

INTERVIEWS

HARMONY HAMMOND

April 17, 2018 • As told to Chelsea Weathers



Harmony Hammond, *Inappropriate Longings*, 1992, oil, latex rubber, and linoleum on canvas with metal gutter, water trough, and dried leaves. 7 1/2 x 18 1/4'. © Harmony Hammond/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

As a cofounder of A.I.R. Gallery in New York and Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics in the 1970s, Harmony Hammond was at the forefront of a feminist revolution in contemporary art. From her early sculptures that incorporate gendered

notions of craft, such as her series of “Floorpieces” and hanging textile sculptures, to her book Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History (2000), to her more recent, almost monochromatic paintings, Hammond has expanded the possibilities of what might be considered queer art, often championing the idea that abstraction has the power to signify gendered and/or queer content. Her current exhibition, “Harmony Hammond: Inappropriate Longings,” focuses on a selection of work from the 1990s and will be on view at Alexander Gray Associates in New York from April 19 through May 26, 2018. Here, Hammond discusses how she chooses materials, and their significance to her past and current practice.

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED in bringing sociopolitical content into the world of abstraction. Incorporating materials and objects, with their geographies, histories, and associations, is one way of doing this. Since the late 1980s, I’ve worked with oil on canvas, combined with nontraditional materials—primarily items that are recycled and repurposed (fabric, linoleum, rusty metal, charred wood, grommets, burlap) or natural (straw, leaves, roots, hair, blood), but also others like latex rubber and tar. Occasionally, I use objects. The fact that most of these materials have been discarded in some way references the lives and creative histories of those who have been relegated to the margins of culture.

I live in Galisteo, New Mexico, and regularly commuted to Tucson, Arizona, where I taught at the University of Arizona for sixteen years. So, many of the materials and objects I gathered and used during that time reflected the barrios and rural environments of New Mexico and Arizona, or the dirt roads somewhere in between. While these materials are very different from those I scavenged for when I lived in New York in the 1970s and early 1980s (fabric from the garment districts south of Houston Street), my work is not about the Southwest per se. Nor is it about me.

Like many artists, I began using found materials because they were free for the taking. Initially, I am drawn to a particular material because of its formal properties (color, form, texture, etc.) or some particular quality it has (like how latex rubber literally forms a skin). However, it’s not the materials themselves, but how they are used—fragmented, layered, pieced, patched, flapped, stitched, seamed, ripped, cut, wrapped, tied, split,

frayed, juxtaposed, sutured, knotted—that is most important, that carries meaning—what I call “material engagement.” Materials that have the ability to function both as themselves and as metaphor also have agency to suggest narratives.

The works from the 1990s in my current exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates use materials as visual metaphors for desire, violence, body, and place, as well as for the effects of time, foul weather, and foul play. Central to the exhibition is the tableau *Inappropriate Longings*, 1992—the last work in a series of large-scale mixed-media installational paintings incorporating weathered materials and objects salvaged from abandoned farm sites. It combines a triptych of oil paint, latex rubber, and linoleum, with a metal gutter, a water trough, and dried leaves attached to or placed in front of the painting. The left-hand panel consists of fragments of floral patterned linoleum sutured with latex rubber. The center panel presents a bleeding linoleum house shape in a field of brown oil paint and is also covered with a skin of rubber. Like an excavation of memory, the right-hand panel presents the dark underside of the linoleum. The words *goddamn dyke* incised into the skin-like latex of the left panel insert a queer bodily presence into the regions of rural America and the modernist painting field. There’s a sense that something happened, but what? Hinting at transgressions and violence within the domestic setting, the painting is a material witness to a crime scene giving clues of events and actions not fully revealed.

Inappropriate Longings anticipates the work I do today. Over the years, the paintings have gotten simpler, more condensed, with fewer materials in any given piece. Thickly painted and near-monochrome, they are less narrative (in the sense of suggesting an event or action), however, the physical properties of the materials used—such as straps, grommets, bandage-like strips of cloth, or rough burlap patches with fraying edges and pronounced seams—activate the space beneath the crusty surface of oil. Space itself is a carrier of meaning. Color is visible through cracks, tears, crevices, splits, and holes, potentially disrupting the unified surface held together by pigment. It’s about tension at the edges and what’s hidden, revealed, covered up or over. What asserts itself from underneath. I think of it as a kind of survivor aesthetic: one of rupture, suture, and endurance.

— *As told to Chelsea Weathers*