

Art in America

HARMONY HAMMOND

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DWIGHT HACKETT

by *jan ernst adlmann*



SANTA FE It's been said "there are no secrets except the secrets that keep themselves." Among the many observations that one could float about Harmony Hammond's recent paintings is that they convey the feeling of such secrets. One came away from this tour-de-force exhibition at once marveling at the sheer elegance of these highly original conceptions and feeling emotionally encumbered by the heavy enigma that they emanate.

In the eight works on view, "near monochromes" as the artist calls them, Hammond combines downright succulent painting with the heft and authority of sculpture in bas relief. (Assyrian limestone reliefs come to mind.) Ranging in size from 40 3/4 by 29 inches to a monumental 98 3/4 by 79 1/8 inches, the paintings are executed in oil with a variety of embedded materials, and date from 2008 to '11.

There was something about this ensemble, aptly if also cryptically titled "Against Seamlessness," that conveyed an atmosphere of apprehension, of a vague ambient dread like that pulsing through the films of David Lynch. With their straps and grommets, the works are almost all ominous. One can't help but compare these trussed and fettered objects with the exquisitely crafted, erotically charged and menacing leather-sheathed heads of another feminist of Hammond's generation, Nancy Grossman.

Hammond has long proven herself to be particularly adept at putting an intriguing spin on women's traditional arts. In the past, she has abstracted from weaving and braiding techniques, while the new works rely upon binding. One can't escape the veiled threat in their suggestion of restraint. (And at least one title, *Muffle*, of 2009, reinforces that sensation.)

Hammond deliberately cultivates certain art historical precedents, only to upend them. *Red Bed*, an impressively scaled work (80

1/2 by 50 1/2 inches) feels—for all its suavity of handling—only a hair's breadth from disturbing. Crisscrossed by thin straps tied and stapled to the surface and buried in a seductive Pompeian red, it recalls both Rauschenberg's rumpled, paradigmatic *Bed* of 1955 and gritty Art Brut paintings.

One can imagine that, like heavily worked palimpsests, Hammond's paintings hold long-lost texts deep within their densities; bursting with corrections, emendations and punctuation, they beg, mutely, to be deciphered.

Photo: Harmony Hammond: Red Bed, 2011, oil and mixed mediums on canvas, 80 1/2 by 50 1/2 inches; at Dwight Hackett.