

Art Review

## Review: The Harmony Hammond Show at RedLine Refutes Abstraction as Patriarchal

By [Michael Paglia](#) Wed., Sep. 24 2014 at 9:39 AM

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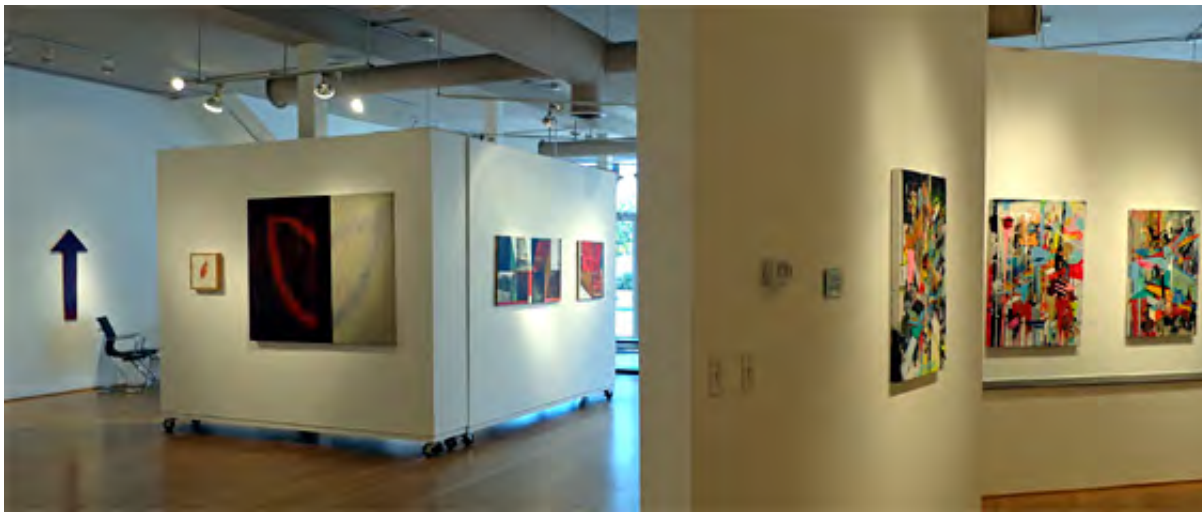


RedLine

"Suture," by Harmony Hammond.

A generation ago, in the latter third of the twentieth century, post-modernist deconstructionists were finished with abstraction. It was dead, they said, along with painting itself. But in the intervening decades, two things happened. First, this deconstructionist idea became entrenched in academia, and second, it was proven to be wrong beyond any shadow of a doubt in studios, galleries and museums.

I bring this up because of the way that the spectacular *Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome* (which is rapidly coming to a close) at [RedLine](#) makes the point. Hammond, who lives in New Mexico, has created a body of abstract paintings over the past five decades that are at least as relevant to current ideas about making art as the controversial Aspen Art Museum piece that featured tortoises with iPads strapped to their shells. Actually, they are more so, because unlike the tortoises, Hammond's paintings are both smart and tremendously beautiful.



Michael Warren Contemporary

Gallery view of *Layered Perspectives*, at Michael Warren Contemporary.

The RedLine show was ably curated by art historian and queer theorist Tirza True Latimer, who collected some of Hammond's works from the '70s and used them as the obvious sources for her work of the last few years (though the earlier pieces are notably smaller than the mostly monumental newer ones).

Hammond is a feminist and a lesbian, and she's used these facts to inform her work, which is decidedly abstract -- a sensibility that some have labeled patriarchal. But Hammond disagrees. "I don't accept that painting is an over-determined site, a privileged domain of the authoritative masculine voice," she writes in the show catalogue, adding that her paintings "come out of post-minimal and feminist concerns about materials and process."



**"Bitterroot," by Harmony Hammond**

In a prelude to the show, she proves it via a display case with Native American baskets made by women alongside her responses to them. For Hammond, this provides a female origin for her post-minimal "woven" paintings, which she did in the 1970s and which clearly anticipate her recent efforts. In these early works, many of which are on lozenge-shaped panels that recall skateboards and snowboards, Hammond built up the surfaces with thick layers of mostly somber-colored oil paint blended with wax. While the layers were still wet, she worked the paint with the back end of her brush so that in an all-over arrangement, the colors from the lower levels are revealed on the surface -- hence the reference to baskets, as the different colors are "woven" into one another.

These early works are marvelous, but the newer ones are positively magisterial, their somber and elegant presence literally taking over the multi-part spaces at RedLine. Hammond has pointed out that these large monochromatic panels aren't truly monochromes -- a fact that becomes clear when you examine them up close. For instance, a big black panel turns out to be an array of deep greens, with lighter shades being revealed here and there through Hammond's working of the paint. Many of the monumental works include ready-made elements that have been embedded into them, including straps with grommet holes, bits of rope, and push pins.

Several set up a duality with either vertical or horizontal divisions, as in "Suture," a masterful diptych. There's a dappled deep red with black accents on the left, and a mellow orangey yellow on the right; a found bit of ceiling tin runs vertically down the panel, marking a clear division between the two.

Hammond's show reminded me of other women artists active in the West who played with geometric abstraction, minimalism and post-minimalism during the mid- to late twentieth century. They include Agnes Martin, Janet Lippincott, Mary Chenoweth and Dorothy LaSelle. So not only do Hammond's works demonstrate that non-objective formalist abstraction belongs to women as well as men, but our region's art history proves it, too.

Also relevant to this discussion of the persistent importance of abstraction in the West is *Layered Perspectives*, at Michael Warren Contemporary, which features three artists creating abstracts. One, Angela Berkson, hails from New Mexico, while the other two, Teresa Booth Brown and Stanley Bell, are Colorado artists. Gallery director Mike McClung has conceived of the show as three interconnected solos.



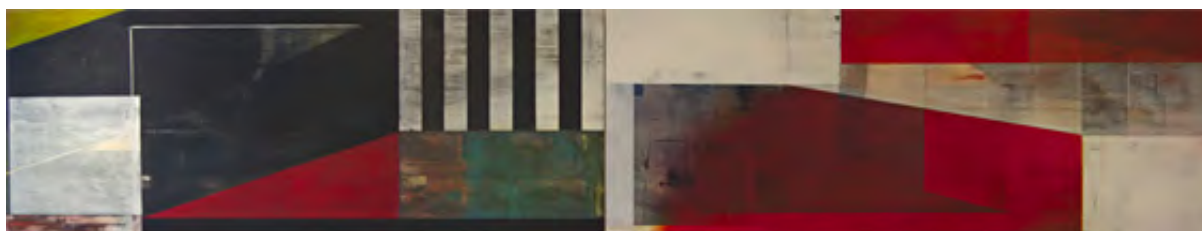
Michael Warren Contemporary

"Petal Burn," by Angela Berkson

In her recent pieces, Berkson refers to simple iconic forms, in particular the arrow; a number of works are arrow-shaped and mounted to the wall with pivots so that they rotate like the hands of a clock. Using encaustics, Berkson creates varied tones, with shades bleeding through from underneath to the top layers.

These pieces have been paired with more conventionally shaped rectilinear paintings; some contain simple shapes inspired by flower petals, others the outlines of houses on fire. One remarkable aspect of these works is the dull surfaces produced by the encaustic method, in which paint and wax are blended. In this, Berkson's technique is similar to Hammond's.



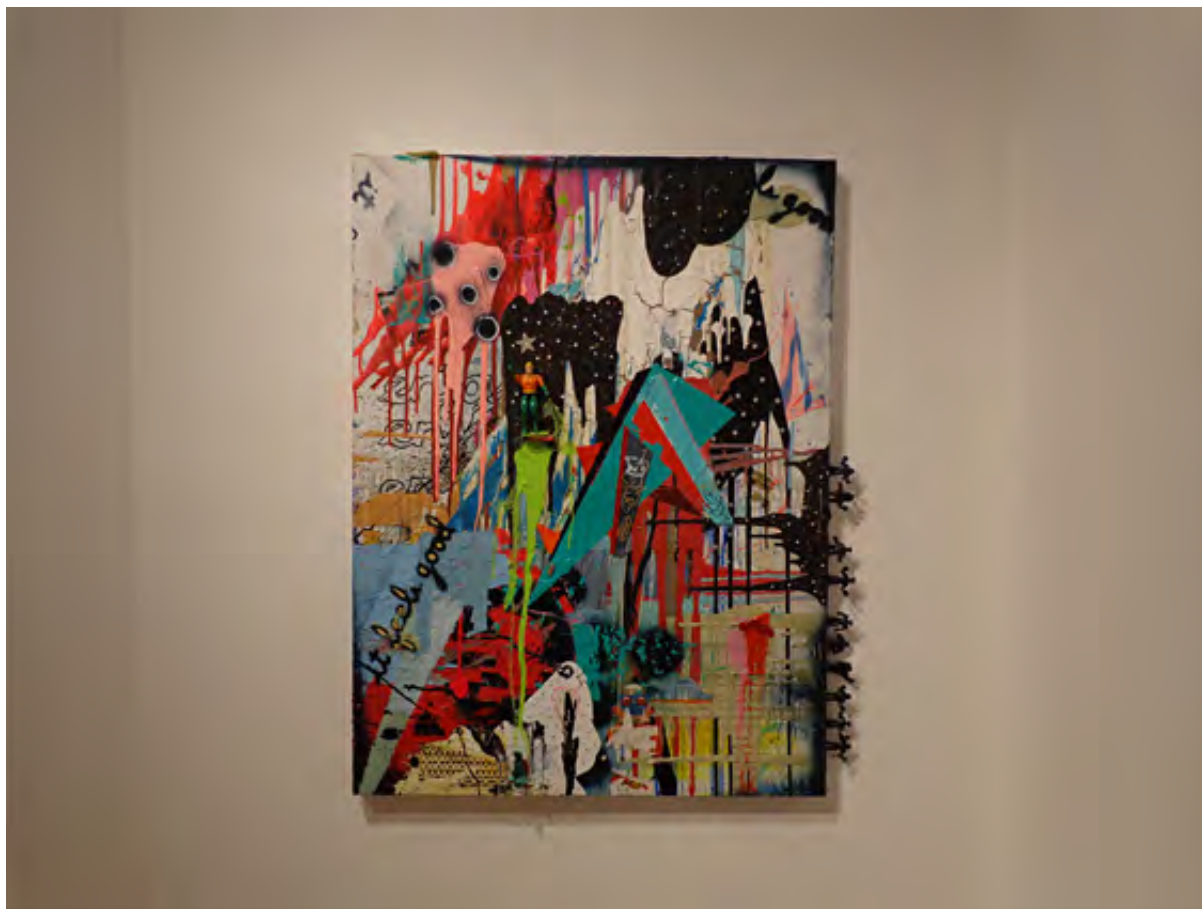


Michael Warren Contemporary

"Eau de nil," by Teresa Booth Brown

The Teresa Booth Brown section of *Layered Perspectives* is a knockout. The artist is represented by an array of her signature abstracts created with paint, collage and drawing applied to panels -- often exaggeratedly horizontal panels. Brown works the surfaces over and over to produce pieces that combine linear elements, often through the collaged parts, with dreamy expressive passages that come from both the application and select removal of paint and pencil. The results are sublime, as in the imposing "Eau de Nil," a diptych that's over thirteen feet long and absolutely commands the wall it's on.

The effect of the "Wyoming" series is similar: It will stop you in your tracks, as it's made up of no fewer than 24 panels that Brown created during a residency at the state's Ucross Foundation.



Michael Warren Contemporary

"The feelgood \_\_\_\_\_ of the year," by Stanley Bell

Bell, meanwhile, fills the picture planes of his paintings with as much visual material as he

can cram in; some even have little toys and other elements appended to them. One that doesn't have anything other than paint is "Jonah & the Whale," which beautifully sums up Bell's interests. In this painting, an elaborate palette has been assembled with lots of loud and garish tones; the paint has been hand-applied in places and put down with the aid of stencils in others.

These works are interesting from several stylistic perspectives, and you could say that Bell has updated neo-expressionist techniques and applied them to abstraction -- unlike the original 1980s movement, which was technically representational.

Hammond, Berkson, Brown and Bell are all presenting individual responses to the idea that abstraction -- and, in particular, abstract painting -- is passé. They are among the many artists who have refused to accept the word of those observers who are more interested in constructing theories than in actually looking at art. Also conspiring against the naysayers is the broader art audience, which obviously agrees with the abstract artists and has helped them keep abstraction vital by going to their shows and buying their works.

*Harmony Hammond*

Through September 28, at RedLine, 2350 Arapahoe Street, 303-296-4448, [redlineart.org](http://redlineart.org).