

Harmony Hammond

Passage

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“It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting’ there.”

--Bob Dylan

Deep and dark as midnight on a dirt road before a new moon, large paintings by Harmony Hammond appear. Her process seems essentially formal, filling rectangles with super-phat layers of dark oils, but to stand before, or inside, or to move around these monolithic monochromes is to experience an unusual expressivity in action.

Dark red with the power of a thousand black suns, her supercharged skins arise. Hammond’s paintings follow multiple traditions simultaneously. Certain physical qualities of oil paints make them the far superior paint medium when it comes to creating the look of light on skin. During the Renaissance and Baroque period this led to the equation of oils and flesh. Hammond updates a picture like, say, Titian’s Flaying of Marsyas, perhaps the most eloquent expression of this paint-equals-body concept, by translating it into minimalist and field painting vocabulary, stripping it of specific narrative, but keeping, creating, the ominous tide of feelings, menacing, grave, and corporeally sublime. Touch here on how time rends all flesh. To whom do you show your scars?

Dark black as the stain of blood-mingled oil on the earth and deep as the fallen on all sides of Iraq, for all its abstraction, Hammond’s work is disquietingly real.

Like all great art that registers profoundly its time, Hammond’s also goes beyond it (like Goya goes beyond his to expose global universals). Welt (black) and Welt (crimson) register not only the raw nerve of the current torturous moment. They tear away the daily surface chatter to lay bare a wounded, wounding culture, and expand to encompass a heart of darkness that seems to run under the culture, under the civilized trappings throughout the horrible half of human history.

Hammond’s study is of the body, the flesh, as was said. The paintings mentioned above are painted on old canvas from the floor mats where the artist practices Aikido, a martial art in which she’s achieved, as in painting, all levels of mastery. The “welts” are the lines where the large canvases are seamed, now transformed by thick impasto. These are violent times; we are a culture hooked on that violence in more ways than you’ve thought up yet. While the physical act of applying oil paint in layers this thick is probably almost as intense as an Aikido workout, one has the feeling that Hammond is stepping aside, inside somehow, and letting this dark energy move through her as she remains unscathed.

Dark blue as a note from the heart of a horn that darkens the darkness and gives space a shape if only for a few seconds, like the great Miles Davis of Live Evil or like her AbEx predecessors Helen Frankenthaler and Marc Rothko, to whom she has often been compared, she transcends formalism, transforms it really, into an instrument for sounding intense depths of feeling and being. Like non-mimetic music, her works are resolutely abstract, utterly specific, yet can draw multiple pictures to the mind of whoever listens with their eyes.

Passage is the biggest work here at 94-by-280 inches. The triptych format is associated with the late Gothic to Early Renaissance altarpiece, and Hammond’s multi-traditional, brand new paintings, regardless of format, always create a sacred space, suggesting ritual, quietude, and contemplation. We are brought to an awareness of our violent tendencies and herein given opportunity to ponder change. Echoes of the lives of the saints as painted by Juan Sánchez Cotán or Francisco de Zurbarán and somehow David’s Marat, are all here submerged with all those Isenheim-type crucifixes. Passage is a painting you see best by walking, walking up and down its twenty-three-plus feet, trying to get from this broken now to some sort of redemption, some break in the glistening shadow. In the last panel, left to right, there are slashes/wounds of brighter color. Here Passage looks like painting again.

From the early, dark, minimal paint-sculpted ovoids of Huichol II and III, from funky 1975 recalling Eva Hesse, to Piquetitos, an homage to Frida Kahlo in which “little nips” of color wound the paintskin, to the huge rectangles of ‘07, everything on the walls happens initially as a semi-sculptural relief/monochrome object, while Passage at the open end, with its brighter blues and reds and oranges, stands naked as a painting. In the universe this exhibition constructs there is all the pain and suffering of humanity, yet somewhere in the proximity a way out of the cave through the redemptive possibilities of art and awareness.

Dark invisible is the color of the skin of the disappeared. The tones of the now unknowable flesh go beyond all seeing. From the plunge to the deep dark center of the collective soul back up to the soaring indigo star-spilled sky, Hammond’s work asks that we look at ourselves, our fears, and our effects in the limitless mirror of the void and, with this awareness as a center of balance, engage a higher human destiny.