

The Tension of Trace

Gia Inouye



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 has a distinct style creating abstract art with a distinctly queer message. Her works contain tangible tensions that unsettle dominant narratives in abstraction. One means by which Hammond creates these tensions is through her use of contrast, combining elements that challenge each other. This strategy is exemplified by her work *Trace* (2015), in which Hammond successfully creates tension by using paint-covered metal grommets to disrupt a flesh-toned, monochrome canvas with rough, dark holes.

Made with oil and mixed media on canvas, *Trace* stretches 80 1/4 inches in length and 54 1/2 inches in width. The piece is covered in a mix of pinkish creams and warm tan oil paint that hold the strokes of paint brushes and sponges in its texture. Hammond has painted over rows of grommets, which create raised peaks on the surface of the canvas. The paint-covered grommets

form shadows in their centers that first appear like polka dots; simple black circles are dotted onto the fleshy colors of the piece. On closer inspection, paint collects on the sides of the grommets in haphazard and imperfect ridges, and the layer that lurks beneath the oil paint is revealed through the centers of the grommets in stark blacks, whites, and sanguine reds. Each grommet is unique, and for some, the paint accumulates in a thick circular layer around its perimeter, leaving the center of the grommet untouched. For others, the paint interlopes past the inner edge of the grommet, distorting its circular center and obscuring the view of the blacks, whites, and reds. Despite the differences between each grommet, they are all successful in evoking a type of bodily orifices, reminiscent of a “mouth, nose, ears, eyes, or even tear ducts” (The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2019).

Harmony Hammond was born on February 8, 1944, in Chicago, Illinois. Currently based in New Mexico, Hammond began making art in New York City during the 1970s. Inspired by the Stonewall riots, and her coming out as lesbian, she started to explore—while simultaneously pioneering—her style of mixing abstraction with social activism, counteracting the belief that political art had to be figurative (Haynes, 2019. 2). As stated in *Harmony Hammond: Material Witness: Five Decades*, Hammond “has made her life’s work at the hotly generative crossroads where feminism, Minimalism, process art, and biographical experience intersect, while defiantly resisting all such classifying designations” (2019, 1.6). She was able to blur the line between artistic genres while still successfully combining her work with activism. Her earliest works consist of bright colors and a mix of painting and sculpture which she used to comment on LGBTQ+ and women’s rights. For example, in *Floorpieces* (1972) Hammond combines painting with weaving, contrasting the two mediums to highlight how society views the two different

skills. Painting is seen as fine art while weaving is demoted to craft and frequently referred to as “women’s work” (Cotter, 2019. .7)

In the 2000s Hammond began to create her “near monochromes” which consisted of flesh-toned creams, whites, or greys, paired with grommets or ripped canvas, sometimes both. *Trace* was made by arranging grommets in an asymmetrical grid on an unstretched canvas which she then adhered to a stretched canvas and coated in paint (The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2019. 6.21). This drastic development of Hammond’s style incites the question: how has Hammond’s artistic activism evolved with the creation of the “near monochromes”?

The answer can be found in the grommets of *Trace* and their erraticism. Of varying sizes and shapes, the grommets extend outwards toward the viewer. They introduce dark and vivid colors which disrupt the otherwise tranquil monochrome of the canvas. Hammond intended to use the grommets as a metaphor for the “disruption of utopian egalitarian order” (The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 2019. 7.21). In other words, they are meant to represent the instability and fragility of equality and opportunity. Hammond has broadened her message through the abundance of grommets to mirror the endless **challenges** that threaten oppressed groups. Despite this, her work is a means of inspiration, not pessimism, and the tension between the paint and the grommets acts as “the possibility of holding together, of healing.” *Trace* is a call to push forward.

I believe that ultimately, Hammond’s creation of tension through her careful use of grommets is successful in revealing the challenges that threaten the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, *Trace* helps highlight Hammond’s journey as an artist and the developments in her style. While I initially found *Trace* to be overwhelming from the number of grommets and their resemblance to a body, I eventually enjoyed discovering the different layers of the painting and

how they interacted with each other. Learning about Harmony Hammond's process of making her "near monochromes" and their metaphor for disruption inspired me to have more appreciation for the work.

Bibliography

Cotter, H. (2019, August 8). *Harmony Hammond's Art Is Bold and Prickly as Ever*. The New York Times. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/08/arts/design/harmony-hammond-aldrich.html>

Harmony Hammond: Material Witness, Five Decades of Art (The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Comp.). (2019). The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum and Gregory R Miller.

Haynes, C. (2019). *Going Beneath the Surface: For 50 Years, Harmony Hammond's Art and Activism Has Championed Queer Women*. Artnews. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/harmony-hammond-12855/>

Narrative Biography. (2018). Harmony Hammond. Retrieved July 22, 2022, from

http://www.harmonyhammond.com/narrative_bio.html