Frieze

Inside Out: Harmony Hammond’s Queer Art of Bondage

BY EVAN MOFFITT
19 MAR 2019

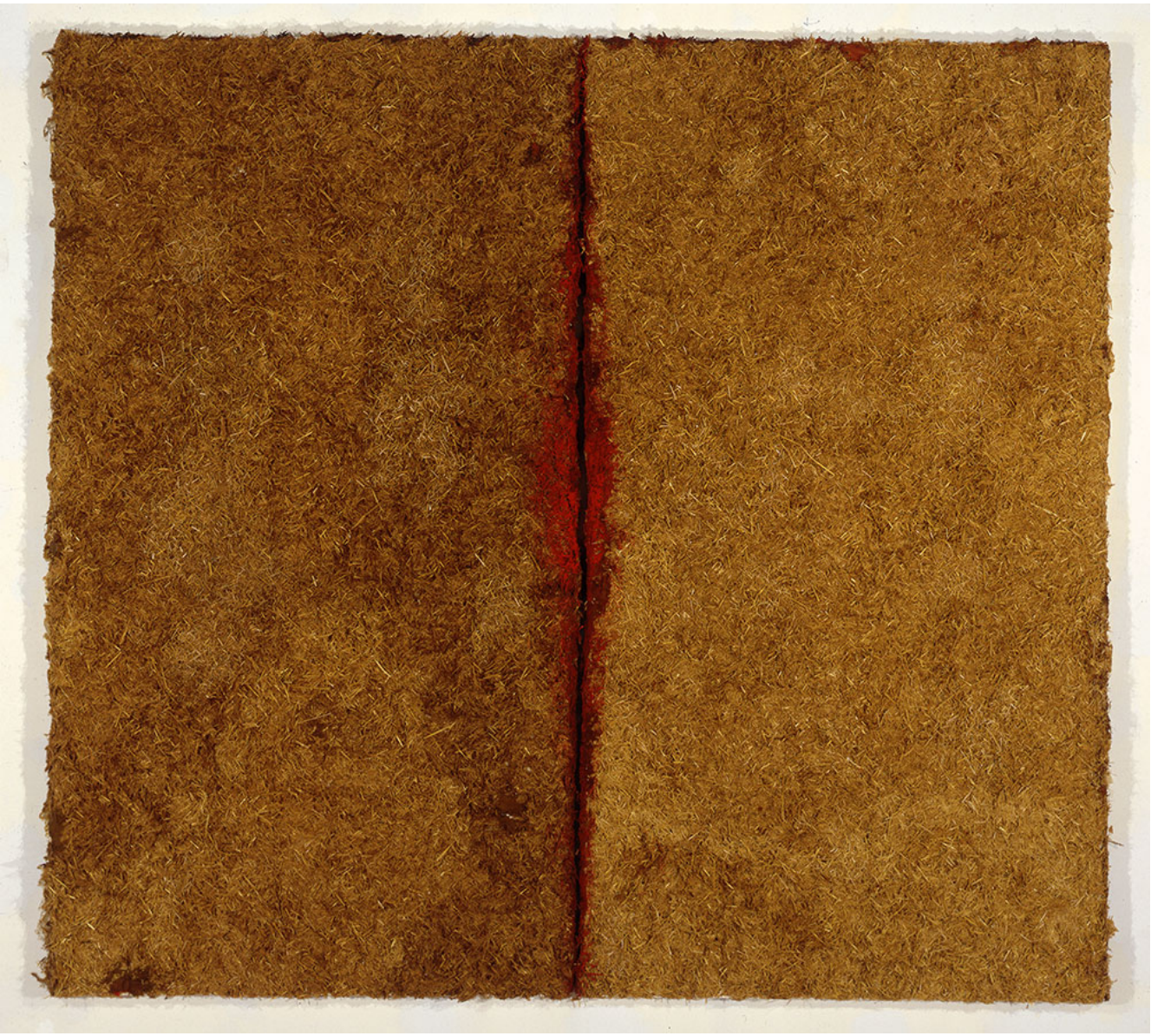
In the artist’s first US survey at the Aldrich Museum, abstract paintings and sculptures evoke women’s bodies in pleasure and pain



There are few artists more overdue for attention than Harmony Hammond, the pioneering lesbian feminist whose first US institutional survey opened this month at the Aldrich Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut. A prolific painter and sculptor for over five decades, Hammond is perhaps best known as co-founder of both A.I.R., launched in 1972 as the first artist-run gallery in the US dedicated to the work of women artists, and of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication of Art & Politics* (1977–93), which transformed the emergent discourse of feminism in the arts. Her book *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (2000) is an academic classic. But it is in Hammond’s own artworks that her politics take clearest shape: across the four galleries of this compact exhibition, abstraction is a direct invocation of women’s bodies and the work they produce. Intense textures lend her paintings and sculptures an erotic charge; here, surface is a window onto the interior self.

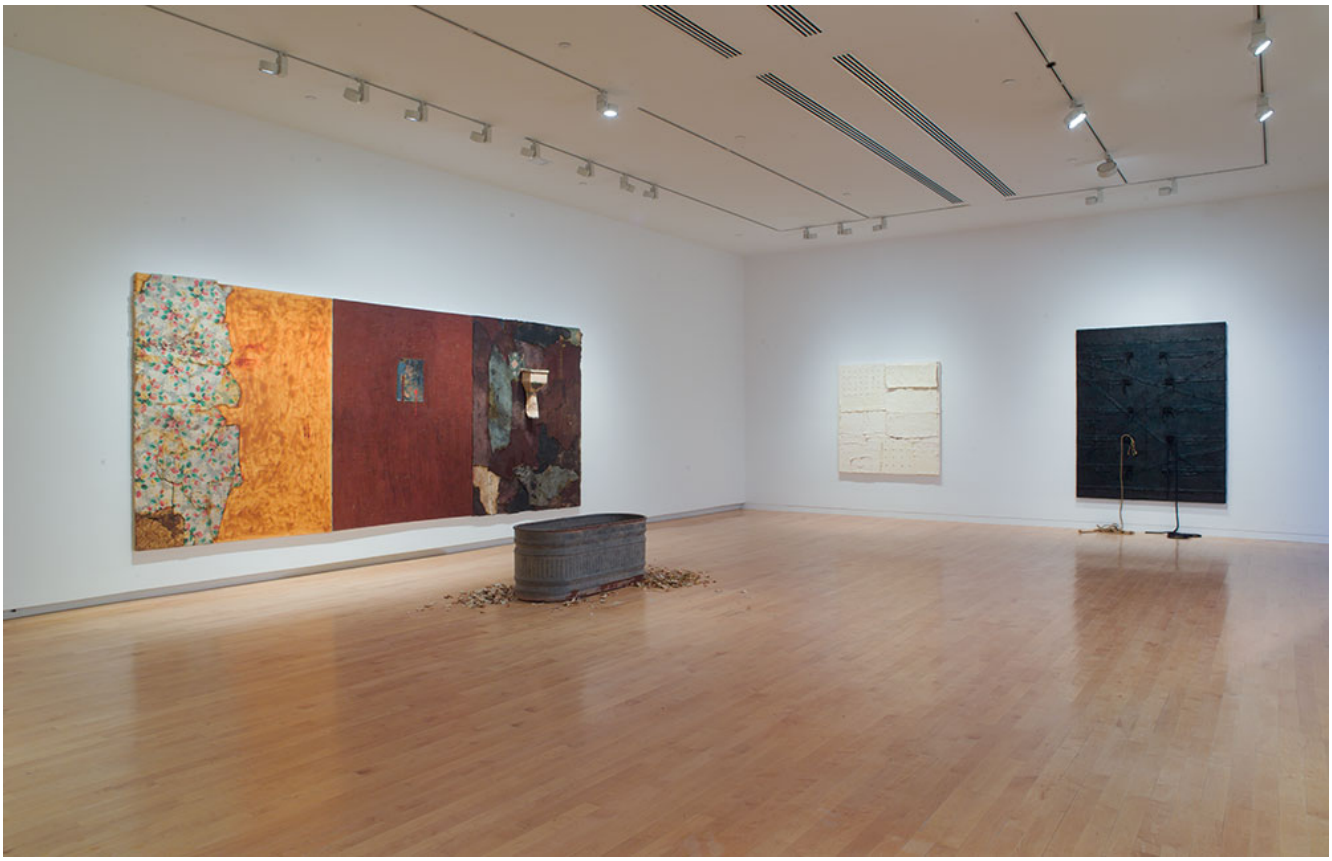
One early painting, *The Black Leaf* (1976), is a useful starting point: a lozenge-shaped canvas coated in black wax medium that Hammond gouged out in a herringbone pattern, revealing a raw dermis of red oil paint beneath. The work’s stitch-like motif not only invokes the ‘women’s craft’ of basket and textile weaving, which Hammond considers the anthropological genesis of abstract art, but through its visceral execution carries a powerful political message. Writing of the scraped and torn paintings of Louise Fishman and Joan Snyder in a 1977 issue of *Heresies*, Hammond remarked: ‘The reversal of

the usual additive process of painting refers to the violation of the traditional painting surface and also to the physical and psychic violation of women.’



Harmony Hammond, *Untitled*, 1995, straw, acrylic, oil on canvas (diptych). Courtesy: Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS); photograph: Herbert Lotz

Violence is always close at hand in Hammond’s work. Daubs of red on the acrylic and straw coat of one untitled canvas from 1998 resemble blood on matted fur. A nearby diptych sports a gruesome gash where its panels have been joined together (*Untitled*, 1995). As material for basket weaving , straw has gendered connotations; it also invokes the land, another gendered and colonized body. *Sieve* (1999) features a rusted metal sheet riddled with bullet-sized holes affixed to a canvas slathered in red oils. The work makes obvious reference to the 1950s spacialism of Lucio Fontana, whose slashed and punctured canvases ruptured the modernist picture plane and extended the declarative flatness of abstract painting into real space. Hammond goes further still: her pierced canvases are not just three-dimensional but appear almost to be flesh incarnate, with holes a Doubting Thomas might finger.



Harmony Hammond, ‘Material Witness: Five Decades of Art’, 2019, installation view detail, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Courtesy: the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2018 Harmony Hammond

There is a similarly fleshy quality to Hammond’s sculptures, though they appear not freshly wounded but healing. *Hug* (1978), the earliest work on view from her series ‘Wrapped Sculptures’ (1973–84), features two nesting ladders bundled in cloth painted black and shimmering bronze. Though their forms are faintly recognizable, their diminutive size and excess padding render them useless for their original purpose. Instead, we might take Hammond’s title as an invitation to loop our arms around or through their rungs; or, laid horizontally, they could serve as bedframes or stretchers. As Hammond has argued, these sculptures are not bandaged bodies but, rather, their tender innards: skeletons wrapped thinly in meat and skin. ‘Their associations with female body parts and orifices […] conveyed the interior female body – the muscle, tissue, membrane, fluid,’ she wrote in *Lesbian Art in America*. ‘Intended to create a lesbian sensual presence in the world, they were not about mummifying, binding, bandaging or protection, but about making something out of itself from the inside out, with the insides showing on the outside.’

In the 1980s, Hammond’s art strayed further outside, to the rural landscape of northern New Mexico, where she relocated in 1984. The results were mixed: highly evocative of the countryside, the works lacked nuance in their address of the social and economic conditions there. Take *Inappropriate Longings* (1992), for instance: at more than five metres long, it’s the largest work in the show and features a motley patchwork of torn and scuffed linoleum flooring, rust-red paint and muddy latex, into which a homophobic slur has been scratched. The triptych foregrounds a weather-beaten trough filled

with dead leaves. The work isn't so much an abstract reference to poor and conservative rural communities in the US as it is an assemblage of its refuse.



Harmony Hammond, *Blanco*, 2012–2013, oil and mixed media on canvas. Courtesy: Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS); photograph: Jeffrey Sturges

These days, though, Hammond is at the very top of her game: the most recent works in the exhibition are also arguably the strongest. *Blanco* (2012–13), a white monochrome painting criss-crossed with grommeted canvas straps, is a sly and sexual send-up of minimalist tropes, like an Agnes Martin in a straitjacket. (At another glance, it resembles a barn door.) Hammond seems to delight in the constrictions of painting and achieves a masterful range of chroma and texture. It is a model of strength through vulnerability – and of how we might escape the moral and political straitjacket of our time.

Main Image: Harmony Hammond, Bandaged Grid #1, 2015, oil and mixed media on canvas. Courtesy: Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2018 Harmony Hammond / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS); photograph: Jeffrey Sturges

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