

HARMONY HAMMOND with Phillip Griffith

Harmony Hammond made her start as an artist in the feminist milieu of 1970s New York, co-founding A.I.R. Gallery, the first women's gallery, in 1972. Her early artwork developed a feminist, lesbian, and queer idiom for painting and sculpture, especially in such celebrated works as her woven and painted *Floorpieces* (1973) and wrapped sculptures, like *Hunkertime* (1979 – 80). Since 1984, she has lived and worked in New Mexico. Her current show at Alexander Gray Associates (May 19 – June 25, 2016) showcases what she calls her “near monochrome” paintings and monotype prints on grommeted paper that Lucy Lippard has termed “grommetypes.” On the occasion of the exhibition's opening, Hammond spoke with Phillip Griffith about martial arts, the painting body, and violence in her work.

Phillip Griffith (Rail): Your paintings from this new exhibition seem appreciably different than the wrapped paintings included in your 2013 show with Alexander Gray.

Harmony Hammond: Well, *Things Various* (2015), the earliest painting in the current exhibition, segues from the 2013 work. The visual vocabulary of grommeted straps—sometimes tied together, sometimes not—attached to the thick paint surface with pigment-covered pushpins, is the same. Only in *Things Various*, most of the straps hang open, untied, suggesting only the potential of connection or restraint.

The new paintings continue to emphasize the material engagement of paint, but differ from the earlier work through the use of the grommeted grid as a disruptive visual strategy and the shift to what is going on beneath/below/under what we perceive as the painting surface. They ask, where is the painting located?

Rail: Can you tell me where your materials and process came from?

Hammond: I wrote a text for the exhibition catalogue that repeats part of *A Manifesto (Personal) of Monochrome (Sort of)*, written in 2010, in order to situate the new work in relation to my ongoing concerns with the body and the painting body



Harmony Hammond, *Things Various*, 2015. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 80 1/4 x 54 1/4 x 5 inches. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates. © 2016 Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

(meaning both the person who makes the painting and the painting object itself). The catalogue text, however, goes on to discuss the work in expanded terms. For example, many of my near-monochrome paintings include or are painted on repurposed canvas that was originally used to cover the woven tatami mats used in Aikido, the Japanese martial art I studied for thirty-six years. Long, six- to eight-foot-wide strips of canvas are sewn together to form a rectangular cover for the tatami mats that in turn cover the dojo floor. Over time, these mat covers wear out and need to be replaced. The old covers, charged with repeated body contact—including my body—were given to me; I have used them as the support in some of the earlier paintings, such as *Muffle* (2009) and *Flap* (2008 – 11), as well as in *Witness* (2014), *Naples Grid* (2015), and *Bandaged Grid #1* (2015), all paintings included in this show.

Connecting strategies such as seams, patches, straps, and flaps, created on the back when two pieces of canvas are stitched together, are left showing. The grommets were initially found in the hems of the canvas mat covers. I had cut the hems off, eventually using them as straps, but soon ran out and started sewing my own straps and grommets. In my most recent work, the grommets have jumped off the straps and appear as a gridded field with under layers of paint asserting themselves up through the holes, suggesting agency and voice—a rupture from underneath, from what has been muffled, covered up or over.

Rail: I love the casual, almost vernacular, “sort of” in the title of your manifesto for your near-monochrome style. It leaves an offhanded but decisive crack in the self-certainty of the manifesto form.

Hammond: Yes, the title is a “crack,” an opening. The crack assumes an audience.

Rail: Your account of the canvas from the tatami mats, as well as your manifesto, describe the relationship of the painter’s body to the body of the artwork. It seems to me there is another body present before the painting: the viewer’s. Can the viewer have a painting body, too, through the act of looking at the work?

Hammond: The skin of paint always suggests the body. The painting not only references the body but is a body; at the same time it refers to the painter or the one who paints. The paint, and therefore the act of painting, literally holds not only the painting object but the painter together—the most essential and personal of the functions of art making.

The cracks in the painting surface under stress are one way the viewer enters in, as are the grommeted holes, which act as body orifices. That said, your suggestion regarding the possibility of the viewer also having a painting body is something I have to give thought to. The viewer does exist, is there, but I don’t usually focus on their presence. An exception would be my digital print *A Queer Reader* (2003), which, through the cut/opening/gap, intentionally includes the viewer as reader. At the same time, I believe that if the work is “honest”—a loaded word, I know—the viewer will get it, at least on some level. I have always been interested in what I call “felt content,” in other words, content that is felt on and in the viewer’s body before it is conceptually translated. The paint treated as a material like any other has agency, the potential to engage through the body.

Rail: I’m wondering if these two bodies have a relationship to your martial arts practice, which puts two bodies in disciplined relation to each other.

Hammond: In the early ’70s my martial arts training provided a genderless form and practice for physically occupying and filling space that mirrored feminist principles of women “taking space,” of empowering themselves. But perhaps it is the importance of process itself that is the connection between the bodies in painting and martial arts. I’ve long been aware that feminism’s focus on process (consciousness-raising, the idea that the ends do not justify the means, etc.) is compatible with post-

Minimal concerns with material and process in my work, and vice versa.

In both martial and visual arts it's about moving from the center out (the personal is political). It is not about the end goal (in fact there is no end goal), but rather the doing, the practice, the becoming and unbecoming. Both are disciplines in which one learns to listen. One "masters" the form in order to abandon the form.

The two martial arts I have studied, Tai Chi Chu'an, and Aikido, are based on circular movements, on redirecting the attack or negative energy back on the attacker. One must listen and stay connected to the opponent. There can be no gaps, no openings, unless you intentionally give one to draw out your opponent. This is especially true in sword forms.

In martial arts, there is no viewer. It is not performance. But, then, neither is painting.

Rail: Cracks on the surface contribute great pleasure to the experience of looking at your paintings and grommetypes. Your earlier wrapped works, like *Hunkertime* (1979 – 80), evoke care and protection, but these near-monochromes privilege cracks, tears, and fissures in the painting's "skin," as you put it. How do you think about violence and force in tandem with care and protection?

Hammond: Cracks are not always violent. Cracks can give pleasure. That said, there is a discussion to be had about a subtext of violence in my work. I myself am aware of it, but have not pursued thinking about it in depth. The rupture of the bullet holes in the horse skull of *Meditation* (2001 – 02) or the grid of metal buckets previously used for target practice in *Untitled (buckets)* (1995), come to mind, as does the large mixed-media installation painting *Inappropriate Longings* (1992), which has the words "goddamn dyke" incised into the skin-like latex rubber, interrupting the presumed heteronormativity of both rural America and the modernist painting field. I could go on, and of course, this subtext is present in many of the near-monochromes when seen up close.

I agree that the wrapped paintings are different than the wrapped sculptures. The discussion of the straps intentionally wrapped around the sides of most of the near-monochrome paintings is usually focused on notions of restraint and constraint—of bandaging, binding, and bondage. Those ideas and references do circulate around the paintings, however; the straps can also be thought to embrace the painting body, to protect rather than restrict it. In the most recent grid paintings, there are fewer, if any, straps, be they for connection, containment, or protection.

In a certain way, these paintings feel naked and vulnerable to me, perhaps because they let the viewer in more, as does *Bandaged Grid #1*. With the current paintings, it is not so much about "violence to" (which is passive) as it is "rupture" (which is active).

Rail: The distinction between a passive "violence to" and an active "rupture" brings us back to the relationship between the two painting bodies.

Hammond: Your comments have me free-associating all over the place, in a complex skein of references to and metaphors of violence, disturbance, rupture, resistance, transgression, and agency.

For me, work grows out of work. Generally speaking, there's a kind of cycle my visual practice goes through. With each "new body" of work, I gradually condense it down in terms of form and content. It



Harmony Hammond, *Bandaged Grid*, 2015. Oil and mixed media on canvas. 44 1/4 x 76 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates. © 2016 Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

becomes more “minimal” and “refined,” but still with an edge of content. For example, the paintings in this exhibition might at first glance appear to be minimal monochrome grid paintings. A close examination however, reveals not a violence as in earlier work like *Meditation*, *Untitled (buckets)*, or *Inappropriate Longings*, but rather a disturbance or rupture, something unsettled, as the underlying layers of color are visible and push up through surface cracks, crevices, and holes, interrupting both surface and grid.

At some point, I unconsciously begin to “rough it up,” to let the paintings become more physical and muscular—looser and less controlled. Awkward. *Bandaged Grid #1*, the most recent painting in the exhibition, is going in this direction.

I don’t think of the content in these new paintings as particularly “feminist” or “queer.” Rather, it’s the suggestion of content at all in what are, on one level, rather formal paintings, that disrupts the usual received narrative.

Rail: To me, this recalls what you said earlier about “felt content” in your work.

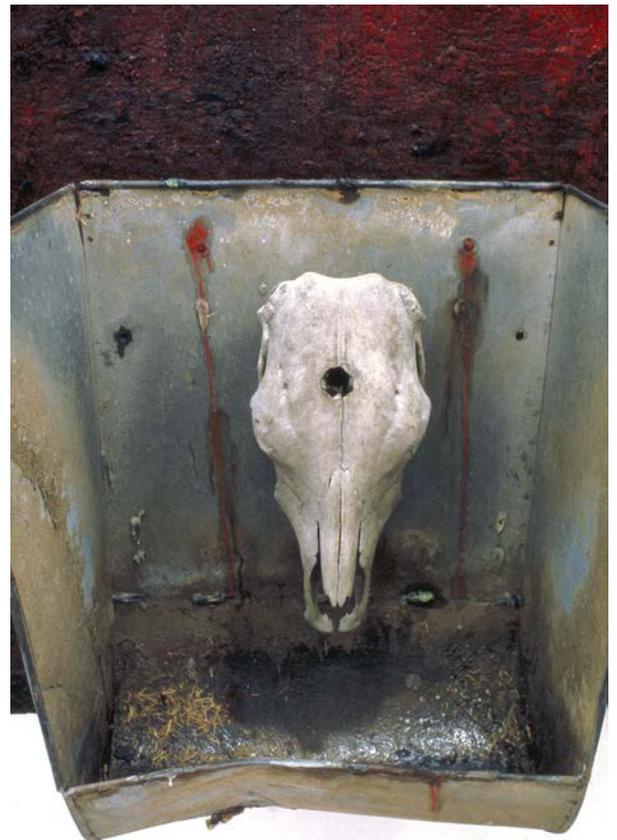
Hammond: Found and recycled materials and objects are one way to bring content into the world of abstraction, as they all have histories that accompany them wherever they go.

Weathered, patinated, showing signs of previous time, place, function, or use, they suggest a survivor aesthetic. My early *Presences* (1972) and *Bags* (1971) are obvious examples, as are the mixed-media *Farm Ghost* (1990) paintings, but I think this carries forward in the work I do today.

This “roughing up” is not necessarily violent. But let me free associate a bit about violence. Initially, the mixed-media paintings incorporated found corrugated roofing tin from the Barrio Viejo of Tucson, the neighborhood I lived in while teaching at the University of Arizona. The neighborhood was being gentrified by people like me moving in. Paintings made with an uneasy juxtaposition of materials scavenged in that neighborhood became about the violence of gentrification, a process in which we artists participate (willingly or not). Juxtaposition and edges become sites of tension and negotiation.

Later, I gathered old corrugated roofing tin as I drove between Tucson and Santa Fe. Mixed-media installation paintings, such as the *Farm Ghost* series and *Inappropriate Longings*, speak of their own violence—small family farms abandoned. There’s no water. There’s no one there. The paintings incorporating materials from those sites (roofing tin, gutters, troughs, buckets, linoleum, etc.) are abstract narratives about hard times, drought, and capitalism in rural America, about the violence done to and by the farmer. They are not nostalgic. As much as we try to read the sites through the materials and objects left behind, we don’t really know what went on there.

I am often interested in the other side, the back or the underside, of materials—such as the back of the Aikido mat cover or the underside of linoleum fragments in *Inappropriate Longings*—suggesting hidden or buried secrets. It’s as if the materials know and bear witness to what went on in that kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, attic, basement, or shed.



Harmony Hammond, *Meditation*, 2001 – 02 (detail). Oil on canvas with metal feed trough, latex rubber & horse skull. 88 × 72 × 18 inches. Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates. © Harmony Hammond. Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Rail: You mentioned *A Queer Reader* earlier. That book project, as well as another, *Represent Women: A Primer* (2002), in which you repair or reconstitute a damaged book, attempt to recuperate acts of violence. These projects involved books, not paintings, but I can't help but think of the body of the book in these works, as you already have focused on the body of the painting.

Hammond: Yes, *Represent Women*, *A Queer Reader*, and the seven *Portraits* (2004) recuperate the object from the initial act of violence, but there are differences. In *Represent Women*, the actual vandalized book is part of the artwork. Slit and split along its spine, the remains of the book felt so violated that I found myself choosing to make new covers of cast latex rubber to hold it together, to protect it, to wrap around it and embrace it.

A Queer Reader and the seven *Portraits*, the works of art operate conceptually off a second vandalized book, but the physical book is not part of the artwork. The original cut made by the vandal was incised into the paper jacket of the book (with the Pierre & Gilles photo of a sailor used in the jacket design) revealing the red cloth cover beneath. This eye, or leaf shape, was also cut into some of the interior pages. I used a blank page with that cut-out shape painted red where the vandal's mat knife had slipped a bit, scanned it, then used that scan as a template, digitally moving pages of text around behind the template until I found a section of text that worked visually and conceptually. The *Portraits* function somewhere between photography and collage. I was interested in what was, or was not, being seen through the cut hole—in how to show the vandalism and yet turn it around.

Rail: *Turn it around*—that phrase recalls what you've described: redirecting an opponent's moves in the martial arts.

You've also mentioned another earlier work, *Meditation*. That mixed-media painting includes a horse's skull with a bullet hole in the center of its forehead, which I read as a definite marker of violence. Your new works make use of the punctured hole of the grommet, a type of penetration. So, they're also violent but perhaps more ambiguously so—or at least in a way that is less overly determined than the bullet hole.

Hammond: *Meditation* follows the *Farm Ghost* and other mixed-media paintings. I had been working with old water troughs and gutters as metaphors for circulatory systems, for life-giving fluids like water and blood. I knew that I wanted to attach the feed trough, which had been knocking around my studio for some time, directly to the painting and that the painting surface, which looks like dried blood or scabs, was visually powerful enough to hold this protruding object. I was interested in literally attaching objects in the way that we attach meaning to paintings, not integrating them into the painting surface as we are taught in art school, but just attaching them.

It took me a long time, however, to figure out what was to go in the shrine-like trough. I tried many things. Everything seemed like not enough or too much. One day, out of desperation, I just hung this horse skull with a bullet hole through the head in the trough. I had found the skull upstate when I lived and worked in New York. I took it west with me to New Mexico, where it gathered dust for several decades before finding its place in this painting.

Rail: The skull is an icon resonant of the West, though.

Hammond: To my surprise, I liked the skull, but didn't know why. It also scared the shit out of me because it was such a "no no" to put a skull in a work of art, such a risky act, something a serious woman artist living and working in New Mexico—the landscape of O'Keeffe and O'Keeffe clones—should not do. At the same time, the fact that it felt so transgressive interested me. And so the horse skull stayed, functioning as a warning sign, like a skull one might find at a toxic waterhole. But maybe some sort of warning, too, in

terms of painting and modernism. In hindsight, the painting seems unintentionally in dialogue with O’Keeffe’s *Cow’s Skull: Red, White, and Blue* (1931).

The bullet hole in bone is certainly a definite sign or marker of violence, but it is more complicated than you might think at first. What initially reads as violent, may not be entirely so. My friend Herb, who has a horse and rides, informed me that when a horse is seriously injured out on the range—say it breaks a leg—it is often shot in the head to humanely relieve it of their pain and misery. It is the responsibility of every rider to know how to do this. He gave me a text and diagram from a book that describes exactly what to do. When I exhibited *Meditation*, I also exhibited a digital scan of the book text and diagram.

To my mind, bullet holes and grommet holes function differently on a conceptual level. Bullet holes read violent but may or may not be so. Holes made in the canvas as part of the grommeting process don’t read or feel violent to me (the way the punctures and slashes of Burri or Fontana might). Nor are the holes voids. Maybe it’s because the metal of the grommet protects the hole from stretching or ripping and the bullet hole is ragged, not perfectly round and smooth. Grommeting is more about creating a space for passage that functions like a bodily orifice. And yet, I intentionally do not do a good grommeting job. I smash the grommets so their perfect circles become irregular, perhaps misshapen—animated, alive.

CONTRIBUTOR

Phillip Griffith

PHILLIP GRIFFITH is a scholar and poet, and a doctoral candidate in French at the Graduate Center, CUNY.