

ArtSeen

Harmony Hammond: *Accumulations*

By Ksenia Soboleva

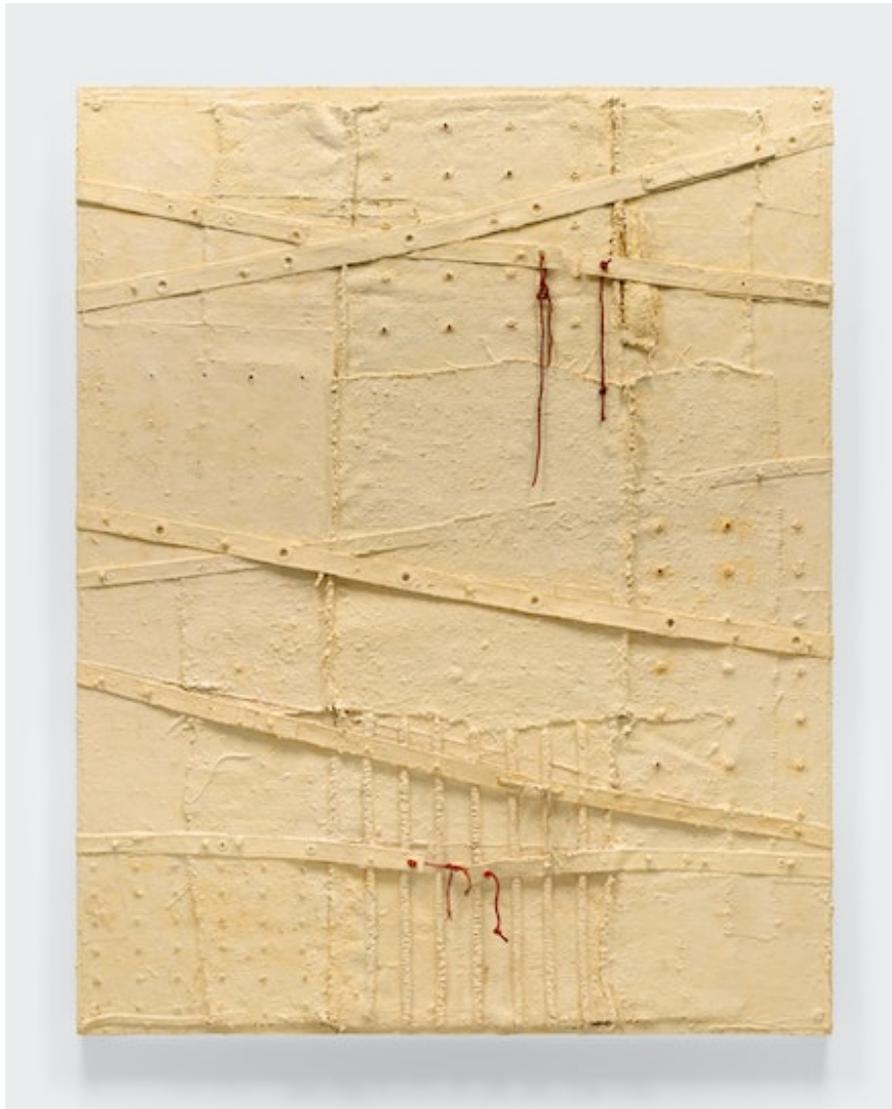


Installation view: *Harmony Hammond: Accumulations*, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2023. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates.

I am the kind of art historian who cannot detach the artwork from the person who made it: the body of the art is entwined with the body of the artist, a body that exists in a certain time and place, pursues certain desires, and experiences certain failures. While this attachment is well understood and accepted today, it would not have been taken very seriously when Harmony Hammond first emerged as an artist in the early 1970s, a moment still suffering from the bitter aftertaste of Clement Greenberg's mid-century formalism. But through her work as an artist, writer, and curator, Hammond has always

advocated for lesbian art and identity. In the 1970s alone, she co-founded the women-run AIR gallery (1972), co-edited the Lesbian Art & Artists issue of the feminist magazine *Heresies* (1977), and curated the iconic lesbian art show *A Lesbian Show* (1978). In 2000, Hammond published the *Lesbian Art in America* book, a culmination of years of research, commitment to her community, and a critical resource for any scholar pursuing research on the topic—such as myself.

Over the last two decades, Hammond has largely retreated from her curatorial and writing efforts, instead focusing on her own artistic practice. Her current solo show *Accumulations* at Alexander Gray presents a series of new paintings from the last three years that speak to her continued dedication to material and process.



Harmony Hammond, *Chenille #12*, 2021. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 90 3/8 x 72 1/2 x 3 3/4 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2023 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

To Hammond, the canvas is a body. Created through an immersive procedure of layering paint, burlap, and repurposed linen, the works adorning the walls of the large open gallery appear at once painterly and sculptural. Continuing Hammond's series of "Chenilles" a reference to her use of textiles, *Chenille #11* (2020–2021) and *Chenille #12* (2021) are representative of the artist's signature use of fabric straps, burlap patches, and grommets. The skin-like surface comes to resemble a bandaged body, parts of it stitched together, orifices oozing. Yet as much as these gestures imply the aftermath of violence, they also connote healing; both wound and scab. The gestures of repetition are at once destructive and reparative. Unlike the punctures and slashes deployed by male artists such as Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana, Hammond's grommet holes are transitional spaces, passageways that create an effect more meaningfully in dialogue with the work of artists such as Eva Hesse and Lee Bontecou.

Hammond further explores this tension in *Bandaged Grid #10 (La Mesa)* (2022), a large rectangular canvas hung horizontally which is made up of horizontal burlap straps, some seemingly leaking blood, punctuated by a regular grid of grommet holes. The lower quarter of the canvas is composed of patches of tablecloth featuring a green floral pattern. This is one of several works in which Hammond references women's domestic labor, a recurring theme throughout her oeuvre. The artist takes scraps of textile, accompanied by their various histories, and creates a new body out of these fragments. Imbued with the lives lived by the materials used, Hammond's paintings reveal a layered history of touch. The painting is a body that has been in physical contact with Hammond over and over, the touch at times gentle, at other times rough.



Harmony Hammond, *Bandaged Grid #10 (La Mesa)*, 2022. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 59 1/4 x 119 1/4 x 2 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2023 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

There is an eroticism that is inherent to these works, their abstraction heightening the potential for imagination. To a mind inviting of queer fantasies, Hammond's paintings might recall BDSM practices—I cannot help but think, when looking at the fabric straps wrapped around the canvases, the indents of the grommets, of consensual bondage, bruising, domination, and the various gestures of power play. While Hammond is less interested in speaking about her lesbian identity today than she was during the last three decades of the twentieth century, I could feel her queer energy radiate throughout the conversation we shared for the *Brooklyn Rail's* New Social Environment broadcast on May 15. When she calls herself a “space queen,” referring to her affection for big outdoor and indoor spaces (she has lived in Santa Fe since 1984), I am reminded of the desire, so characteristic of the 1970s, to claim and reclaim not only physical space, but the space of language—both spoken and visual.