

ArtReview

Gernot Wieland on the couch



Bruce Nauman on the fence

Plus Luc Tuymans, Mexican Macabre, Susan Cianciolo

Harmony Hammond *Inappropriate Longings*
Alexander Gray Associates, New York 19 April – 26 May

The centrepiece of this exhibition of little-seen Harmony Hammond works from the 1990s is *Inappropriate Longings*, a significant installation composed of three large paintings and a water trough filled with brittle leaves. The words ‘GODDAMN DYKE’ are etched in red pigment into the leftmost panel, a direct reference to the brutal murder of a woman whose killer left the same epithet on the wall of her house.

Hammond made the piece in 1992, the same year that US politician Pat Buchanan gave his infamous culture-war speech at the Republican National Convention, decrying “radical feminism” and “homosexual rights”, two things that Hammond has spent her career championing. “It is not the kind of change we can abide in a nation that we still call God’s Country,” Buchanan railed.

Outside of Buchanan’s brimstone quotation, the phrase ‘God’s Country’ has been used to describe many sites around the globe, but generally refers to ‘areas that are sparsely populated, with wide expanses of nature’ (Wikipedia). Such a description is apt for the broad stretch of land between Galisteo, New Mexico, and Tucson, Arizona, terrain crossed by the artist monthly on eight-hour drives between her home and

her teaching job at the University of Arizona. Along the way, Hammond would stop at abandoned farmhouses, where she tore up strips and sections of the linoleum flooring found there.

That linoleum is incorporated into many of the works in this show. The material certainly invokes the Western farmhouses where it was found, as well as 1950s kitchens across the country, doubly calling to mind the nuclear family. In that these works are constructed from fragments of failed domestic spaces, the linoleum collages and paintings fracture our ingrained narratives about rural America – they both foreground the possibility of violence in supposedly idyllic sites and insert evidence of queer bodies into the storied American West.

Untitled (Form of Desire) (1992) is a combinelike mixed-media piece in which Hammond has adhered strips of black and burgundy linoleum onto black paper along with sexy, gloopy drips of latex rubber and a severed ponytail of her own blond hair bound with black tape, giving it a whiplike quality. In ripping out the linoleum from farmhouse floors and regluing it in new configurations, Hammond has claimed the material for her own means and to tell her own

stories. Through the insertion of her hair and the allusion to the queer forms of desire indicated by the title, Hammond embeds personal and queer narratives into both the symbolic landscape of the American West and the material tropes of the modernist avant-garde.

Another significant material in this body of work is straw – an additional symbol of the American rustic. *Untitled #1* (1998) is composed of four stacked layers of rectangular slabs of hay. Along with the adhesive used to congeal the hay strands, patches of red paint are worked into the surface, evoking the look of matted blood in the hair of a broken skull. Hammond, in fact, likens the straw to hair, insisting on an invocation of the threatened and harmed body in an ‘abstract’ work.

This show is a sobering reminder that the age of gay marriage is also the age of the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, and that assimilationist politics have not evaporated the threat of violence. Hammond’s work is a timely battle cry to tear God’s Country apart, linoleum floor by linoleum floor, and out of the debris, make something on one’s own terms.

Ashton Cooper



Untitled (Form of Desire), 1992, mixed media on paper, 108 × 75 cm.
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Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York