

CRITIC'S PICK

Harmony Hammond's Art Is Bold and Prickly as Ever

At 75, the trailblazing artist, feminist and author of "Lesbian Art in America" finally gets a museum survey, and it shines.



By **Holland Cotter**

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From Harmony Hammond: *Material Witness, Five Decades of Art* at the Aldrich in Connecticut, a view of her "Presence" series of fabric sculptures, 1971-72. The forms look archaic, ceremonial, communal in spirit. Harmony Hammond/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jason Mandella

RIDGEFIELD, Conn. — With all the hullabaloo around the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, it's easy to forget that, well into the 1970s and beyond, to be an out gay artist was to court mainstream-career suicide. Harmony Hammond, who began exhibiting and curating in the very early post-Stonewall years, was one of the people responsible for defying and reversing this repression.

In the 1970s, in New York City, she organized the first local exhibition devoted entirely to art by gay women, and called it what it was: “A Lesbian Show.” She co-founded the feminist Heresies Collective and coedited a lesbian-themed issue of its journal. In 2000, she published “Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History,” the first and still only comprehensive survey book on the subject. (It’s been out of print for years.) From the start, in her own sculpture and painting, she bucked the trend that equated political art with figurative work, and invented her own modes of queer abstraction.

She did pay a price for such focused boldness. Only now, at 75, is she having her first career retrospective, “Harmony Hammond: Material Witness, Five Decades of Art.” And it’s not at a big-guns urban institution, but at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in leafy suburban Connecticut. Wherever, the show is taut, moving and beautiful, and well worth traveling to see.

As organized by Amy Smith-Stewart, senior curator at the Aldrich, the survey doesn’t follow a chronological path, though biography clearly shaped this art. Ms. Hammond grew up in a working-class town near Chicago. She studied painting in college, married a fellow artist, and for a while supported herself with minor art-related jobs.

But after the couple moved to New York City in 1969 — the Stonewall year — her trajectory became less conventional. Within a year, she had a daughter, separated from her husband, and began the process of coming out as a lesbian. Plunging headlong into the roiling downtown cultural scene, she joined a feminist consciousness-raising group, studied weaving and tai chi (she would later practice and teach the Japanese martial art of aikido), and, in 1972, became a founding member of the all-women A.I.R. Gallery, which is still going strong.

The earliest work at the Aldrich, a set of six fabric sculptures called “Presences,” reconstitutes the main element of her first A.I.R. solo. Each sculpture, suspended from the ceiling by a rope and lightly brushing the gallery floor, is roughly human size and composed of layered strips of dyed and painted cloth. The forms, of uncertain gender, look archaic, ceremonial, and communal in spirit. Significantly, most of the fabric strips were from recycled clothing donated by members of the women’s group Ms. Hammonds was involved with.



Harmony Hammond's "Floorpiece IV," 1973, acrylic on fabric.
Harmony Hammond/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jeffrey Sturges



At the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, left clockwise, "Floorpiece V; IV; II; III; VI," all 1973. Harmony Hammond/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jason Mandella

The sculptures that immediately followed, called “Floorpieces,” were also made from cloth, in this case commercial knit scraps that Ms. Hammond scavenged from sweatshop dumpsters in SoHo. She braided the cloth in a traditional rag-rug technique, then painted the surfaces. The tondo-shaped pieces — five of the original seven are in the show — are a cross between paintings, sculptures and domestic accessories. As such, they cast all three categories into question, and erase hierarchical distinctions between fine art and “women’s work” craft. To emphasize their versatile identities, Ms. Hammond insisted they be displayed on the floor in an otherwise empty gallery, as they are, to striking effect, at the Aldrich.

The art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, one of Ms. Hammond’s most astute critics, has suggested that the “Floorpieces” were the first works to consciously introduce a queer, and specifically lesbian identity, into Ms. Hammond’s work. The artist herself gives the nod in her extraordinary series of “Wrapped Sculptures” from later in the decade.

Once again, fabric is the chief material, but now tightly wrapped around wood armatures — ladders, stretcher bars, furniture parts — in thick, bulging, skin-stretching layers like muscles pumped to the point of explosion. The artist has said she modeled the work on aspects of the female body, exterior and interior, and she comes up with some tender tableaux: In one, a small, dark “ladder” leans, as if seeking support, against a larger, light-colored one. But the same technique can produce ominous things. A large, four-pronged wrapped sculpture called “Kong” protrudes from the wall like an immense grasping hand.

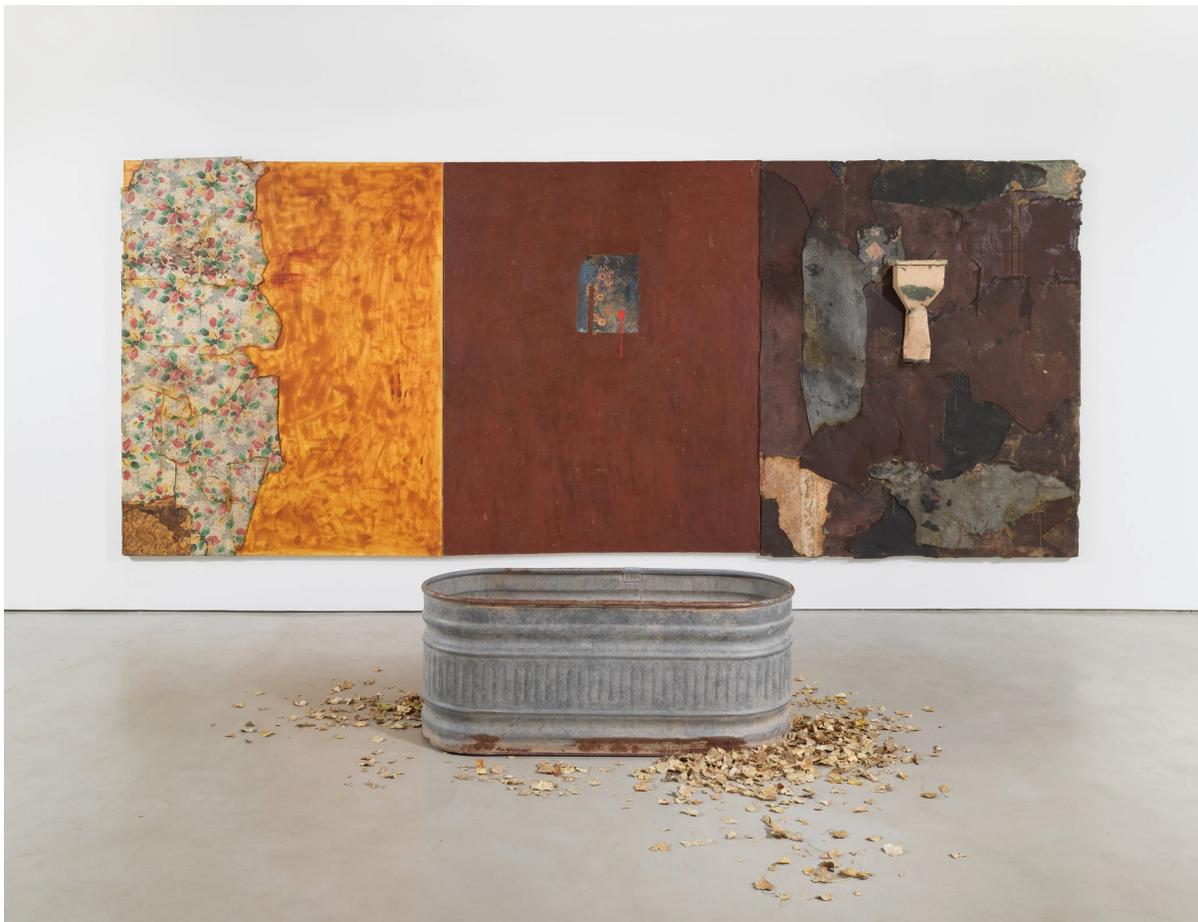


In “Hug,” 1978, a sculpture of two cloth-bound ladder forms, the artist modeled the work on aspects of the female body. A small, dark “ladder” leans, as if seeking support, against a larger one. Harmony Hammond/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Denis Y. Suspitsyn

When these sculptures first appeared, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they looked like nothing else in the art world. They still look that way. So does much of what came after.

In 1984, Ms. Hammond moved to New Mexico, where she still lives, and her art reflected the changed environment. With expanded studio space, she explored larger formats. In place of dumpster-diving, she collected relics of abandoned farmhouses. A 1992 installation called “Inappropriate Longings” includes three abstract collage-paintings that incorporate fragments of old linoleum flooring. In front of them stands a coffin-shaped water trough filled with dead cottonwood leaves.

At a glance, the installation gives off a nostalgic Dust Bowl vibe, though a close look delivers a nasty contemporary surprise: razor-carved into one of the panels, and smeared with red paint, are the words “Goddamn dyke.” The artist made the piece in response to reports of a hate crime committed during Colorado’s 1992 passage of an amendment to the state constitution denying gays protection from discrimination. (In 1996 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the amendment as unconstitutional.)



A collage-painting, “Inappropriate Longings,” 1992, combines fragments of old linoleum flooring. A coffin-shaped water trough is filled with dead cottonwood leaves.
Harmony Hammond/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jeffrey Sturges

Ms. Hammond entered art as an abstract painter and continues to be one, though of an emphatically un-Modernist kind. She has written: “My work is NOT pure, isolated, authoritative, universal, self-referential, self-sufficient or removed from social function.” This declared impurity is obvious everywhere in the show, from drawings made using watercolor, ink, and menstrual blood to a series of painting-like works made of straw mixed with acrylic pigment. (Some of these pieces look like blocks of spun gold, others like clods of dry earth.)

What is consistent is an unrelenting stress on materiality and a non-binary approach to form: Everything is painting *and* sculpture. In certain recent paintings, strips of cut canvas, secured by tacks or pierced by grommets, crisscross the surface in sculptural relief. And although this work is nonfigurative and even technically imageless, it very clearly suggests bound or bandaged flesh. In short, her monochromatic abstraction is never fully abstract. It is always, in some way, about actual tension and pressure, physical, political, psychological.



Ms. Hammond's "Blanco," from 2012-13. What is consistent is an unrelenting stress on materiality and a nonbinary approach: Everything is painting and sculpture. Tension and pressure — physical, political, psychological — are often evident.
Harmony Hammond Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Jason Mandella

Tons of abstract art has been churned out in the past five decades, yet not much new has happened. Galleries and museums are filled with walk-on-by works that, whatever their ingenuities, are basically just variations on old models, wall-filling exercises in easy, comfortable beauty. Ms. Hammond's art has beauty too, but of a prickly, irritant kind: it's

burlap — sometimes sandpaper — as opposed to silk. No surprise that, in a market-driven art world resistant to what can't be classified and resentful of work that refuses to ingratiate, the spotlight has been a long time coming her way. At the Aldrich, it shines.

Harmony Hammond: Material Witness, Five Decades of Art

Through Sept. 15 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn.; 203-438-4519, aldrichart.org.