



Some of Harmony Hammond's recent works—her *Floor Pieces* in the form of rag rugs, for example—looked very much like the products of women who hadn't arrived at a feminist self-consciousness. These "rugs" were, of course, rescued from being seen that way by the artist's choice to exhibit them in art galleries during a period when the art world was filled, as it still is, with discussion of feminist issues. An irony was in effect: what looked like "woman's work" was intended to repudiate such labels. "Women's work" was being charged with a political-aesthetic value long denied it.

Not everyone recognized Hammond's ironies. For some, her *Floor Pieces* were "merely" craft objects. The right to miss an irony belongs to everyone. Many—perhaps most—artists whose ironies are missed retreat to an alienation graced by a certain aloofness. Hammond chose not to retreat. Along with the *Floor Pieces*, she also showed her *Presences*—hanging sculptures made of scraps of female clothing. The meanings of these works are directly (not ironically) converted. They offer images of desolated female survival, with the emphasis on survival. Each one is very ragged, very heavily laden with spatters of muddy paint, and strewn with unlovely tangles of thread and hair. These are expressionist evocations of long-accepted impositions. At the same time, the *Presences* make an effective claim to a specifically female dignity, though perhaps on rather traditional grounds: they preserve and elaborate familiar notions of the inherent strength of women, of the fundamental

Harmony Hammond, *Koster*, 1975. *Oil and wax on canvas, 24 x 38"*. Courtesy Lamagna Gallery.

## HARMONY HAMMOND

value of women as primordial maternal, social, and cultural forces.

In her most recent show, Hammond has chosen once again to show products of "woman's work." However, her feminist intentions are now so clear that it's difficult to imagine anyone missing them. Fired clay fragments showing traces of basket and sandal weaving are exhibited in the center of the Lamagna Gallery's main room. Some are seen beneath a plexiglass case atop a chest of drawers; the rest are to be seen by looking into the drawers. This piece of furniture is in a utilitarian style bringing with it the flavor of an ethnological museum's store room. The clay fragments are treated like rarely exhibited treasures. On the walls of the gallery, there are small allover paintings with heavily layered surfaces scratched in various small-scale, minute-

ly detailed patterns. Here a reference to fabric weaving replaces the traces of basket and sandal weaving shown by the clay fragments.

It's important to note that Hammond's new works are not the results of weaving processes; they are not woven objects. They refer to weaving, they exhibit traces of it. This particular kind of "woman's work" is being treated as important enough to warrant references that draw on the mediums, styles, and display methods of modernist art (the allover paintings on the wall), and likewise important enough to warrant display and storage methods drawn from ethnological museums (the fragments in the chest of drawers). However, importance of this kind, once accepted by the viewer, is only the beginning. I think Hammond wants to touch on values more profound—from a feminist point of view—than those of traditional modernism or ethnology.

In a statement accompanying this show, Hammond quotes George Wharton's *Indian Basketry* (1972): "Women made the first basketry and pottery. They smeared the outside of their baskets with clay or pitch so the baskets could hold water and keep it cool. Later when the baskets grew old, they were discarded in the fire and the women saw that the clay (pot) remained." Hammond raises this from the level of a neutral, scientifically based speculation with remarks of her own, which read in part: "The ritual situation gives importance to the material. The fragment—a piece of the whole. A record and impression of a creative moment. An object that now takes a space but records a time and space of an unknown creator."

The references and traces in Hammond's new work cast her in the role of the "unknown creator" she mentions in her statement. A specific woman, she intends her particular use of modernist traditions, ethnological display methods, and primordial processes to establish a hierarchy of value that gives first place to magical or—as her statement indicates elsewhere—shamanistic moments of transcendence. These are, in her

phrase, "creative moments." They produce certain objects—allover paintings and clay fragments, in this instance. Such moments are also ritualistic, and so are intended to produce, to create (in her phrase, once again) "metaphysical equilibrium" of a shamanistic kind which can be relived, recreated in viewing the "record[s] and impression[s]" these moments leave in her works.

This last-quoted phrase of Hammond's recalls the notion of Action Painting as a record of a psychologically profound encounter with the empty canvas. Though it originated with Harold Rosenberg, this interpretation of Action Painting is, at present, so widely diffused that Hammond is able to extend it for her own purposes without having to feel any debt to a particular critic or critical tradition. Hammond's version of the artwork as a record pushes it beyond *fine* art materials, methods, and styles; and locates profundity in a shared, prehistorical—perhaps timeless—female experience, rather than in the experience of a highly differentiated, traditionally avant-garde—and male—sensitivity.

Thus it is a supra-personal "metaphysical equilibrium" that is to produce, and to be induced by, Hammond's new work. This equilibrium occurs as primordial patternings (the processes, evocations, and results of weaving) transcend borrowed traditions and even individual personality to reveal ultimate meanings.

At any rate, by drawing on a new variety of sources, and insisting on a strong relationship between objects and their verbal accompaniment, Hammond has helped to rearrange received notions of stylistic compatibility and the locale of meaning in exhibitions of painting and sculpture (the clay fragments). She deliberately and self-consciously suspends meaning somewhere between what she says and what she does, between her statement and the objects it "explains." As for the meaning itself, that is still being evolved. I think its impact will depend largely on Hammond's ability to achieve further pertinent innovations in format and style. (Lamagna, *January 3-27*)

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