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Queer Abstraction

Barbara McBane



Harmony Hammond, *Blanco*, 2012-2013, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 90.5 x 73.5 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. Art ©HarmonyHammond/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

In the late autumn of 2014,

San Francisco's Queer Cultural Center and the California College of the Arts presented *Queer Abstraction*, an evening of conversations about current interests in abstraction in the queer art world. Participants included Professors Julia Bryan-Wilson (UC Berkeley) and Tirza True Latimer (CCA) along with artist Harmony Hammond, a long-time advocate for lesbian and queer art and (in the words of the program notes) "one of today's boldest abstract painters."[1] Where to place Hammond's work within a larger history of monochrome painting, and what the significance of "near-monochromes" might be for "queer abstraction," broadly speaking, were questions that hovered over the evening's conversations and were answered aslant, in true queer form.

Bryan-Wilson began by helpfully setting parameters for discussion in the form of two questions: What do we mean by 'queerness'? What do we mean by 'abstraction'? She noted the multifaceted slipperiness of the terms, and proposed an open-ended definition of Queer Abstraction as "a resource for all those in the margins who want to resist the demands to transparently represent themselves in their work." Latimer followed by introducing Hammond's work, starting from the 1970s, when Hammond used abstracted biomorphic forms and domestic materials to evoke lives and cultures "outside the art world's official purview"—that is, lives lived in resistance to demands for transparency and the imposition of marginalizing categories and naming. Latimer noted that this early work has received disproportionate attention, notably in landmark feminist and queer retrospectives like *WACK!* and *In a Different Light*. Hammond's more abstract, near-monochromatic recent paintings have tended to be critically overlooked.

Latimer (as curator) and Hammond sought to redress this neglect by mounting a show at the Red Line Center for Contemporary Art in Denver, Colorado, earlier in 2014 (*Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome*) where a number of Hammond's large abstract paintings were on display. While appearing at first to consist of near-solid color fields, on closer inspection, the surfaces of these paintings reveal layers of undercoats and use texture, shadow and light to "interrupt" the presumed purity of the monochrome. These paintings are "not true monochromes," said Latimer, but are "becoming/unbecoming monochromes": they simultaneously "cite and refute the traditions associated with monochrome painting."

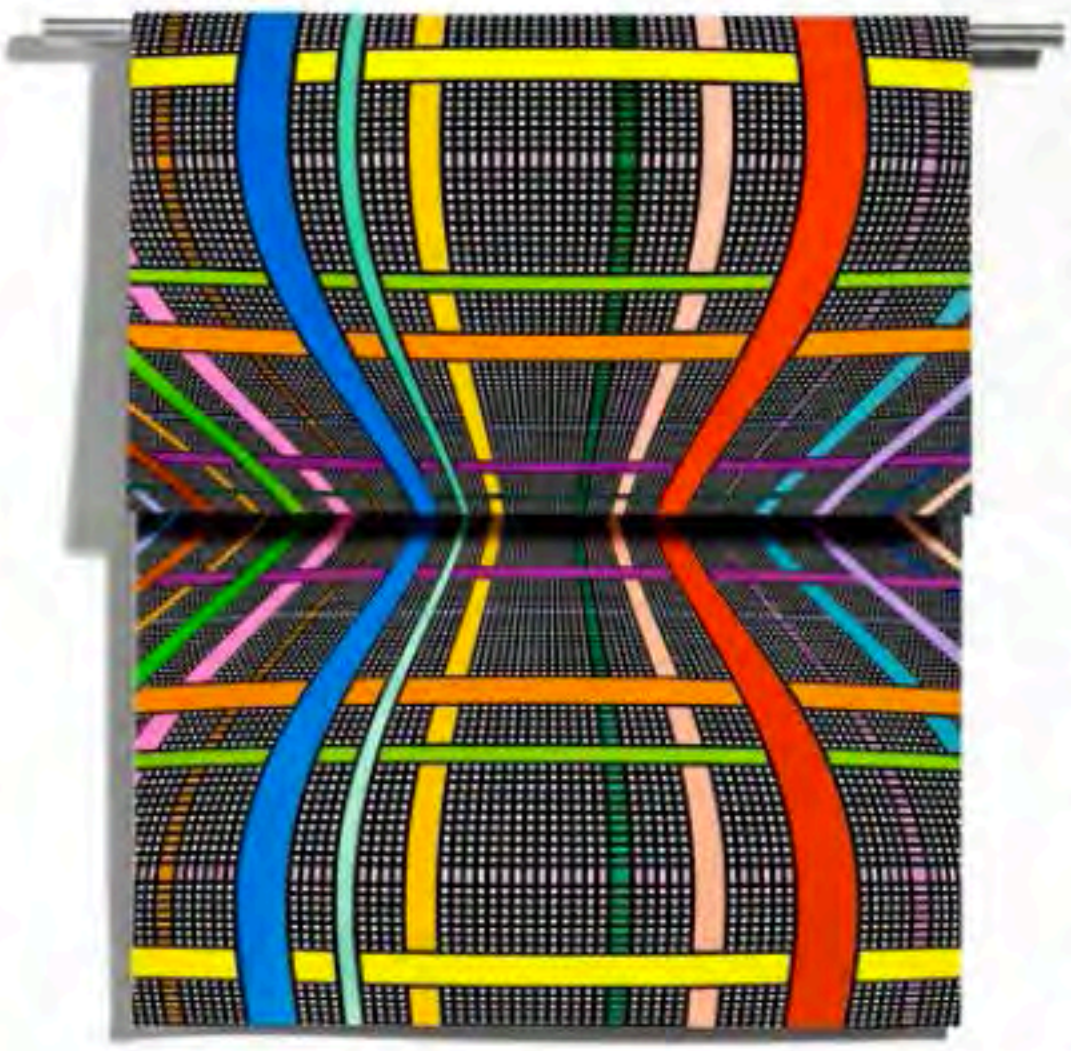
While Latimer mentioned minimalist monochrome painting in passing, she did not stop to define what "the traditions associated with monochrome" might be. Bryan-Wilson directed Latimer back toward this omission during the round-table discussion, querying her about "clustering these works of Harmony's under the rubric of the monochrome" which "has a very specific polemical history." Bryan-Wilson invited Latimer to expand on how/why she was "staking a claim in monochrome history" for Hammond's late abstractions.

Hammond followed Bryan-Wilson's and Latimer's presentations with a lively survey of four fellow queer abstractionists: Linda Besemer paints layers of acrylic on glass surfaces, then detaches the accumulated layers to create folded, hanging acrylic "blankets." Hammond noted that a painting with no supports, "made entirely out of itself," can function as "a metaphor for queer identity." Jonathan









VanDyke uses performance, submission/dominance choreography, drip painting, and other techniques to generate "durational paintings." Cutting, stitching, and costume design are also part of VanDyke's work, and he specifically acknowledges feminist influences. Josh Faught's assemblages also owe a debt to feminist art, drawing from fiber arts and needlecraft. In pieces like *Triage* (2009), scraps of fabric and objects hang off surfaces "like paint but not paint." From the varied body of work of Vienna-born, New York-based Ulrike Müller, Hammond honed in on a series of small enamel paintings—"pendants"—in which minimalist abstract forms are rendered in baked enamel to imply gendered or re-gendered bodies.

Hammond's four artists suggested coordinates for an expansive terrain of Queer Abstraction but, interestingly, none was even remotely a "monochrome" or "near-monochrome" painter. Rather, all four seemed to draw on early feminist interests in crafts and the textile arts. Hammond's presentation thus raised questions about where she might place her "near-monochromes" in a

(clockwise from top left)
Harmony Hammond, *Rib*, 2013. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 90.25 x 70.5 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. Art ©HarmonyHammond/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Josh Faught, *Triage*, 2009. Hemp, nail polish, spray paint, indigo, logwood, toilet paper, pins, books, plaster, yarn, handmade wooden sign, denim, and gloves, 80 x 120 in. Courtesy the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York.

Josh Faught, *How to Beat the High Cost of Living* (Detail), 2009. Handwoven cotton, nail polish, toilet paper, silk flowers, indigo, sequins, and ink, 92 x 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lisa Cooley, New York.

Linda Besemer, *Little Double Bulge*, 2008. Sheet of acrylic paint over aluminum rod, 24 x 22 in. Folded. Courtesy the artist.

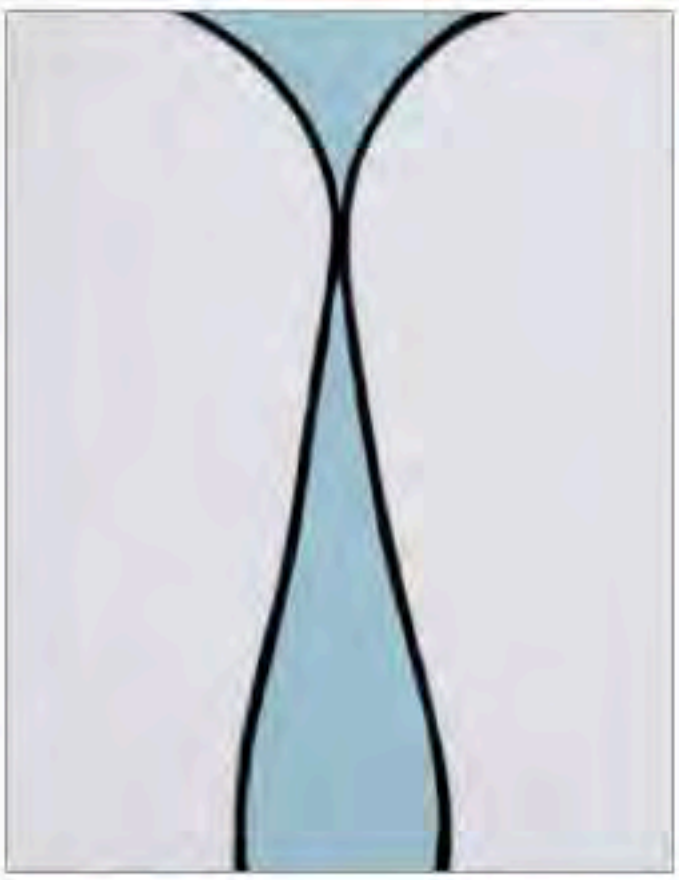
landscape of Queer Abstraction where so much of the work relies on strategies rather different from her current ones.

At one point toward the end of the evening, Latimer observed that "monochrome is an *effect*, clearly, as much as the black square is an effect; *black* is an effect." The comment suggested directions for rethinking monochrome. When Derek Jarman revolted against visual representation during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s/90s in his film *Blue*, he did it by evacuating the visual image of everything except chromaticity: the color blue. Blue is an *effect*, a category with limitless associations. Considered as "pure color" (a "reading" which Hammond actively resists), the monochrome, in part, signifies a category, a container, that carries a history of connotations and meanings both rich and dangerous. The language of color—its words, names, and supposedly 'pure pigments' (black, blue)—is not unlike systems of signification built around such categories as 'male,' 'female,' 'heterosexual,' 'homosexual', languages constructed from apparently pure objects which, when examined closely, are no more than contingent, performative effects (as Judith Butler famously argues). So it is no surprise the queer abstractionist might wish to examine inherited categories—including colors—minutely and deconstructively, returning them to their constitutive parts: paints made of plants, clay, or plastic; support surfaces fashioned from fiber and cloth; armatures assembled from wood, metal, glass. On close inspection, inherited categories—whether of color, gender, or sexual orientation—dissolve and disappear. In the end, Hammond's presentation came to the question of where/how her recent work stakes a claim in the history of monochrome painting obliquely (read: queerly), with a guided tour, not through a genealogy of monochrome forbears, but through a gallery of queer abstract "impurists"—artists like herself, less interested in transcending the materialities of the art object than in immersing us as thickly as possible in its messiness. ■

[1] Bryan-Wilson is associate professor of art history at the University of California, Berkeley; Latimer heads the Visual and Critical Studies Program at California College of the Arts. The event took place on October 31, 2014, as part of the "Queer Conversations on Art and Culture" (QCCA) series cosponsored by the Queer Cultural Center and CCA's graduate program in visual and critical studies. Many thanks to the QCCA Organizing Committee for their assistance: Tina Takemoto, Tirza T. Latimer, Nell Schwartz, Greg Crysler, and—especially—Rudy Lemcke for providing documentation.

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(below left) Jonathan VanDyke, *No Name*, 2013, (installation view). On Stellar Rays, New York.

(below) Jonathan VanDyke, *With One Hand Between Us (Day 2)*, 2011, 40-hour performance for three actors and installation with three sculptures. Scaramouche, New York.

(above right) Ulrike Müller, *Fever 103*, 2010, Vitreous enamel on steel, 15.5 x 12 in.

(right) Ulrike Müller, *Fever 103*, 2010, Vitreous enamel on steel, 15.5 x 12 in.

