Wadsworth Atheneum

May 20 to June 17 (A102)
and to June 25 (MATRIX), 1984

Kudzu, 1981

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.
Harmony Hammond is best known for her large wrapped rag sculptures - imposing "presences", as she calls them. Neither beautiful nor ugly, neither wholly abstract nor explicitly figurative, they emerge from the domain of the feminist shaman. Hammond seeks to make visible the primordial force of woman's spirit in bodies that grow from the center outward with radiance and vitality. This she does using materials and techniques that connect her art with such traditional women's crafts as quilting, weaving and spinning. In recent years she has turned to the realm of painted imagery in order to explore on the two dimensional surface the worlds of both spirit and matter, of relationships and being. While quite different in impact from the space-taking assertiveness of the sculptural forms, the paintings also convey, through vibrant color and vigorous gesture, a related and life-affirming sense of the "spirit forces" made visible.

The women of her grandmother's generation frugally collected scraps of material from worn-out clothes and discarded fabrics, giving them new life in their brightly colored quilts. So Hammond has scavenged the garment district near her New York studio for years, salvaging castoff rags to transform them into lively and compelling sculptures that testify to woman's traditional genius for making something whole from the fragments of human experience and exhaustion.

Hammond begins each sculpture with a wooden or metal armature. This, too, comes from refuse found in the city streets. She then swaddles it with layer upon layer of tautly pulled rags, wrapping these rags around the armature with insistent and repetitive gestures which recall the sewing, weaving, and basketry processes of her female forebears. The building of these figures is a very physical process, evident in the brawny strength which they project. Spiralling from the center outward, it is also a process of touching and tucking, of things buried deep within the body and of things that push through the ultimate transparency of the binding latex skin. From this process emerge solid and sensual presences, at ease with their lumpy unevenness. Sometimes menacing, sometimes yielding, they are intended to stand as proud witnesses to the reclaiming of woman's body as it freely and comfortably asserts itself.

Without being strictly anthropomorphic, Hammond's sculptures take on human characteristics, with an emphasis upon variety and imperfections. In Hunkertime (1981), for example, the nine forms (built from discarded ladders) each have a distinctive "personality" imparted by the nature of their enveloping material, their painted surfaces, and the addition of girlish ruffles. They "hang out" in groupings that suggest huddling together, gentle coupling, or independence flaunted.

Kudzu (1981), like the rampant weed of the South for which it is named (a monster-plant out of control, yet supposedly possessing healing powers), is at first unsettlingly aggressive, even threatening. Surprisingly, it is also somewhat benign in its potential for embrace. A certain endearing awkwardness loosens its strangling grip, and a scattering of colored glitter whimsically enlivens the dark and brooding matted charcoal skin. As in most of Hammond's sculpture, multiple associations enrich the viewer's experience. Forceful though they often are, they also seem ready to cradle or ready to dance.

Hammond is concerned with binding art and life into a cohesive whole. She has referred to her work as a "visual scrapbook," its repetitive marks and gestures as "visual diaries" connecting the
Aikido Practice (Harmony Hammond), 1982

While at first it may seem difficult to connect the very real and active presences of the three-dimensional work to the more figurative evocations of Hammond's paintings, both explore encounters between the worlds of spirit and matter, a meeting of the internal and the external, a merger of feeling and intellect. As the layered cloth lends physicality to the sculpture, so the layered thicknesses of the painted surfaces impart a sense of substance to the pictures. Hammond sees paint as a magical medium from which the imagery emerges with spontaneous freedom given the swift pace imposed by the demands of the fast drying pigment.

Like the sculptures, the paintings represent a world of fragments of daily life with primeval essences. She is articulate about specific links between her art-making, her feminism, and her dedication to the defensive martial arts of Tai Chi Chu'an and Aikido. Aikido focuses upon the projection of ki or inner life energy (spirit) through spiralling movements of spinning and rolling that recall the wrapping process of Hammond's sculptures or the spiral tongues in her recent paintings (e.g. The Spirit Inside, 1983; Flaunting and Flirting, 1984). She works in what she describes as "a state of peripheral control," on the edge between the conscious and unconscious, creating a tension that nurtures and activates the spirit-energy that on occasion informs both her art and her life.
women figures, sometimes comic personages both self-contained and interrelating. Early characters, such as the venturesome "Fan Lady" (whose body is usually made up of a spiral) and her cohort "Cactus Lady," have tended to perform for the viewer on stage-like platforms, acting out scenarios of encounter, flirtation and introspection. Other characters have included "Crying Bead," "Crying Spirit," and "Ruffled Waters." Hammond sees her own work "... as an extended novel with the characters leaving the stage of the painting surface and edges. Nonlinear. They appear, disappear and reappear at different times in different situations...Poetic metaphors ...They have a life of their own so you have to keep an eye on them."

The more recent paintings here introduce a new character, "Chicken Lady," who invites us to travel with her as she wanders with wide-eyed naivete over the pictorial ground, earnestly exploring the various "planes of nature" and the symbolically indicated world of spirits. The transparency of "Chicken Lady's" body (a form, like many of the figures she encounters, inspired by New Mexican petroglyphs) literally indicates her openness. Her innocent awareness is possible thanks to the protective environment of the "spirit dots" that often frame and dapple the canvas (These "spirit dots" recur in much of Hammond's work, e.g. Hunkertime; Cochiti, 1980; The Intention to Know Desire, 1982.). "Chicken Lady" can multiply into both mother and daughter, friend and lover. These configurations interact, often exchanging information and ideas (e.g., the spiral from the mouth: Speaking Tongues, 1983; Planes of Nature, 1983). Aspects of one character serendipitously appear in new locations (The rib-cage of Kudzu is sometimes the back-bone of "Chicken Lady" or the branching tree of Living Thought, 1984.). Often the internal spirit and the external outline resist a perfect fit, a disjunction that speaks of the conflicts between inner and outer worlds (e.g., Chicken Lady With Spirits, 1983). Colored tabs serve as "keys" or windows into this painted world, at the same time that they animate and give energy to the surface, an energy echoed in the aura markings that surround the various painted characters.

Hammond's recent sculpture and painting, when seen together, manifest power, dignity, humor, optimism and tenderness. They invite the museum viewer to experience the world on these terms.

Harmony Hammond was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1944. She received a BFA from the University of Minnesota (Minneapolis) in 1967. Hammond moved to New York City, where she now lives, in 1969. She was a founding member of both A.I.R. Gallery and the Heresies Collective, has received Individual Artists Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1979 and 1983, and has been an artist-in-resident at The MacDowell Colony, Petersborough, New Hampshire and Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York. Hammond is currently teaching at the Philadelphia College of Art and the Feminist Art Institute, New York City. She is also an assistant instructor at the New York Aikikai.

Judith Rohrer
Guest Curator
Wesleyan University
Middletown, Connecticut

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX
PLEASE NOTE: Harmony Hammond will give an informal talk on her work in the MATRIX and A102 gallery spaces on Friday, May 18 at 5:30 p.m.

Radiant Affection, 1983–84, cloth, wood, latex and foam rubber, gesso, acrylic and rhoplex, two units, total size 92" x 106".

Fan Lady Meets Cactus Lady, 1981, lithograph with silkscreen, etching and collage (Vermillion Editions), 29 1/4" x 41 1/4".

The Intention to Know Desire, 1982, oil on unstretched canvas with painted frame, 35" x 29".

Forms of Desire II, 1983, oil and acrylic on paper, 44 1/2" x 30".
Chicken Lady with Spirits, 1983, oil and acrylic on paper, 30" x 43 1/2".

Mergings, 1983, oil on paper, 26" x 19 1/2".

Mother and Child, 1983, oil over monoprint, 31" x 20". Private Collection, New York City.

Planes of Nature, 1983, oil on canvas, 34" x 28".

Speaking Tongues, 1983, acrylic and oil on paper, 26" x 20".

Affirming the Existence of the World of Images, 1983, oil on canvas, 71 1/4" x 94".

Systems of Belief, 1983, acrylic and collage on monoprint, 55" x 41 1/2".

Flaunting And Flirting, 1984, oil on canvas, 50 1/4" x 40".

Living Thought, 1984, oil on canvas, 50" x 40".

The Spirit Inside, 1984, oil on canvas, 33 1/2" x 28".

Works in MATRIX and A102:

Hunkertime, 1979–80, cloth, wood, acrylic, gesso, liquid rubber and rhoplex, nine units, 60"–83" high, total width c.20'.

Cochiti, 1980, celastic, chicken wire and enamel, three units 54" x 31" x 12" (largest).

Kudzu, 1981, cloth, metal, gesso, acrylic, wax, glitter and charcoal, 90" x 90".

Grasping Affection, 1981–82, cloth, wood, foam, latex rubber, gesso, acrylic and rhoplex, 42" x 72" x 30".

All sculptures are on loan courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery, New York City. All paintings and prints are on loan courtesy of Louise Ross Gallery, New York City unless otherwise noted.
Flaunting and Flirting, 1984
Selected one-woman exhibitions:
A.I.R. Gallery, NYC '73, '82, '84; La Magna Gallery, NYC '76; P.S. 1 (Institute for Art and Urban Resources), Long Island City, NY '79; Douglass College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ; Fan Lady and Friends '81; Glen Hanson Gallery and W.A.R.M., Minneapolis Harmony Hammond: Ten Years 1970–1980 '81; Real Art Ways, Hartford '82; Lerner-Heller Gallery, NYC '79, '79, '82; Klein Gallery, Chicago '82; Luise Ross, NYC '84.

Selected group exhibitions:
New York Cultural Center, NYC Soft As Art '73; Nancy Hoffman Gallery, NYC A Woman's Group '74; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY Primitive Presence in the 70's '75; Whitney Museum Downtown, NYC Out of the House '78; Renaissance Society, Chicago Thick Paint '78; Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague International Feminist Art '80 (traveled); Women's Hall of Fame, Seneca Falls, NY Home Work '81; Lerner-Heller Gallery, NYC The Great American Fan Show '81; The Sculpture Center, NYC Decorative Sculpture '81; The New Museum, NYC Extended Sensibilities '82; California State College, Stanislaus, CA Exchange of Sources: Expanding Powers '83 (traveling, inc. Real Art Ways, Hartford); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia Connections '83; American Center, Paris Luxuriances '83; Brooklyn Museum of Art, The Artist as Printmaker '83; 55 Mercer Street Gallery, NYC Life Signs '83; A.I.R. Gallery, NYC Women Expressionists '84.
Selected bibliography by Hammond:

"More on Women's Art: An Exchange," Art in America, vol. 64, no. 6 (November '76), p. 11+.


"Class Notes," Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics, Issue #3 (Fall '77), p. 34+.


"Home Work," Home Work, Women's Hall of Fame (Seneca, NY)'81, p. 3+.


Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art, and the Martial Arts, TSL Press (NYC)'83. This publication includes many of the above mentioned articles.

Selected bibliography about Hammond:


Raven, Arlene. harmonies an essay on the work of Harmony Hammond, Klein Gallery (Chicago)'82.


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