

Harmony Hammond

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Alexander Gray Associates

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May 19–June 25, 2016

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Material Engagements

The paintings in this exhibition come out of late 60s and early 70s post-minimal interdisciplinary experimentation with materials and process, a time when artists moved back and forth between what might be called painting, sculpture and performance, calling it one thing one day and another thing the next. Feminists brought a gendered content to this way of working. I and many other feminist artists abandoned the male-dominated site of painting consciously using materials, techniques and formal strategies associated with women's traditional arts and the arts of non-western cultures, precisely because of their marginalized histories and associations. Underlying this practice was the belief that materials (in my case cloth) and the ways they are manipulated (layering, piecing, weaving, stitching, knotting, ripping, wrapping, patching, braiding, lacing, etc.) contribute to content as much as form, sign or symbol.

This is still how I approach my work today. It's about painting, materiality and content, about process and agency—what I call “material engagement.”

All art participates in multiple narratives. I like to think of mine as contributing to both dominant and oppositional discourses. For the last fifteen years or so, I have made large, thickly painted near-monochrome oil paintings on stretched canvas. While these paintings engage with (and I like to think, simultaneously interrupt and resist), the received history of modernist painting—and more specifically, narratives of abstraction and monochrome—they too come out of post-minimal and feminist concerns with materials and process, rather than modernist reduction. They too invite content.

Like my wrapped sculptures of the late 70s and early 80s, the recent paintings are slowly layered and built out of themselves from the inside out (moving from personal to social or political). The surface is activated by the manipulation of the materials (paint, fabric including various types of canvas, metal grommets, and occasionally strings or ropes) resulting in a physical presence usually associated with sculpture.

Simultaneously elegant, raw, crude—definitely handmade—the textured surface of multi-directional brushstrokes functions as indexical sign of maker and making, referencing other materials and substances at the same time it stubbornly remains itself: paint. Color, while freed from representation, retains referentiality. Dried blood and other body fluids, flesh, bone, skin, wounds, scabs and scar tissue, scraped hides, stucco, weathered and patinated wood and metal, topographical locations. The body is always near.

Monochrome painting allows one to escape figuration but presence the body. The skin of paint calls up the body, and therefore the painting body. By that, I mean the physical object as well as the body that makes the painting. At their best, the paintings transmute the painting field into the body.

Monochrome, or what I do, the not quite monochrome, the becoming or unbecoming monochrome, the disruption of monochrome, is where content enters in. Up close under-layers of color are visible through surface cracks, crevices, and holes. It's about what's hidden, what's revealed, pushing up from underneath, the painting surface under stress.

I've always been interested in the possibilities of content in abstraction (after all, abstraction of something implies process), especially what Kobena Mercer calls "discrepant abstraction," or all that does not fit neatly into the institutional narrative of abstract art as a monolithic quest for purity. Despite their minimal presence, paintings like *Flap*, *Things Various*, *Spillway*, *Witness*, *Naples Grid*, *Red Stack*, *Trace* and *Silencia*, upset the canonical rhetoric of purity and transcendence, troubling abstraction's dominant narratives by showing the seams, sutures, flaps, tears, patches and holes.

Grommetted cotton canvas speaks of tarps, tents, and drop cloths—it's tough and functional—it has a job to do. For me there are additional associations. Some of the paintings—for example *Welts* (black) and (crimson), *Muffle*, *Flap*, *Witness*, *Naples Grid* and *Bandaged Grid #1*—include or are 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 and I have used them as the support in some of the paintings.

I have also included the seams. Consciously countering digital seamlessness, the connecting strategies are intentionally left visible revealing the hand of the artist and the facture of their own making. When two pieces of like-kind canvas are stitched together, they create a "flap" on the under or other side of the Aikido mat cover. I've always been interested in the underside of things. In *Flap*, I've brought the "flap" center front, where it casts a shadow on the painting surface indicating a hidden and possibly gendered space beneath.

The "flap" also plays a role in *Naples Grid* (double flap) and *Bandaged Grid #1* where the flap's cast shadow dialogues with the few dark-colored patches of fabric that can be read as tears in the painting surface.

The grommets (holes reinforced with metal so they don't rip and tear) 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 so had to start sewing my own straps and grommetting them.

The grommetted straps in the wrapped paintings suggest binding, bandaging, bondage, and restraint—evoking as Tirza True Latimer has noted, "... a body negotiating for freedom of movement." Usually, the straps are intentionally wrapped around the painting as object and body, appearing at first glance to embrace/restrict/hold the painting together—however, they are not that tight. They do not restrict or constrict. The straps—which are often pieced as in *Buff*, *Sienna*, *Blanco*, *Coverup*, *Fraggle*, and *Things Various*—do not necessarily connect, do not hold the painting together. It's the paint, and therefore the act of painting, that holds the painting body together.

Straps and strings in the torso-sized *Lace* and *Cinch* paintings, as well as *Klee* where the straps do not wrap around the painting, suggest a rib cage or corset, but do not cinch. They are not pulled tight. There is no constraint—only the possibility of constraint. It's the same with *Rib* where the ties are provocatively left hanging open.

These days, I'm more into the grommetted holes than the straps. Of course, grommets have their own painting history. In the late 60s and early 70s they were used extensively by artists painting on unstretched canvas as a means to hang or informally present a painting. I use grommets in a manner more visual and conceptual than functional. When located on hems or straps, the grommets suggest the potential of tying down, securing, holding together, connecting, or attaching. In dialogue with the pigment-encrusted pushpins which stick out in relief, the grommetted holes physically open the painting surface, alluding to layers and spaces buried below. The holes also suggest body orifices where blood or other body fluids ooze out from underneath or not. Sometimes paint clogs the holes.

In my most recent work, the grommets often appear as a gridded field, thereby eliminating the possibility of physical function. The grid is always about marking time and space, about repetition and order. It is

non-hierarchical and asserts the flat picture plane. I've used the grid on and off since the 70s, often disrupting it. The soft crocheted grid in *Girdle* would be one example. A grid structure underlies my journal drawings in ledger books and weave paintings from the 70s, and can be found incised in some of the near-monochrome paintings.

My grids are intentionally irregular (not perfectly measured and drawn). Many of the paintings start with a grid of grommetted holes in unstretched canvas that is archivally affixed to a slightly larger stretched gessoed canvas, and gessoed some more before being built-up with layers of oil paint. The glue or gesso shrinks the grommetted piece of canvas, causing the grid to go out of alignment and animates the holes. In other words, I consciously allow—no encourage—process to alter the materials, and therefore, the grid.

The edge of the unstretched canvas is always irregular and visible (creating an edge within an edge). This creates a spatial indeterminacy, a subtle visual tension as the grommetted holes read dark and deep through the painting to the wall—though that is rare—at the same time the visible edge of the unstretched canvas reinforces a shallow pictorial space. Under layers of paint assert themselves up through the holes suggesting agency and voice. A rupture from underneath, from what has been built upon... added to... covered up or over...

Straps may be added before, after, or intermittently with layers of paint and in some cases, as in *Trace*, pulled off, leaving tracks of previous occupation or function. In both *Flesh Fold #1* and *#2*, the unstretched grid of grommetted canvas affixed to a stretched canvas is partially pulled back like skin or blanket revealing a rawness underneath left exposed or filled in with poultice of paint. There's a feeling of immediacy and provisionality.

In *Bandaged Grid #1*, the most recent painting in the exhibition, fraying strips of left-over canvas are superficially affixed like bandages to the painting. The grid of grommetted holes, now only partially visible, becomes one of the under-layers. A bandage always implies a wound. A bandaged grid implies an interruption of the narrative of the modernist grid and therefore, an interruption of utopian egalitarian order... a precarity. But also, however fragile, the possibility of holding together, of healing.

Harmony Hammond, Galisteo, New Mexico, April 2016



Lace II, 2013



Bandaged Grid #1, 2015

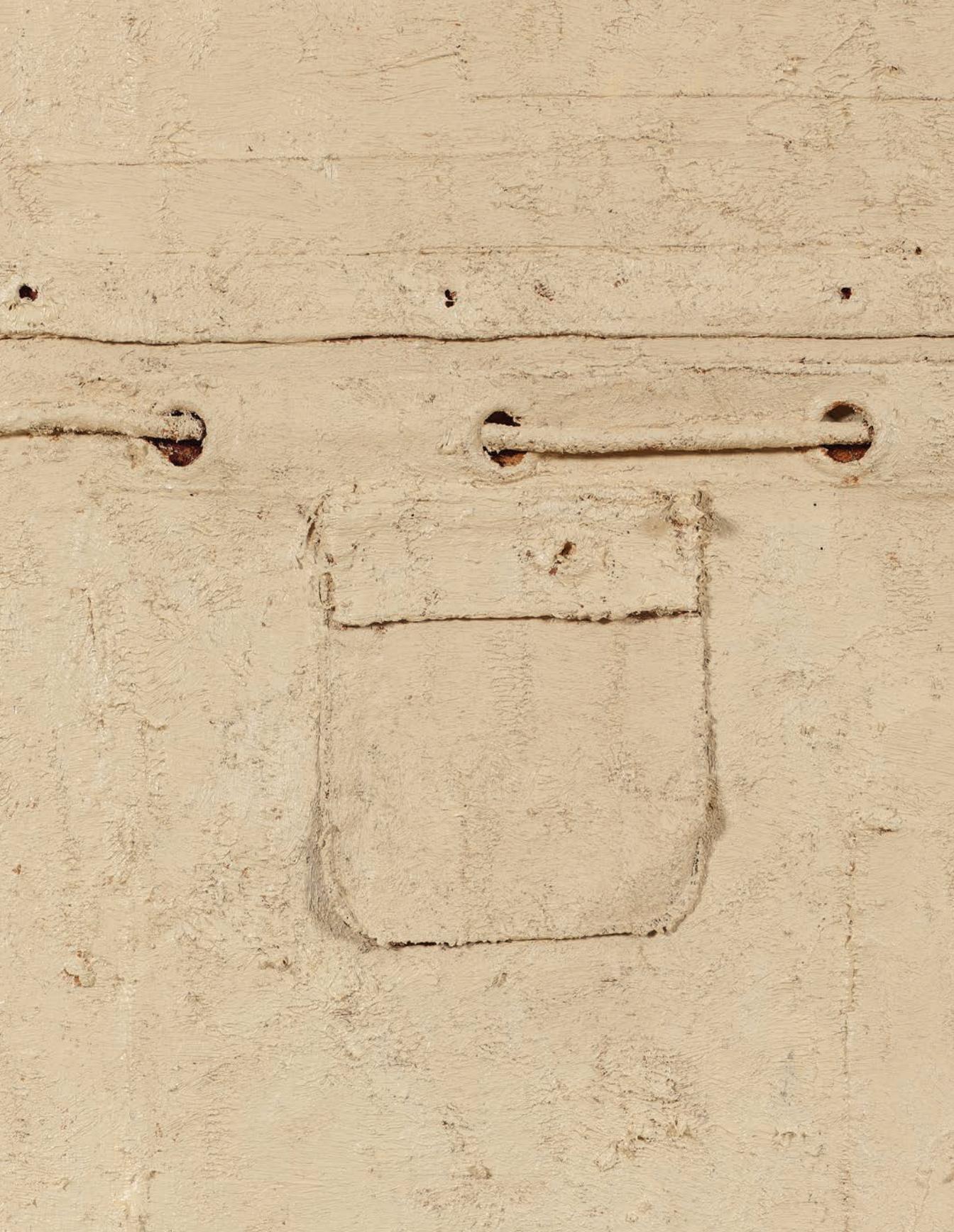
Red Stack, 2015





Harmony Hammond

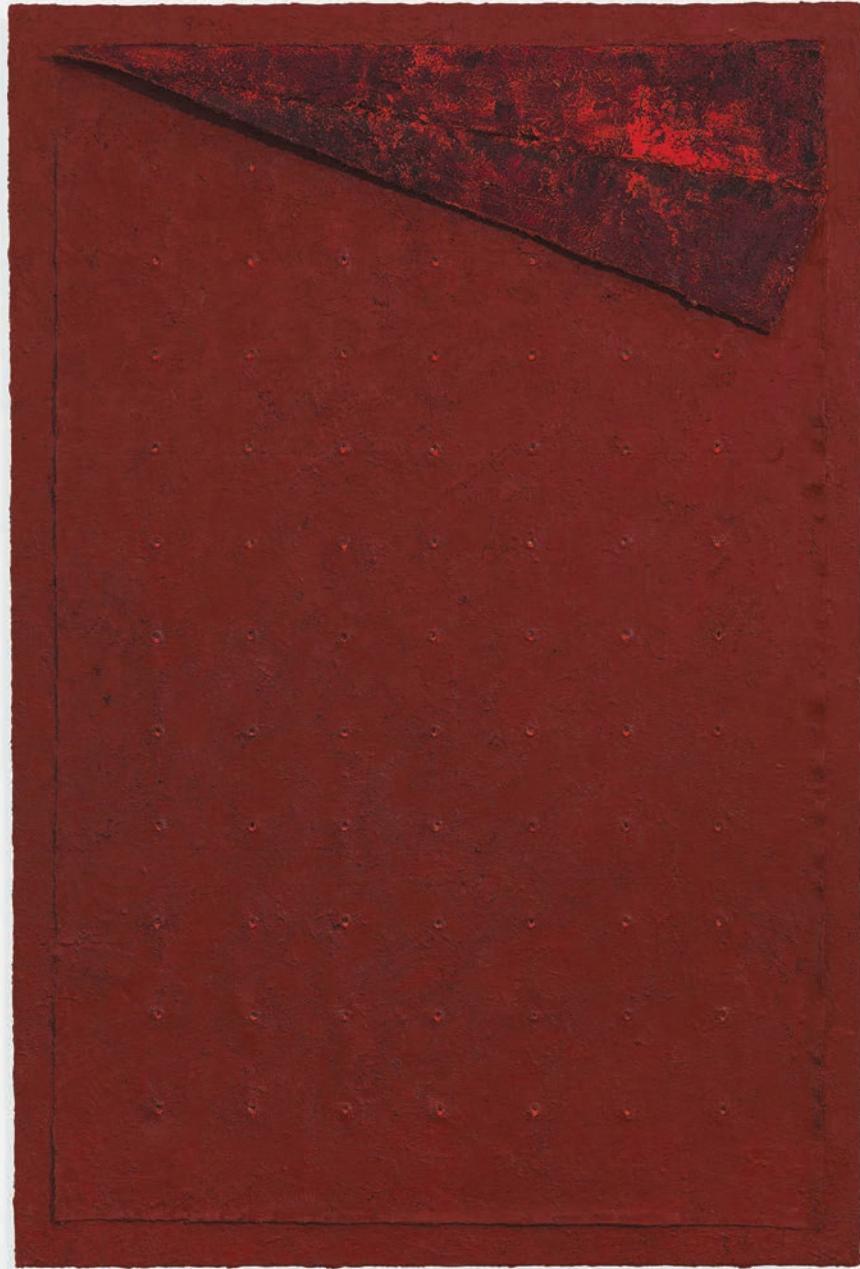
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016



Above: *Things Various*, 2015
Left: Detail



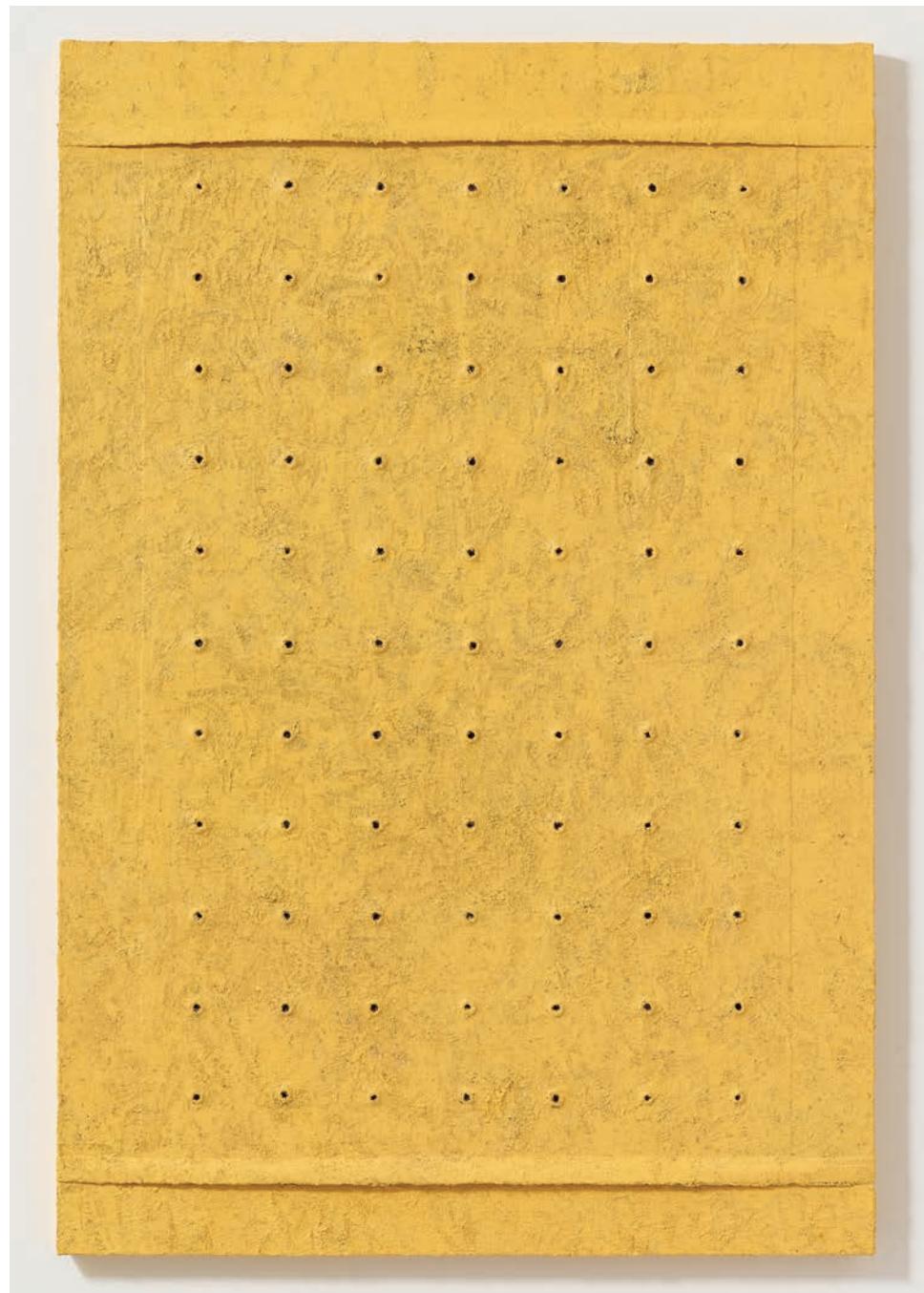
Trace, 2015



Flesh Fold #2, 2015



Witness, 2014



Above: *Naples Grid*, 2015
Right: Detail





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016



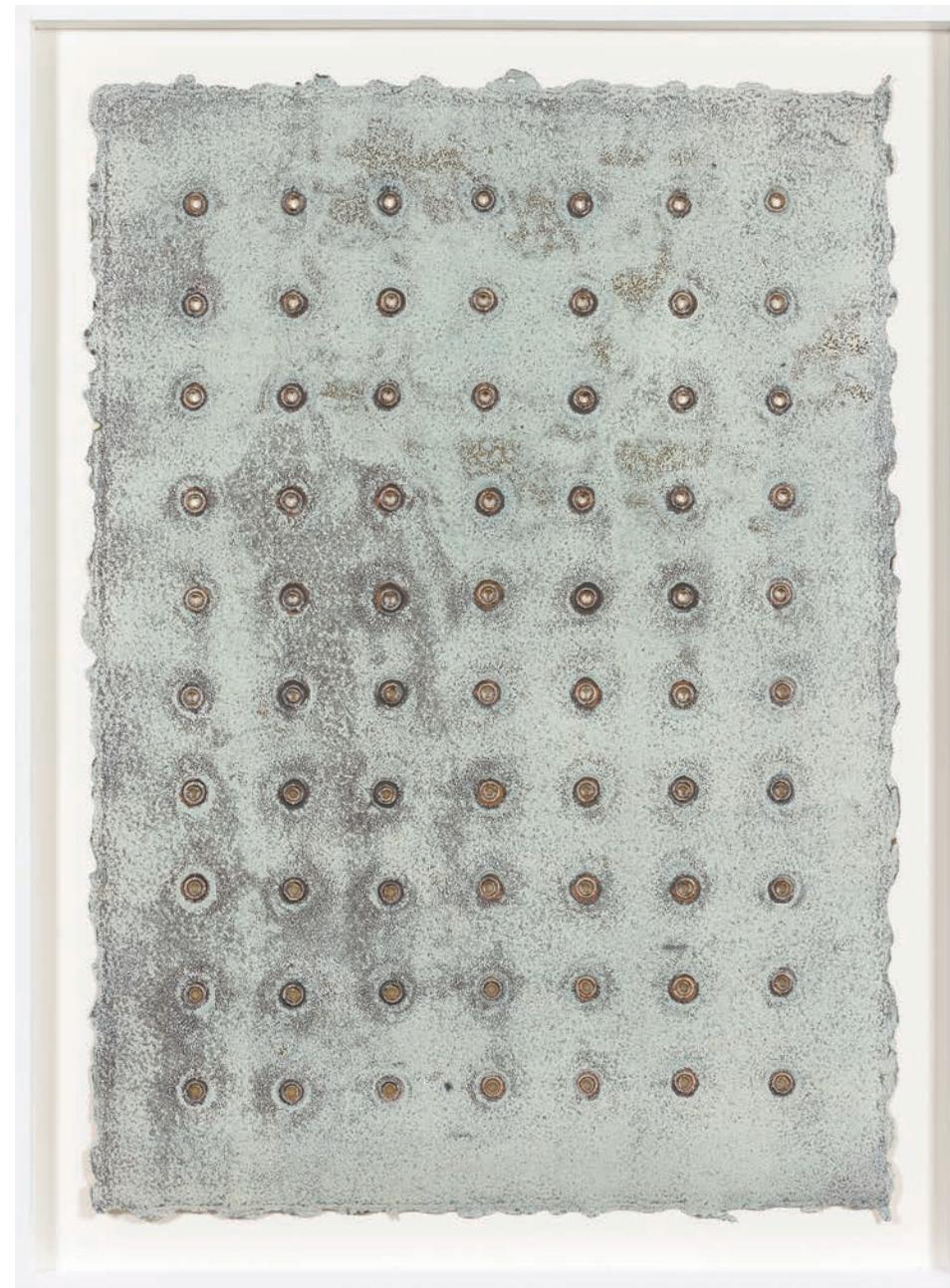
White Rims #1, 2015



White Rims #2, 2015



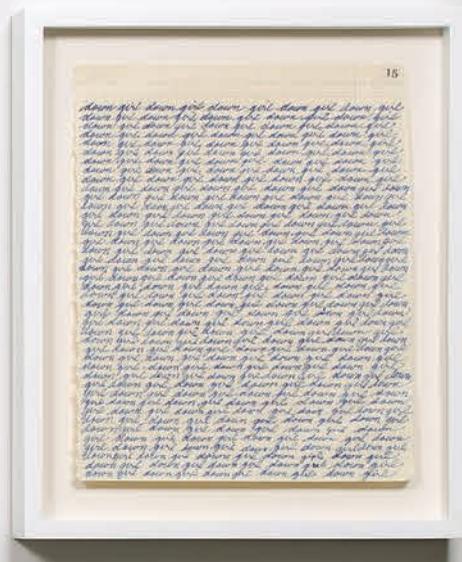
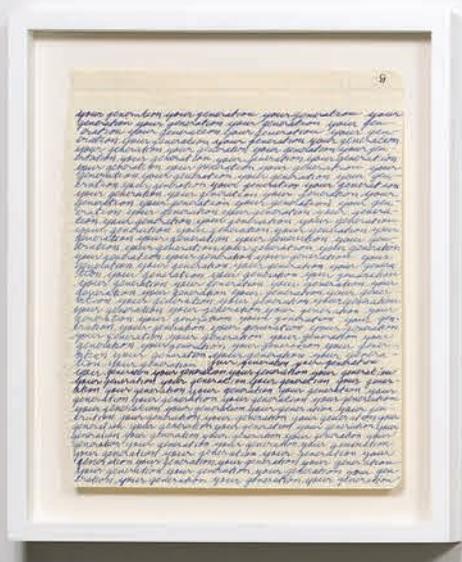
White Rims #7, 2015



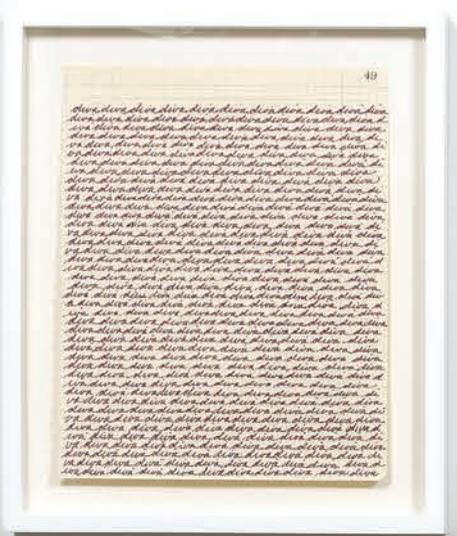
Above: *White Rims #4*, 2015
Left: Detail



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016



Ledger Drawings Suite A, 2015



Ledger Drawings Suite B, 2015

Harmony Hammond (b.1944) is recognized as a pivotal contributor to the Feminist and Queer discourse that emerged in the early 1970s in New York. She attended the University of Minnesota from 1963–67, before moving to New York in 1969. She was a co-founder of A.I.R., the first women's cooperative art gallery in New York (1972) and *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* (1976). Since 1984, Hammond has lived and worked in northern New Mexico, teaching at the University of Arizona, Tucson from 1989–2006. Hammond's earliest Feminist work combined gender politics with post-minimal concerns of materials and process, frequently occupying a space between painting and sculpture.

For years, she worked with found and repurposed materials and objects such as rags, straw, latex rubber, hair, linoleum, roofing tin, and burnt wood as well as buckets, gutters and water troughs as a means to introduce content into the world of abstraction. A second ongoing series of overtly political work in various media ranging from bronze sculpture to digital prints, deals with issues of intolerance, censorship and self-censorship. Hammond's near-monochrome paintings of the last decade participate in the narrative of Modernist Abstraction at the same time as they insist on an oppositional discourse by welcoming outside references—cultural, social, political—to influence the painting field. Their focus on materiality and the indexical, suggesting topographies of body and place, derives from and remains in conversation with, her feminist work of the 1970s.

Harmony Hammond's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally in venues such as Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria (2016); Rose Art Museum, Waltham, MA (2015); Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Germany (2015); RedLine Art Space, Denver, CO (2014); National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. (2011); MoMA PS1, New York (2008); Vancouver Art Gallery, Canada (2008); Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Internacional Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (2007); Neue Galerie, Graz, Austria (2007); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA (2007); SITE Santa Fe, NM (2002); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA (1996); Brooklyn Museum, New York (1985); New Museum, New York (1982), Downtown Whitney Museum, New York (1978), Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN (1968); among others. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Brooklyn Museum, NY; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Phoenix Art Museum, AZ; New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe; and the Wadsworth Atheneum,

Hartford, CT, among others. She has received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim, Joan Mitchell, Pollock-Krasner, Esther and Adolph Gottlieb and Art Matters Foundations, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, among others. Hammond's book, *Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art and the Martial Arts*, (TSL Press, 1984) is considered a seminal publication on 1970's Feminist art. Her groundbreaking book *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (Rizzoli, 2000) received a Lambda Literary Award, and remains the primary text on the subject. In 2013, Hammond was honored with The College Art Association Distinguished Feminist Award. She received both the College Art Association's Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award and Anonymous was a Woman Award in 2014.



Harmony Hammond, 2010



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2016

Checklist

Witness, 2014

Oil and mixed media on canvas
90.25h x 70.5w x 3d in
(229.24h x 179.07w x 7.62d cm)

Naples Grid, 2015

Oil and mixed media on canvas
80.25h x 54.5w x 3d in
(203.84h x 138.43w x 7.62d cm)

Red Stack, 2015

Oil and mixed media on canvas
80.25h x 50.5w x 2.5d in
(203.84h x 128.27w x 6.35d cm)

Things Various, 2015

Oil and mixed media on canvas
80.25h x 54.25w x 5d in
(203.84h x 137.8w x 12.7d cm)

Trace, 2015

Oil and mixed media on canvas
80.25h x 54.5w x 2.5d in
(203.84h x 138.43w x 6.35d cm)

Bandaged Grid #1, 2015

Oil and mixed media on canvas
44.25h x 76.5w x 2.5d in
(112.4h x 194.31w x 6.35d cm)

White Rims #1, 2015

Monotype on Twinrocker paper with metal grommets
47h x 33.5w in (119.38h x 85.09w cm)
Printed at 10 Grand Press by Marina Ancona

White Rims #2, 2015

Monotype on Twinrocker paper with metal grommets
47h x 33.5w in (119.38h x 85.09w cm)
Printed at 10 Grand Press by Marina Ancona

White Rims #4, 2015

Monotype on Twinrocker paper with metal grommets
47h x 33.5w in (119.38h x 85.09w cm)
Printed at 10 Grand Press by Marina Ancona

White Rims #7, 2015

Monotype on Twinrocker paper with metal grommets
47h x 33.5w in (119.38h x 85.09w cm)
Printed at 10 Grand Press by Marina Ancona

Ledger Drawings Suite A, 2015

Ink on paper in 5 parts
11.75h x 9.5w in (29.85h x 24.13w cm) (each part)

Ledger Drawings Suite B, 2015

Ink on paper in 5 parts
11.75h x 9.5w in (29.85h x 24.13w cm) (each part)

Illustrated

Lace II, 2013

Oil and mixed media on canvas
50.3h x 40.3w x 2.5d in
(127.76h x 102.36w x 6.35d cm)

Flesh Fold #2, 2015

Oil and mixed media on canvas
80h x 54.5w in
(203.2h x 138.43w cm)

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Cover image: *Bandaged Grid #1*, detail, 2015, oil and mixed media on canvas
44.25h x 76.5w x 2.5d in (112.4h x 194.31w x 6.35d cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, the Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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