

# Harmony Hammond and Tirza True Latimer on Queer Feminist Abstraction

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Harmony Hammond, *Suture*

**Harmony Hammond has been pushing the limits of abstract painting since the late 1960s.**

Art naturally evolved from representation (pictures of things) toward abstraction, argued modernist art critic Clement Greenberg and his fellow formalists. Portraiture and landscape painting be damned: In pure art, paintings do nothing but express their essence as painting. But in the 1960s, painting about painting fell out of style and new forms emerged, feminism and queer art included. Both relied heavily on representation, pop cultural symbols, performance and text to explore political and social issues involving gender and sexuality.

Feminist artist, activist, educator and writer Harmony Hammond has been a queer amongst queers, staying committed to abstract painting from the late 1960s into the present despite the reemergence of symbol-rich art. Her career is the subject of the show *Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome* at RedLine, which looks at her weave paintings from the 1970s and puts them in dialogue with some of her current, large-scale works.

At first glance, viewers might not notice the queer and feminist politics of her art; they could confuse Hammond with any run-of-the-mill abstract expressionist committed to the purity of the medium. But according to Hammond and the show's curator, Tirza True Latimer, those viewers would be very wrong.

To learn more about Hammond's work and the exhibit at RedLine, *Westword* spoke with the artist and Latimer.

***Westword:*** *Talk about your career as an artist.*

**Tirza True Latimer:** In my essay in the catalog, I talk about Harmony's beginning in activism as a feminist and queer feminist and her involvement in the '70s founding A.I.R. Gallery [Artists In Residence], and also as a cofounder of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, and her curatorial initiative on the first lesbian show in SOHO, and later accomplishments in the curatorial realm advocating for queer and feminist artists, and the editing of *Lesbian Art in America*.

All of those activities run parallel to her career as a teacher and a maker of art that seems to address feminist and queer concerns in biomorphic ways and thematic ways, such as her early weave paintings that look like braided rugs. You can kind of think, "Ah," and quickly go to the place where you're looking at handcraft. You're looking at horizontal rather than vertical. You're looking at something that's in life, that's used, that's stepped on, not something that's in the pristine, sacrosanct space of the gallery and thinking of all the politics of all that.

Who makes this and who makes that and what's the relationship of those things to each other? You can kind of get to the feminist content and some of the queer work by color and form and pairings of like but not identical things that might complicate the notion of a kind of a necessary male-female complementarity in pairings.

The working in twos, the exploration of difference and equality formally, those thematics have been generating new interest in recent years because of a whole new generation of feminists coming out of a period of, "Oh, we really accomplished all that" and post-feminism.

Younger people are realizing that the discourse has changed and their actual material realities in the world -- in terms of very resistant biases that are gender-based and sex-based -- that those things, no, they haven't been resolved. This is still a project and requires not only vigilance for protecting some of the legal incursions against prejudice that our generation actually made. Abortion rights, for example, are constantly coming up for review. There are the job discrimination issues. The whole gay marriage debacle, really, and its high points as well have brought feminism back into the forefront of the political consciousness in a new generation.

The work that Harmony did in the '70s really has a new audience now, and it's been circulating in these exhibitions like the WACK! [Art and the Feminist Revolution] exhibition.

**Harmony Hammond:** It's like a new generation of feminists.

**Latimer:** We went through the terrible '80s.

**Hammond:** It's a new public.

**Latimer:** There is a new public and a new group of artists...

**Hammond:** ...that are ready.

**Latimer:** They know that history...

**Hammond:** ...the DIY...

**Latimer:** ...the queer craft movement.

**Hammond:** They know that history. They embrace it. And they move on.

**Latimer:** They are looking at Harmony as a resource and a mentor and an example. This work is in circulation. It has been reproduced. It has been shown again. That's fantastic. But the downside of that is the downside for any artist who has had a long career of being periodized and being known for a specific kind of work that was done in a specific mode in a specific context and who has continued to work and has continued to evolve.

**Harmony:** It's really what most artists do.

**Latimer:** What we wanted to do here was to put some of the less explicitly feminist, but no less feminist and less explicitly queer work from the '70s in conversation with more recent work to kind of not do a retrospective or a survey -- which is a necessary thing that must happen, but wasn't our ambition -- but to kind of bracket, in a certain way, this fuller career and these longer conversations about politics and abstraction and feminism and painting.



Harmony Hammond, Cinch III

Harmony Hammond's use of everyday objects defies the modernist expectation that abstract paintings refer to the medium itself and do not relate to the outside world.

**Hammond:** What Tirza has done is juxtapose two bodies of work in a conversation with each other. That's the bracketing kind of thing. We don't have everything in between like in a survey. And the weave paintings, which are from '74-'77 here, were shown in New York when they were made. They were shown and reviewed and talked about. And then they were wrapped up in plastic in the studio.

The work that I became known for over time was the work with fabric and so forth. That became the kind of work that people associated me with, even though in the middle of working with fabric, I made paintings that represented traditions of fabric -- but they were paintings. And that was very important. Because of that, they didn't, over the years, fit the easy stereotype of what constituted "feminist art."

And so feminist art has either continued to be made of fabric -- hanging up your grandmother's wedding dress or something like that -- or representational work, work that's very symbolic.

**Latimer:** And iconography-rich.

**Hammond:** Very feminist, coded iconography that is stereotyped. And the weave paintings don't do either of those. They are very conceptual in a certain sense. They take a little time. They're not an easy or fast read. You can't go in and go, "Oh, that's feminist art," and walk out the door. You might walk out the door, but it's not because it's feminist art.

**Latimer:** Or you might look at it and appreciate it formally and not ever have a feminist read at all. That's also part of it.

**Hammond:** So it's not a type of work that has a very coded, stereotyped, feminist iconography. In the interim time period, there were shows, but there wasn't anybody thinking or writing about the work, and that's what's new.

**Latimer:** I want to say too about that bracketing, one thing that this does is kind of mess with a narrative that's a progress narrative in the history of art and the history of modernism and the history of abstraction that goes: "Art moved in the modern era from representation toward abstraction and toward pure abstraction." Often, careers are looked at in that way -- often quite falsely.

To look at Harmony's work, none of which is figurative per se...

**Hammond:** There are a few figurative elements.

**Latimer:** There are a few. But to look at it as moving away from a kind of biomorphism toward a pure abstraction; I mean, this kind of shows it's all abstract. All art's abstract.

**Hammond:** I literally came of age as an emerging artist in the late '60s-early '70s. That [abstraction] was very much in the air. I went to graduate school at the University of Minnesota. I mean, my teachers were second-generation abstract-expressionist painters. So, you know, I think in terms of paint and abstraction, for better or worse. But this show has given renewed attention on this body of paintings from the '70s that come from certain kinds of feminist sources.

Because of this reemergence of feminist interest in abstract painting as well, there is a renewed interest in these paintings. This show is responding to that as well.

There is new critical writing on the work that hasn't been there. There has been a ton of writing on my other work, but not this body because it requires a different kind of time looking and thinking. And this was a perfect juxtaposition, because as we were saying in the beginning, so often artists who have worked for a long time, you're used to asking the same questions. The same issues are there. Part of looking at the weave paintings from the mid-'70s is that many of the issues are still going on

in the large paintings.

**Latimer:** That's part of the idea of this show: The becoming and unbecoming of monochromism as a genre, the becoming of each of these works of art, the importance of process, the work disclosing and in some cases concealing and disclosing the process of its making but also the larger cultural productive context that goes way beyond some sort of narrow idea of what art is and its putative autonomy.

*Can you unpack that?*

**Latimer:** I guess the still dominant narrative about abstract Euro-American painting owes a debt primarily to the formalists like Clement Greenberg and the championing of an idea about each discipline becoming purely itself. That was the logic -- the evolutionary logic of modern art. Art is moving toward its purist form, its pure materiality, to painting flat uniform color so the monochrome being the perfect end logic, with no reference outside to: "What is a body?"

It wasn't expressive. It had no psychology. It existed on its own terms and that was its purity according to this one line of influential thinking that obviously has always been highly contested.

But the way that we learn to think about art and to make art in our professional silos as art historians and artists has been very shaped by that narrative. That narrative has been incredibly naturalized: That's evolution; it's almost science.

So becoming monochrome, according to that narrative -- Clement Greenberg's narrative -- is all about purity and autonomy and not about the world and the artist having any kind of visible relationship or encroaching into that pure field of painting.

**Hammond:** Even fissure or friction.

**Latimer:** Nothing to sully, with the mundane or the human, that perfect field of color. That's the logic of monochrome that Harmony's work brings into a kind of productive debate about, "What does that narrative cover?"

I mean, why are we accepting this as a truth when in fact the world is involved in the production of everything and participates in a conversation with viewers and with makers? It's a negotiation that includes all kinds of other cultural traditions that are even more fundamental than that of Western painting since the Renaissance, such as the rugs that we walk on, the woven materials with which we wrap ourselves in and all of the textures and colors that have shaped our memories and sensibilities, even things that are very subliminal and have been, in a certain sense, suppressed and demoted in visual and cultural history: Those are just utilitarian objects; those are baskets; those are rugs you can walk on.

So, to bring that back into the field of vision and the field of painting, because those things and those traditions are related and to revalue them because...

**Hammond:** ...because who were the makers?

**Latimer:** Because part of humanity that has been getting the short end of the stick value-wise for a long time -- women -- have this historical relationship with craft and that non-coincidence of the relative devaluation of craft and the valuation of fine art, that schism, that binary that reinforces male-female binaries. So bringing those things into the foreground...

**Hammond:** ...I'm merging them or making them less separate.

**Latimer:** I feel like I can move back and forth. There is a lineage of painting that we were talking about before. We are reclaiming a history of painting that is outside Clement Greenberg's boxes and white cubes.



Harmony Hammond, *Becoming/UnBecoming Monochrome*  
RedLine Gallery's exhibition of Hammond's work runs through September 28.

*Where does functionality come in?*

**Hammond:** It's interesting, because when you take materials or objects in a painting and you repurpose them from how the object was originally used, you can use them to call up those functions or to function in the same way or to intentionally not. I would have to say that I've done both. The weaving references function that way.

**Latimer:** But you're thinking in the other way? You mean, what's the utility? Are you hung up on that?

*Thinking about this collision or perversion of abstraction, I think my question--*

**Hammond:** That it becomes non-functional.

*Yes. Or only function in an artistic way. It's not a pragmatic, utilitarian thing I can wear or drink from.*

**Hammond:** I don't think about that so much, but it's in there, it's in there, at least conceptually.

**Latimer:** It drags the idea into a place where the idea has been excluded.

**Hammond:** Right. I agree. I had a show recently where I had some paintings that were mixed-media, earlier works, and there were just things in there like buckets hung on paintings. The buckets

were rusted out, totally dysfunctional. I was putting really dysfunctional elements in the works.

**Latimer:** Functional dysfunctional elements.

**Hammond:** Yeah. It's functional in the painting. Like you're saying, where there is something being hidden or being revealed, the hidden thing becomes part of the overt meaning. It's that same thing again. And just really rusted out, dysfunctional buckets, early bag pieces, they didn't function as bags. You couldn't wear them. You couldn't use them. You couldn't carry things in them. The rug paintings on the floor -- they referenced rugs, but you can't use them as rugs. There is definitely something in there. I don't think about it a lot, but it goes on in there.

*Westword interviewed Catherine Opie recently. She spoke about how her art has shifted from representation toward abstraction and attributes this to a diminished political urgency between the AIDS crisis and the present. Because your work has been dealing with abstraction for so long, I wonder where you are on all of this. Where's queer identity and theory going? Is it dissipating? Is it failing as a project? Has it become assimilated into mainstream culture? Is there urgency still?*

**Latimer:** I want to make a couple observations inspired by a few of the key words you threw out there. One is that political urgency takes different forms. We're obviously not in a less urgent space today than we were in the '90s as humans. And yet, maybe the utility, strategically, of identity politics, as it was useful in the '90s, is changing.

But one of the things that you said about having failed or something failing, I think is really interesting to think of in terms of queer politics and queer strategies today. Speaking to your point of dysfunction, the significance of failure and acknowledging failure and using failure is in [Judith] Butler's theories of performativity -- the failed performance of something that can illuminate a construct that's been so naturalized as to not be available for questioning or intervention in terms of identity, in terms of relationality, in terms of capitalism, in terms of the exploitation of planetary resources. There is that insistence on bringing failure into focus and not as a shameful proposition but as a pedagogical proposition.

I think of things that are not failed, in terms of a good hostess, in a way, that the effort is all concealed and it all seems so natural and happy. The felicitous painting, where everything just kind of works, where all the sweat and the agony of it is completely masked, to open those discourses up and to show what's going on behind the scenes is something that failure can do.

Strategically, politically and culturally, failure has been a really important concept for the last ten years in queer communities and queer cultural initiatives.

**Hammond:** Well, it's shifted away from representation. It's become more complex, layered and interesting than all of that.

**Latimer:** It's not about who your object choice is or your gender performance, given the usual array of rather limited choices...

**Hammond:** ...stereotyped choices.

**Latimer:** That whole thing of kind of opening that up and failing to conform to any of it quite comfortably is a really important thing.



**Hammond:** Which is one of the things you'll see in the catalog. I have what I've written as a sort of manifesto of monochrome. One of the things that I write in it is that I think about how the surface and the colors perform.

You can't say these paintings are overtly feminist or overtly queer in the coded ways we were referring to about queer paintings during the queer renaissance dealing with representation and queer identity. These paintings don't do that. But, we can say they perform queerly. That's the interesting shift for me, but that's for me. I'm the artist. That's the more intellectual space that I move in or I think in. It's really how I think about things.

**Latimer:** It's not an iconography. It's a way of being or a way of working.

**Hammond:** Yeah. I don't know if that's time based or not, but for many of us it's gotten much more complex and layered and interesting and beyond...There is a point where representation may have a real political urgency to it at a certain time.

**Latimer:** Absolutely.

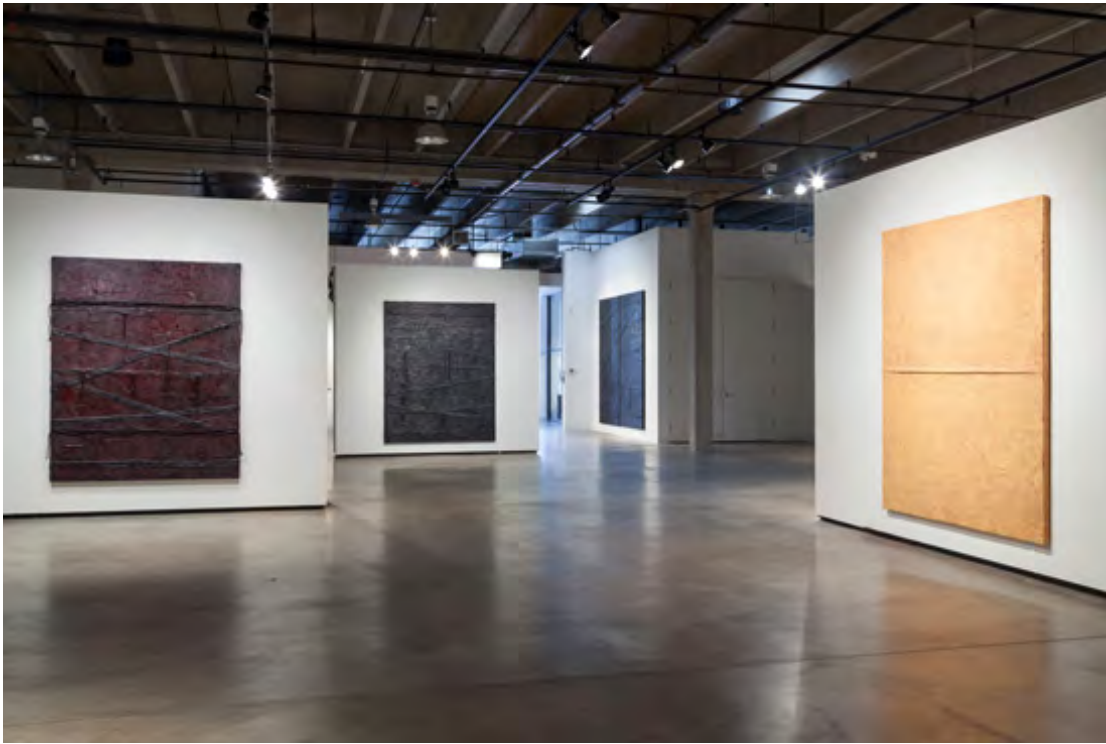
**Hammond:** But we're not there right now.

**Latimer:** As soon as you say something like that, of course, both of us are thinking, well, "Who's we? And who's we, where and when?" Of course, it's all very uneven.

**Hammond:** And we like that.

**Latimer:** Not having any judgment or trying to make it into a progress narrative constantly, but yes, representation, when you're talking about what's going on in Africa and not being heterosexual, representation or being able to see something or some mode of relation that you can relate to and that takes you outside of that system of judgment and condemnation is huge. It's all good. But it's the universal expansion.

**Hammond:** The conversation gets bigger and richer, I think.



Harmony Hammond, *Becoming/UnBecoming Monochrome*

Hammond addresses queer identity through "fugitive color" appreciating the unruly nature of individual colors that appear to be one thing and are something else.

*It's clear that you resist the progressive narrative that art history moves from representation toward abstraction...*

**Hammond:** I'm probably just resistant to narratives in general. (Laughs)

*With that in mind, talk about the tensions between political work and artwork. Is there a difference? How are you thinking about politic in your art?*

**Hammond:** You know, most of my work is not, in the way that you're using it, is not overtly political. Now, that's read against the time in which it was made. The politics of just working with fabric or weaving associations, in the early '60s or early '70s, that was really political at the time. Today, I think it has a politics to it but not a radicality.

Generally speaking, I work conceptually and abstractly, and I think that kind of work can have a politics to it. It can have political abstraction, social abstraction. It can have a lot of different terms.

I do another kind of work, which is more overtly political. And it's interesting, because that work is just more overt. Some of it has figures and representation. But that smaller body of work has woven in and out over a decade. I've never thought of it as being theme-based, but when I look back, when I've had an opportunity to exhibit it a couple times, I realized it was. It deals with censorship, vandalism and self-censorship and vandalism as a form of censorship. That work is very readable in terms of dealing with those issues.

**Latimer:** It's very poignant.

**Hammond:** Yeah. Very coded. Very readable. Very much more readable within a queer discourse verses a feminist discourse, though they're not always so separate. I just do that whenever I want to

do it.

So, to go back to your question, for me, at different times, I'm politically active around different issues. As a queer artist and queer academic who's been so out she could never go in if she wanted to, it's like teaching, lecturing, writing, all of those are part of an activism.

Am I on the streets? Am I a part of an organization? Is it a long-term commitment to an organization? Is it putting out a particular issue of a magazine?

What does it mean to be queer in the village where I live, of 300 people, and to be on the volunteer fire department? There are so many levels to who I am. It's just about the whole again. I am who I am, and I'm privileged enough that I can do that. I'm not in an African nation where I'm going to be shot for that. That's a privilege for sure.

Some of the work is overtly political and some of it is political, but it's much more layered and you have to spend time with it. I do both. I'm not politically active with a particular queer organization or feminist organization at this particular time, but I curate queer exhibitions from time to time, and I work as an art writer and of course take great pleasure in writing about queer artists.

*Talk about your concept of fugitive color?*

The notion of fugitive I like because it has that outlaw sensibility, which I rather get much pleasure from. So that outlaw sensibility, that survivor sensibility, the West, all that stuff gets called up in there.

But something that's fugitive is always fluid, it's always moving. You can't grasp it. You can't locate it. You, therefore, can't lock it in. You can't control it. It just slips. There it is. No here it is. Well, what was it?

That is the word that I've come to use in relationship to the beginning of some of these very new, large monochrome paintings. The fact that they would appear to be maybe black, and you get up close and it seems kind of dark green or blue or is it metallic or is it moving around? And just as you thought you got it--well where is the surface located? And how is this made?

**Latimer:** And as you move, the surface moves and changes.

**Hammond:** Right. Based on the viewers moving orientation, what you perceive to be changes. There is this kind of notion of never being able to locate it, limit it and fix it and own it. The word is descriptive in terms of color and surface, primarily, but in tension with the very physical materiality of the thick paint and the scale of the paintings, which are very much about occupying a kind of space.

We can do that kind of read about fugitive in relation to queer identity or queer politics or queering anything or what's queer, all those kinds of questions.

Very often, people would ask me when I began making those paintings: "But how did you make them?" I thought that was the strangest question coming from a painter or painters. It began to be a frequent question. I thought that was the oddest thing.

There was no gimmick. There was no trick. There are no hidden materials in there. It's not about getting there fast. "I just paint them," was my answer, which was a totally honest answer. That's why

I've come to talk about them in terms of: "They are just themselves. They are what they are." But what are they?

Becoming/UnBecoming Monochrome *is now up at RedLine, where it will hang through September 28.*