

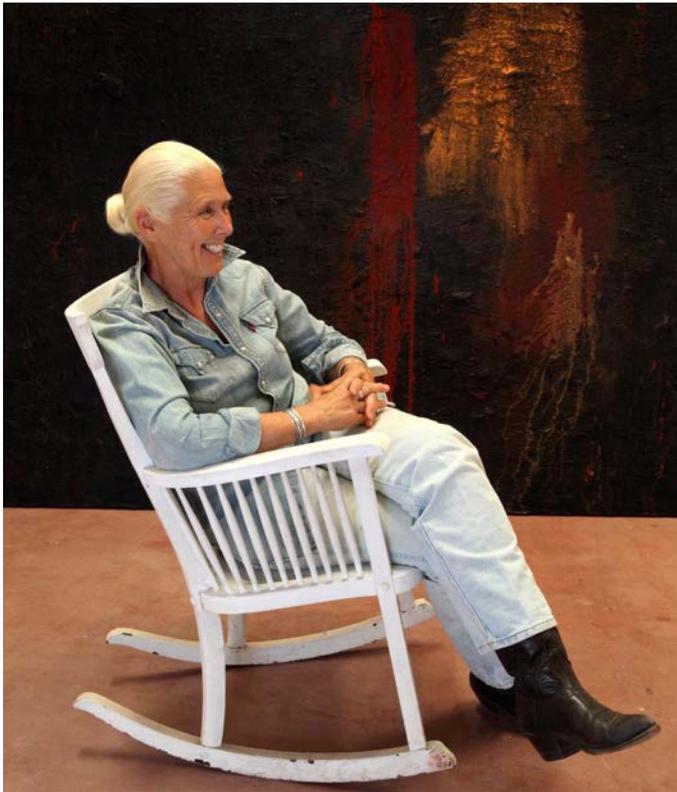
Queering Abstract Art with Wrapped, Grommeted, and “Roughed-Up” Paintings

by [Clarity Haynes](#) on May 12, 2016



Harmony Hammond, “Bandaged Grid” (2015), oil and mixed media on canvas, 44.25 x 76.5 in (all photos courtesy of Alexander Gray Associates)

In 2000, I came across a book in a Philadelphia bookstore that took my breath away. [Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History](#) by Harmony Hammond introduced me to the rich array of queer and feminist art being created by lesbian artists in real time. Discovering this history was incredibly meaningful.



Harmony Hammond in her studio, 2010 (photo by Judith Cooper) (click to enlarge)

Hammond has had a pioneering impact on art, in particular through her insistence on feminist and queer content in abstract work. Her influence on the feminist art movement has been profound: she cofounded [AIR Gallery](#) in 1972, was a member of the [Heresies Collective](#), and curated the groundbreaking [A Lesbian Show](#) at the storied 112 Greene Street in 1978. I have followed her career since that vital discovery in the Philadelphia bookstore, but it wasn't until her 2013 debut exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates that I had the opportunity to see her work in person. Her sculptural, near-monochromatic paintings make an indelible impression on me. They are raw, physical, strange, and evocative. Hammond insists upon a kind of somatic equivalency in her work. In her 2010 essay, "A Manifesto (Personal) of Monochrome (Sort Of)," reprinted in the exhibition catalog, she wrote: "The body is always near."

[Harmony Hammond](#), the artist's second show at Alexander Gray Associates, opens on May 19. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to converse with Harmony about her work and process in anticipation of the exhibition.

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Clarity Haynes: *In your manifesto, you explicitly declare that your paintings "perform queerly." I'm intrigued by that statement. How exactly do they do this?*

Harmony Hammond: I was referring to the fugitive aspect of the dark blue/black paintings from 2009 to 2013 — the indeterminacy. Despite the materiality of the thick paint, you can't quite locate color, surface, or space. Is it blue? Black? Metallic? Color shifts, at times appearing burnished or iridescent. In their refusal to be any one color, the paintings can be seen to occupy some sort of fugitive or outlaw space that rejects the narrative of monochrome painting, at the same time it refuses to look stereotypically queer. Thus we can say the paintings perform queerly.

CH: *Can you tell us something about your working process?*

HH: It is not clear how the paintings are made, but there are no tricks. They are simply painted. I apply brushstrokes in multiple directions so that light, hitting the ridges or marks made by the brush in the paint, causes some areas to read matte and some glossy. Patchy. These intentional irregularities — activating, agitating, or upsetting the surface — mirror the imperfections and experiences written upon our bodies. With the new paintings, content continues to emerge from the paint application. The surface texture of each painting is different, but there is a focus on how under-colors are revealed or push up from beneath and through the grommeted holes, disrupting what at first glance appears to be a minimalist monochrome grid painting.

CH: *That makes sense. The active surface is very apparent in the works in your upcoming show. In “Things Various,” the surface is extremely brushy, choppy, agitated. I love this piece. It feels less contained than your other works, almost as if it is coming apart.*

HH: I don't think it is less contained, but it is more open than previous wrapped paintings. The surface is similar to earlier works, but there are fewer straps. The straps and ropes hang open; they are not tied up tight or blocking the viewer's visual entrance into the painting space. The tracks of previous straps no longer needed are left like scars in the skin of paint; the painting holds itself together. The materiality of the paint has agency. The paint, not the straps, holds the painting body together.

The only painting in the exhibition that slightly suggests the possibility of coming apart is “Bandaged Grid #1.” Its fraying strips of leftover canvas are applied like bandages to the grid of grommeted holes — suggesting bodily wounds, but also an interruption of the narrative of the grid in modernist painting, and therefore of utopian egalitarian order. A precarity. The strips and the paint functioning as poultice, also suggest possibilities of holding together, of healing.





Harmony Hammond, "Things Various" (2015), oil and mixed media on canvas, 80.25 x 54.25 x 5 in

CH: *You draw such attention to the paintings as objects, yet there seem to be fewer openly sculptural elements in this show, compared to your last show. Could you say a few words about your relationship with painting, sculpture, and hybrids of the two?*

HH: While their objectness and physical presence are emphasized (they occupy a space larger than their physical space), the paintings in this show are not sculptures. They engage with the history of painting, not the history of sculpture.

Most of my work over the years, at least going back to the fabric pieces of the early 1970s, occupies and negotiates a space between traditional painting and traditional sculpture. A third space. Think of my [Floorpieces](#), which question assumptions about the "place of painting," or the mixed-media paintings of the late '80s and early '90s that sit on the floor and lean against the wall with objects attached to or sitting in front of them. While it is not predetermined, it seems that this is what I do, this is where I hang out. Since I am trained as a painter, I think of this work as "expanded painting" (painting being "additive" by nature), rather than "painterly sculpture." Even the

grommets holes in the recent grid paintings are partially made by layering or building up canvas and surface versus, say, the slash or puncture of Fontana. In this way, they are connected to the material buildup of Bontecou or Burri.

It is true that there are fewer sculptural elements in many of the paintings in this exhibition than in my previous show. Or to put it another way, the sculptural elements changed as my conceptual interest shifted from the surface to the underside, the space not usually seen (unless it asserts itself or is exposed). Sculptural or relief elements such as straps, flaps, and pushpins that extend the painting surface out into the world are in conversation with the holes or orifices and the secret, buried, or muffled spaces below. In this way, the painting surface is physically and conceptually extended in both directions.



Harmony Hammond, "Red Stack" (2015), oil and mixed media on canvas, 80.25 x 50.5 in (click to enlarge)

CH: *You've been such an influential force in the art world. Who has influenced you? Are there any names we would find surprising?*

HH: In their engagement with quotidian materials, physicality, seams showing (what Robert Storr calls "painting roughed-up"), the paintings are in conversation with a wide range of works. They occupy a space somewhere between the early quilts of Gee's Bend and the work of Hesse, Rauschenberg, Bontecou, Burri, Scarpitta, Manzoni — even, perhaps, Ryman, Marden, and Resnick. They share more with these artists than "monochrome" painters such as Malevich, Kelly, McCracken, Hafif, Rhinehardt, etc. That said, I rarely think about these or other artists and their

work while I am painting — nor do I think about feminism, queer abstraction, or even abstraction for that matter. I simply engage with materials. My job is to pull meaning out of the materials.

There are a few exceptions, however. Sometimes a painting I am working on reminds me of the work of another artist, or even my own earlier work. An example would be the painting “Red Bed,” which was in my 2013 exhibition at Alexander Gray Associates. As I was working on the painting in 2011, I became aware of its reference to Rauschenberg’s series of red paintings and, because of its single bed size and the manner in which it insists upon the upright flat-bed picture plane, his famous “Bed” painting of 1955. This work was a huge influence on me when I was an art student in the ’60s. On one level, my painting became an homage to early Rauschenberg. At the same time, it was strangely familiar in a different way. It took a while before I realized that “Red Bed” repeated many of the visual strategies from my own *Red Blanket* paintings of 1971: it is near-monochrome, pieced and patched with seams showing and strings hanging down, and it occupies a space between painting and sculpture, only now the canvas is stretched.

“Klee” is another such painting. While the scale suggests a torso and the straps suggest a ribcage (like “Red Stack,” it is constructed out of straps), there is a lighthearted, almost humorous quality about the painting that reminded me of Paul Klee’s work. It’s as if the stripes, grids, and other abstracts forms give way to a kind of anthropomorphic personage or spirit.



Harmony Hammond, "Klee" (2015), oil and mixed media on canvas, 36.25 x 28.25 in

CH: *It seems that each body of work pushes you toward something slightly new and different, while also echoing or circling back to previous work.*

HH: While I don't consciously try to reference my earlier work, it does happen occasionally. I find that, like most artists, I tend to repeat certain formal strategies, especially in relation to my body. There is a kind of larger flow or cycle to my visual practice. With each "new body" of work, I gradually condense it down in terms of form and content. It becomes more minimal and refined, but still with an edge of content not usually associated with monochrome painting. Then, at some point, I unconsciously begin to "rough it up," letting the paintings be more physical or muscular — even crude, awkward, adolescent. Looser and less controlled. "Bandaged Grid #1," the most recent painting in the show, is going in this latter direction. Work grows out of work. It is process-based; I don't make sketches. I have learned how to listen, and I have developed a criticality, and therefore intentionality. After all these years of painting, I trust where the process takes me.

Harmony Hammond opens May 19 at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) and continues through June 25.

For more on Hammond's life and work, see this in-depth [video interview](#) with artist Carlos Motta from 2011.

112 Greene StreetAIR GalleryAlexander Gray AssociatesHarmony HammondHeresies Collective