

## HARMONY HAMMOND: AGAINST SEAMLESSNESS

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*Hammond's painted surfaces are fields, to be sure, but they are fields consisting of ruptures. Here they are watery; here they clot; here they are stippled; here they are glossy. The Monochromes evoke landscapes but also skins.*

—Julia Bryan-Wilson, from *Against Seamlessness*

**IT WAS THE FIRST THING I THOUGHT OF** when I saw Harmony Hammond's new series of paintings—that each one hinted at a bodily presence and the skin that covers it. Not that you could see the skin itself, wrapped as it was with the suggestion of bandages or restraints—strips of material applied to the canvas that hid the wounds and eroded layers below.

In some cases, as in the work *Little Buff*, there were faint seepages of a thinly applied, rusty-colored pigment staining the surfaces like poignant reminders that all who live and think and feel engage in a metaphoric bloodletting of some sort—one's own vital juices, or someone else's, are sacrificed in the process of artistic transubstantiation. For the artist, this cannot be otherwise, but I don't mean to insinuate that the process is necessarily a pathological one—it's simply part of an artist's urgent need to wrestle with the facts and then give birth to thunder.

What I'm getting at, in an elliptical fashion, is that for an artist who keeps evolving out of older work, there is a kind of death or necessary wounding of what has been created in the

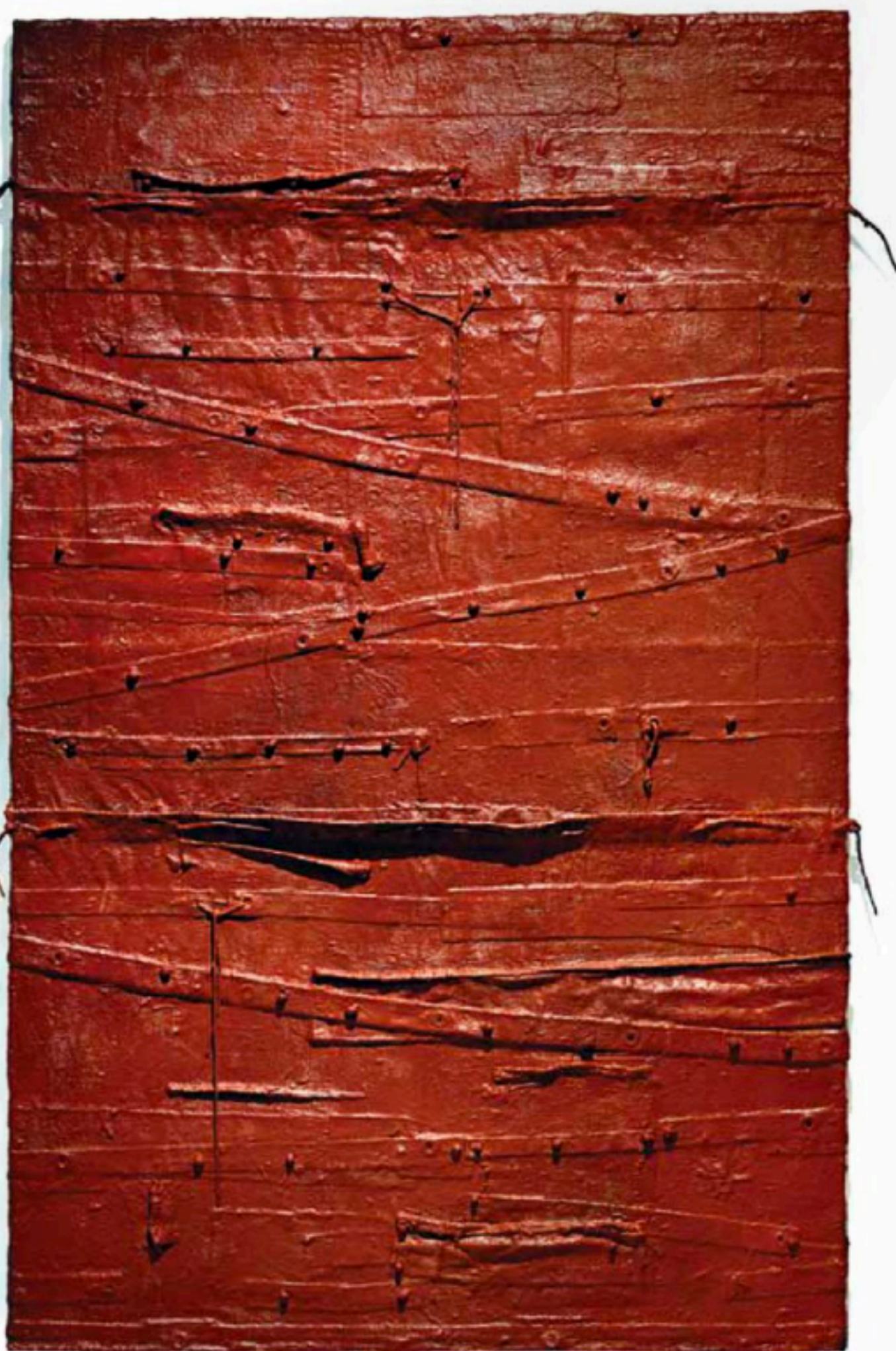
past as old tropes are buried, cannibalized, or morphed into new configurations and extended meanings; the excavation of old forms yields symbolic death and transformation, if nothing else. Old trains of thought go through a new birth canal and are reborn into a world of greater depth, more nuance, a more complex field of intentions—with any luck at all. In Hammond's new paintings, with their bound surfaces, there are references to older work for which the artist is well known—her sculptures, for example, with their allusions to the body, their use of textiles, and their textures achieved by wrapping and braiding. In this new series, Hammond has looked for ways to intertwine her passion for making with her desire to celebrate the dialectical materialism that lies within these intensely worked, but not overworked, paintings.

Hammond's *Monochromes* are as satisfying as any work she has ever done, including her *Farm Ghost* paintings from the early 1990s—a series that was my favorite until now. There is a rugged open-endedness to these current paintings-as-doorways, and they feel like a summation that builds on intentions partly concerned with furthering the traditions of painting itself. And with every new extension of painting's possibility, the work of other artists is inevitably brought into question. For example, looking at Hammond's *Red Bed*, the viewer is reminded of Robert Rauschenberg's mixed-media painting *Bed*, from 1955, a work redolent of an intense bravado and painterly excess. Hammond's *Red Bed* is also a marvel of textures, but they are at the service of compression—of doing more with less—of the power of the dreaming mind that revels in judicious limits and a succinct visual poetry. Hammond says what she has to say using a single pigment and her implied metaphors of a restrained passion that will always be bound up in an uneasy truce with the act of interpretation.

In giving birth to new paintings, an artist does indeed cannibalize what has come before. The individual devours some of the pathways of painting's long history and comes to the point where abstraction and representation veer in and out of each other's reach. It's a game full of irresolution and endless rhetoric. Hammond's paintings are what they seem to be—monochromatic works gilded with evocative textures, but they are also objects of veneration—relics of painting's history and memory and desire. The paintings desire to be themselves—examples of pigment applied to a surface—and they desire something else: to become doorways to, or mirrors of, consciousness. Each painting, then, is an example of a mind conscious of itself and the decisions it makes to further some end. With Hammond's new work, there is this added weight of a world of meaning beyond aesthetic appearances, and it makes you stop and listen as if for the voices of ghosts.

There is a passage from the epic poem *The Nature of Things* by Lucretius that reinforces this sense of apprehending a dialogue emanating from within Hammond's work: *Therefore, even places screened back from our view abound / With voices, and everywhere is seething and aswirl with sound.* The paintings in *Against Seamlessness* are not so much images as sites of negotiation resonant with dialogical echoes suggesting that every body of work that an artist creates is one more prologue in the evolution of genres and the complex reinvention of tropes and formal devices, always infused with passion no matter how guarded, no matter how artfully wrapped with secret longings and personal shifts of vision.

—DIANE ARMITAGE



Harmony Hammond, *Red Bed*, oil and mixed media on canvas, 80½" x 50½", 2011