

5 decades of Harmony Hammond's revolutionary work on view at the Aldrich

By Joel Lang

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An homage to Milford's "Chicken Lady," one of Harmony Hammond's works at the Aldrich.

The recently opened exhibit on the artist Harmony Hammond is a coup for the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield and one that brings unique gifts to Connecticut viewers.

Curated by the Aldrich's Amy Smith-Stewart, it is the first attempt by any museum to survey Hammond's nearly 50-year, still-active career that began by shattering art world and social boundaries and now is seen as prophetic.

Hammond, who gained early fame as a lesbian artist, but now rejects that label as outdated, made paintings that are three-dimensional and sculptures that are painted. Some of her earliest, most radical works are both. Her “Floorpieces” from 1973 is a collection of braided rag rugs, made from fabric scraps pulled from dumpsters, that she also painted and made too thick to walk on.

Spiraling out from the center, they have been compared to mandalas and are also said to look back to pioneer women and forward to the environmental movement. At the time, they were immediately recognized as “paintings” taken off the wall and a feminist response to the minimalist floor sculptures of the art star Carl Andre.

At the Aldrich, five “Floorpieces” occupy a double-height gallery, where they can be viewed from above and seen as Hammond herself has never been seen them: as a stand-alone grouping without competing works on the wall.

Hammond grew up in a Chicago housing project actually called Hometown, that in hindsight seems ironic. She studied art at the University of Minnesota and was young, married and unknowingly pregnant when she moved to New York in 1969. It was the year of the Stonewall Riots, the dawn of the gay-rights movement as well as the feminist and environmental movements.

Soon, Hammond had divorced, joined a conscious-raising group and come out as a lesbian. In the span of a few years, she became a pioneer co-founder of both the celebrated women’s art collective, A.I.R. (in 1972) and “HERESIES,” the feminist journal of art and politics (in 1976).

It marked the start of her second celebrated career as author and scholar. In the late 1980s, she relocated to New Mexico, eventually settling in Galisteo, a town of less than 300 outside Santa Fe. Smith-Stewart visited her there about two-and-a-half years ago to propose an exhibit.

“To be honest, I didn’t know if she would do it, because artists hold out for MOMA or the Whitney,” the curator says, adding that the sheer scale of Hammond’s work made a full

retrospective impossible. “It (the exhibit) could have been the entirety of the building. We had to be very selective. We had spatial constraints. So we decided to focus on materials.”

The re-use of cast off or scavenged materials — old clothing, fabric remnants, tin roofing, pieces of hardware — is central to Hammond’s art. “Floorpieces” is a prime example. But so is the exhibit’s star Connecticut attraction, her “Chicken Lady (1989).”

From the entrance to the Aldrich’s second floor South Gallery, it looks to be a very large painting, but it isn’t really. Ten feet wide and eight feet tall, it is constructed mainly from sheets of rusted corrugated roofing that frame a patchwork quilt. Hammond made it as a homage of sorts to a real person: Doris Gagnon, the local folk hero known as the Milford Chicken Lady.

Hammond never met Gagnon, who for years held up construction of Silver Sands State Park, squatting on shorefront property seized from her. She knew her only from the brief description in a 1984 letter from an A.I.R. intern, who saw a connection with Hammond’s exhibition of cartoonish female “personages,” including one titled chicken lady.

In response to an email query, Hammond recognized a kinship between the Milford Chicken Lady and the one at the Aldrich. “The two do seem to share certain characteristics: tough, outsider eccentrics, doing what they damn well please, caring little about gender roles, government regulations, or the opinions of others,” she wrote. Smith-Stewart says a similar “survivor aesthetic” runs through Hammond’s work. For her Chicken Lady, Hammond reproduced the text of the intern’s letter in turquoise paint. It drips down vertical strips of roofing, paired as if they could be the shutters of the trailer Gagnon was known to live in. The quilt they frame could be its picture window, concealing whoever lives inside.

Smith-Stewart says Hammond chooses materials that tell their own, almost hidden stories. Sharing the same gallery with “Chicken Lady” is an even larger piece, a three-panel installation, made mostly from fragments of linoleum flooring scavenged from

abandoned farms Hammond passed commuting from Galisteo to a tenured faculty job at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

The right panel has a metal chute embedded in the linoleum's dark underside. The focus of the center panel is a fragment of the linoleum's floral surface, oozing red. The left panel positions large floral swatches against a mottled field of gold. Scratched very faintly into the gold, like toilet stall graffiti, are the words "goddamn dyke."

Titled "Inappropriate Longings," the 1992 piece is said to be Hammond's response to a Colorado hate crime. The red streak in the center panel could be blood. And some observers see the metal chute in the right panel as vaguely phallic. But "Inappropriate Longings," which has been exhibited many times, is about as explicit as Hammond gets. Her work mainly speaks metaphorically through its materials, Smith-Stewart says. Also in the exhibit are several large monochrome pieces made from the worn out canvas covering of martial arts mats. They might belong on the floor, but Hammond, who practiced Aikido for decades, has them hung on the wall, like paintings.

In another second-floor gallery, she herself oversaw the positioning of the "Presences," a collection of spectral sculptures made from scraps of clothing donated by friends. Larger than life, they were the subject of her first solo show in 1973. Their reunion at Aldrich is the first time they've been seen together in 46 years.

Suspended from the ceiling, they appear to hover in the gallery, beings brought back to life. To stand among is to be surrounded by mute, ragged giants. The exhibit itself is like that: a feat of re-animation and immersion.

Titled "Harmony Hammond: Material Witness, Five Decades of Art," it runs through Sept. 15. It is to be accompanied by hard-bound catalogue with an essay by Smith-Stewart.

Culture writer Joel Lang is a frequent contributor to Sunday Arts & Style.