The Joke of Painting: On David Hammons at L&M Arts, New York

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Artworks are often analogous to jokes. Their initially puzzling or ridiculous propositions discharge psychic energy and produce pleasurable effects. The main condition is that the generated tensions reach their highest level at the end. Like jokes, too, which allow their tellers to articulate impolite thoughts that they ought not introduce into public speech, many artworks expose that which dominant codes and social conventions prefer to mystify.

The work of New York–based artist David Hammons has long traded in a sly sense of humor with a sharp polemical edge. From early sculptures and performance pieces such as *Spade in Chains*, 1973, which puns on racism and slavery, and *Pissed Off*, 1981, for which he urinated on a large-scale Richard Serra steel sculpture, to more recent installations such as *Which Mike Would You Like to Be Like?*, 2003, featuring three microphones (i.e., three "mikes") representing three Michaels (Jordan, Tyson, and Jackson), Hammons formulates ironic commentary on the lived experience of urban life in the U.S. and the operation of contemporary art. The tongue-in-cheek puns, word plays, and jokes his artworks mobilize undermine the authority of prevailing rules and norms. This derisiveness is their political force.

Hammons's recent suite of untitled assemblages at the L&M Arts gallery in Manhattan's snooty Upper East Side operates along similar lines.[1] However, this time the focus is on one of the central myths of modernist painting, which the assemblages at once restage and explode with the same kind of irreverent wit that has characterized the artist's work. L&M Arts

David Hammons, exhibition view, L&M Arts, New York, 2011.

is a secondary-market gallery, with its primary source of income coming from reselling paintings by members of the New York School, the first made-in-the-U.S.A. artistic avant-garde. *Village Voice* critic Jerry Saltz reported that Hammons initially approached the proprietors of L&M Arts "out of the blue" with an idea the artist claimed "would perfectly fit the gallery's space and history."[2] The result was a much-talked-about 2007 show of six vintage dress forms, each outfitted with a fabulously expensive, segmented, and tailored full-length mink, wolf, fox, and sable coat (*Fur Coat*, 2007). Hammons and his partner, Chie, sullied the backs of five of these garments with broad strokes of thick paint and varnish, turning them into paintings, and the paintings, in turn, into a reflection on the marketing of luxury objects. They also partially torched one coat, an exquisitely puffed chinchilla, rendering a large hole through the middle. The artists offered to pay production costs but refused to allow the gallery to sell any of the artworks. Their provocative gesture brought together questions of class and what it means to be humane with questions of symbolic and economic value.

For this year's exhibition, his second at L&M Arts, Hammons draped ten or so big, abstract oil canvases composed in a luminous palette and

all-over style with large sections of various grungy materials. The latter include crumpled plastic garbage bags, an old and ragged terrycloth towel, and industrial tarpaulins of the type housepainters typically use to protect furniture and floors from stray drips of pigment. Aggressively gouged, bitten, or scorched holes here and there in the cheap plastic or tarps allow glimpses of the generic abstract expressionist compositions beneath. Some of the trappings that shroud the paintings are stitched together by hand, others appear to be machine-sewn, and yet others glued or pressed onto the canvas, seemingly while the paint was still wet. The multiple folds and crinkles of the banal materials hung in layers over the compositions double as expressionistic gestures and produce dramatic effects. In one instance, the tarp is missing, and Hammons shoved a castoff, decrepit wooden wardrobe up against the canvas instead, obscuring the splotches of lavender magentas, mint greens, pastel reds, and turquoise blues. And two pieces on the gallery's second floor consist of just the vandalized industrial elements—translucent plastic tarpaulins and opaque black trash bags ripped, torn, and nailed to the wall through embedded grommets—with no "paintings" underneath.

Hammons's compositions are as dependent on the history of nonrepresentational painting as they are on the Duchampian readymade, Dada collage, and Arte Povera sculpture. The works integrate and turn these legacies, thereby corrupting the machine-made elements with abject refuse and investing the painterly aspect with a renewed sense of aesthetic desublimation that the whole repertory of rips, scratches, gouging, and abrasions implies. The resulting assemblages recall the iconoclastic form of self-expression with trash materials that characterized the work of midtwentieth century *informel* painters such as Alberto Burri or Antoni Tàpies, though they conspicuously lack the existential, humanist-driven impulse of these European abstract artists.

The big scale, garish colors, and thick, spontaneous-seeming brushstrokes of most of the paintings Hammons installed at L&M Arts directly relate to the work of the New York School and hence to the gallery's commercial "history." Where we can see them, Hammons's canvases restage Abstract Expressionism's strange synthesis of formal rigor and idiosyncratic passion, as well as its play on figure-ground versus all-over compositions and stained versus impastoed surfaces. Hammons surely knew that the Museum of Modern Art's blockbuster exhibition, *Abstract Expressionist New York*, prominently featured the apotheosis of this heroic

art movement during the run of his show.[3] He was also aware of the fact that L&M Arts has been the site of no less than seven solo exhibitions of the work of the New York School painter Willem de Kooning. Indeed, it is the oeuvre of the latter that Hammons's abstract pictures resemble the most. The paintings derive their ludicrously vulgar colors and emotional high heat whole cloth from de Kooning. And as if that was not enough, Hammons produced the broad sweeps that dominate his canvases with the help of the type of large brush de Kooning often employed to endow his expressionistic compositions with a virile swagger. But if the reference is de Kooning, it is not as much an homage to the intuitive and technically gifted painter as an oblique revamp of Robert Rauschenberg's outrageous 1953 gambit *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Hammons's riff, it seems, is more one of derision than of eulogy, a parody of de Kooning's medium and style rather than an embrace.

The compositions at L&M Arts are as sculptural as they are painterly. Their draped membranes often touch the ground, establishing a continuity between the walls and the floor. By linking the two axes in a position of apparent correspondence and parity, the artist erodes the boundaries of painting and sculpture and makes the work, in its evident flow and self-determination, directly respond to the viewers' own bodily experiences. Not only are spectators discouraged from lifting the veils of trash that obscure the ostensibly pristine canvases beneath, but they must also be attentive not to trample on the sculptural elements of the compositions that flow into the space of the room.

Twentieth-century viewers embraced abstract art as the shortest route to universal meaning and significance, a phenomenon that has waned but not entirely disappeared. Many of the abstract compositions of Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, for instance, or those of Dan Flavin, Lygia Clark, Agnes Martin, and, more recently, artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Paul Chan, claim (to a greater or lesser degree) a relevance and subject beyond representation, a meaning unspeakable otherwise, yet held in and made concrete by the organization of form and color (and increasingly sound). The emphasis is alternately on liberation, transcendence, and foundational experience. Spectators, in turn, are assured that concentrated speculation about the interior, virtual space of the artwork will lead to moments of sudden intuitive understanding. In order to maintain this belief when confronted with the testimony of their own eyes, viewers often have to act as if there is much more there than there actually is; as

David Hammons, *Untitled*, 2008, mixed media painting.

if, to borrow from the classic tale, the emperor is decked out in exquisite new clothes.

Hammons's compositions offer little in the way of mythical experience. On the contrary, they represent a kind of fervid literalness, one befitting an art surviving the death of art. In their attempts to solve the riddle by peering through the tears and gapes in the tarpaulins or around the edges and margins of the compositions, spectators cannot escape the

fact that there is little of substance beneath the damaged facades. This reality is nowhere more apparent than in the two stunning assemblages on the second floor of L&M Arts, the last in the exhibition narrative's order, that consist solely of double, canvas-size curtains of mutilated industrial plastic affixed to the gallery wall. Here, painting's bare truth confronts the viewer; the problem posed by the bewildering objects is solved. The emperor is naked, after all.

Some will undoubtedly quibble that there is nothing new about this insight. The negation of interiority, of any solid, plotted depth, is as central to the history of modern art as is the passage from content and the division of signification to a phenomenology of the surface, from the figural to the literal, from representation to presentation. But Hammons's insistence is not on the work's facticity. His recent assemblages go beyond a refusal of inner necessity and presentness. They even exceed the late-twentieth-century notion of art as a field within what conceptual artist Daniel Buren once called "critical limits." For Hammons, art is a mischievous game beyond limits. It perverts the logic of forms of belief, conventions of knowledge, and ways of seeing to make the repressed visible in a manner only an excellent joke could accomplish.

Notes

This chapter has been revised since originally published.

1. *David Hammons*, L&M Arts, New York City, January 26–March 4, 2011.

2. Jerry Saltz, "Fur What It's Worth," *Village Voice* (February 27, 2007), at https://www.villagevoice.com/2007/02/27/fur-what-its-worth/.

3. "Abstract Expressionist New York," Museum of Modern Art, New York City, October 3, 2010–April 25, 2011.

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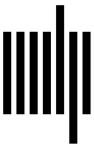

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