rusty-brown menstrual blood act as painterly drips. And in the recent large-scale painting *Blanco*, 2012–13, she upends the transcendent monochrome painting by creating a near monochrome whose skin-like painted surface is replete with punctures, scrapes, and orifices. In all the works exhibited, Hammond’s forms solicited viewers to think about artistic and gendered identifications as messy negotiations and mutations of conventional labels.

At the heart of Hammond’s practice is a putative paradox: She has insistently and publicly argued that abstraction is a viable political strategy for picturing difference, while also advocating, in her own activist, curatorial, and written work, for the visibility of women and lesbians. Though she understood the usefulness of stable identities in coalitional politics and in the art world, Hammond continued to create more nuanced representations of personhood using abstract methods. Hammond’s practice demonstrates that abstraction has the potential to communicate feminist and lesbian politics while still allowing for conflict and contingency.

— Ashton Cooper