

Queerness as Art: How Harmony Hammond's Life Influenced her Work

Elio Berkovic



Harmony Hammond, *Trace*, 2015, Oil and mixed media on canvas, 80 1/4 x 54 1/2 x 2 1/2 in (203.8 x 138.4 x 6.4 cm)

Harmony Hammond's role as a queer artist and activist in post-stonewall New York City relates closely to the art she makes. Her use of *near-monochrome* in her color palettes fights against the conformity that is so prevalent in minimalism, particularly the strict rules of what can and cannot be done. This is similar to her fight against the strict rules in her own life as a queer feminist. Hammond also fights against the toxic masculinity associated with traditional western painting by intentionally choosing to work with more stereotypically feminine mediums in her paintings such as woven materials and other craft-making mediums. These techniques and methods of nonconformity can be seen in her piece *Trace*.

Trace by Harmony Hammond is a large, three-dimensional painting made in 2015 with oil and mixed media on canvas. The piece is composed of an imperfect grid of metal grommets

which Hammond uses to break up the perfection of a blank canvas by getting rid of the seamless smooth surface. The grommets have many thick layers of oil paint both above and beneath them. The painting's surface above the metal grommets is pale pink and has a very uneven and rough texture due to the artist painting many layers. The grommets serve as small windows into the hidden layers of red and blue paint underneath the surface. These red and blue painted layers can also be seen in small sections on the surface where the pink paint has the fewest layers. When the entire piece is taken in, it gives the appearance of human skin with the raised grommets looking like a very close up view of pores. The small divots and peaks on the pink surface of the piece also add to the overall flesh-like appearance.

Artist and activist Harmony Hammond was born in 1944 in Chicago, Illinois. She studied at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois from 1961 to 1963 where she met and married her now ex-husband. She then studied painting at the University of Minnesota where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1967. She moved to New York City to pursue art in the fall of 1969 a few months after the Stonewall Uprising in June of that year. She became heavily involved in the feminist art movement, and within a year she separated from her husband and came out as a lesbian. In the following years she continued to be an integral part of moving the New York City art scene forward with her activist and curatorial work. In 1978, Hammond organized and curated the first ever exhibition in the United States dedicating to showcasing art made by queer women called *A Lesbian Show* at 112 Greene Street Workshop. This was only one part of her fight for visibility for her fellow queer female artists. This fight did not end when Hammond moved away from New York City to New Mexico in 1984 where she started working on her book *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*. Her art since then has not strayed

far from her activist roots with works like *Trace* reflecting her experiences as a queer artist and activist.

Hammond's work with *near-monochrome* gives a glimpse into the activist side of her work as a queer woman. What she calls *near-monochrome* is a technique she incorporates in many of her pieces including *Trace*. She creates pieces that appear monochrome at a glance but upon closer inspection the viewer can find bright colors hidden away beneath the surface. Hammond speaks further about this idea, when asked to describe why her works “behave queerly” by saying, “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” (Haynes, 2016). This nonconformity to historical uses of monochromatic color palettes in her work with *near-monochrome* reflects the similar experience of nonconformity in her experience as an out queer artist and activist. By bending the rules of monochromatic and minimalist concepts she emphasizes the beauty that can be found in nonconformity and rule breaking. This beauty can be found in life as well with queerness and its lack of conformity being a great example of that in Hammond's life.

By rejecting the traditional painting methods of the Minimalism, Hammond strays away from the masculinity associated with the movement and embraces more stereotypically feminine mediums like weaving and textile art. The history of Minimalist painting has a long history of being very white male dominated. Hammond intentionally refuses to associate with that history by working in unconventional ways to make her paintings incorporate more “feminine” methods. Clarity Haynes writes about this saying, “Hammond rejected traditional painting because of its associations with (often toxic) masculinity. Choosing materials that related to women's creative—frequently domestic—practices such as weaving, she intentionally challenged

traditional distinctions between painting and sculpture, as well as art and craft” (Haynes, 2019). By challenging conventional painting and focusing on more stereotypically feminine artmaking techniques, Hammond highlights the beauty that can be found in mediums like sewing and fiber arts. This is her way of bringing feminine art to the surface and bringing attention to the biases that have been prevalent in the history of art, especially in Minimalism.

Harmony Hammond’s art is a window into her life as a queer feminist activist. Her 2015 work *Trace* is a perfect example of that because of its use of *near-monochrome*. She uses this technique as a way to highlight the beauty that lies under the surface and how nonconformity is not something to be feared but rather it should be embraced. Additionally, Harmony’s use of unconventional methods in her paintings is her way of straying away from the toxic masculinity that can be found in the history of minimalism. She chooses instead to work with what is thought to be more feminine mediums associated with craft making and incorporates those into paintings that have a more sculptural feel to them. These are all powerful messages that Harmony Hammond puts into her art to inspire the viewers to find beauty in the unconventional and unique that exists all around us.

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