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Rings, Rungs, and Rugs:

Harmony Hammond's Floor Pieces and Wrapped Sculptures (1973-1984)

Throughout her career, artist Harmony Hammond has made a range of art works using different styles, techniques, and drawing on multiple influences. Hammond's abstract floor pieces and wrapped sculptures of the 1970s and eighties may relate to her queer identity, which was established by 1973. If this is the case, how so, and how might these objects differ in content or intention from her later work in painting? How might membership in a supportive women's group have helped her discover her own identity, and how may it have influenced her artistic production? I propose that her queer identity gives the pieces a more personal, albeit discreet, feeling, and that joining a women's group helped her to more openly explore ideas of queerness in her work.

My interest in these questions came about after exploring the artist's work of these years and not knowing exactly what to do with it. I knew I was interested in the fabric aspect, and was wondering how she made these artworks and how long it took. I wanted to delve into Hammond's life, her work, her family, her social life, and see how much of this I could uncover.

Born in 1944 in Chicago, Hammond has had decades of experience as a queer female artist in a heterosexual male world. Young Harmony had the average lower-middle-class childhood, where nothing really stood out except for her unique name. One of her earliest art experiences, besides grade school art classes, was at the Art Institute. The museum became extremely important to her over the years. When she graduated high school, her parents offered to pay for a year of college, but only to a small school, so Harmony chose Milikin

University in Decatur, Illinois, about three hours west of Chicago. She majored in studio art, focusing on painting, and met Stephen Clover, whom she married. The couple moved to Minnesota, and Hammond worked as a receptionist to pay for her night classes.

A year into the marriage, Stephen told Harmony that he had had previous relationships with men, and that he felt he was sick and could “fix” himself. Hammond stayed with him, never questioning her own sexuality, but spending time with her husband and his boyfriends, participating in various activities with them, such as going to bars or parties. The two moved to New York in 1969, when only a few months earlier, they were surprised to learn Hammond was pregnant. In an interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson, Hammond says she never considered an abortion, even though her marriage was not ideal.¹ After a seven-year marriage, Stephen and Hammond separated, and she went through her pregnancy and the birth of her daughter, Tanya, all by herself. Hammond initially wanted to give birth in a tent in upstate New York, but a few friends convinced her to go to a hospital instead. Hammond and her new baby lived in a loft and she would often gaze out the window, admiring the empty studio spaces across the street she thought she could never have.

After their divorce, Hammond continued to meet other artists and build connections, and even started a consciousness-raising art group with some of the women she met. It was here that she was truly able to talk about her art, what was going on in her life, and the personal details she had not shared before. There were no other mothers in the group; further, they were all white, middle-class, educated, and almost all heterosexual. Yet this welcoming, supportive community also allowed her to finally come out as a lesbian. She had this group around her who she knew would accept her, and Hammond pushed through the negative

feelings she had about her art and her identity to make herself, and other queer female artists, known. In the same interview with Bryan-Wilson, Hammond recalls that she had a shameful feeling, a stigma about being gay.² She remembers thinking lesbians were the biggest threat to men in the art world because they did not care what the men thought of them. The men were afraid of losing the power they had, and Hammond felt there were many things she was not given because she did not “suck up” to the men around her. This was also felt in the journal *Heresies*, which she helped found with other writers, artists, historians, and feminists. She says that lesbians weren’t really talked about, and furthermore, there were very few women of color to add in their experiences. Hammond knew at the beginning that the project would be historic.

This period was full of realizations and activism, such as the founding of Artists in Residence (A.I.R.) and *Heresies*. A.I.R. was an art gallery that had been started to get women into the art world and be recognized for their talent. *Heresies* focused on feminist topics such as politics, violence, racism, and activism in issues such as “Lesbian Art and Artists” and “Power, Propaganda, and Backlash.” Hammond edited and well as published many articles in *Heresies*. This went on until 1984, when she moved to New Mexico with her then-partner, Judith Daner, and daughter. Daner wanted to get away from her tropical plant shop and leave New York, and Hammond did not want to be without her, so they chose Santa Fe. Hammond began writing and lecturing around the country, urging art departments at various colleges to hire more women, and trying to generally bring more feminist consciousness to women. Even today, Hammond continues to speak at colleges and museums, do interviews, and make art, always thinking about how different her life was in the sixties and seventies. It was such a crucial time in not only her life, but in so many other queer artists’ lives as well.

The specific pieces Hammond made in this time look very minimal, but have meaning packed into them. For instance, *Radiant Affection* (fig. 1) is a wrapped sculpture from 1983-84. It is made of cloth, wood, gesso, acrylic foam rubber, rhoplex, and latex rubber. Its dimensions are 92 inches by 106 inches, and it hangs in two separate pieces, nearly identical oval shapes with open centers, much longer than they are wide. They hang vertically on the wall, with some space between them. The ovals are like tubes with connected ends. The shapes have been wrapped in cloth, not all evenly layered. Both shapes are wrapped basically the same, with small bumps or uneven pieces in each. The cloth looks almost rough to touch, as if it were made of twine and wrapped in strips instead of one continuous piece. The majority of the cloth is a tan or cream color, maybe having been white at the time the work was made. The very top, however, is a deep red, almost blood- or wine-colored. The very bottom is slightly more gold than the rest.

The title automatically gives the viewer a sense of some type of connection, a romantic bond between the two pieces, most likely representing two bodies. The bodies are similar in size, shape, and color. This could stand for two women, perhaps Hammond and a partner, and their connection, their affection, as the title says. Often times, when we think of rings we think of commitment, or a cycle. The cycle could be emotional, menstrual, or a life cycle, always repeating. The piece could also be thought of as employing “central-core” imagery, abstractly representing female genitals. The term “central-core” was introduced in the 1970s, to convey the idea that women focused, whether consciously or unconsciously, on depicting female genitals because it was part of their bodily experience. Anything from flowers to concentric circles was seen as “central-core,” and was often not given many other interpretations. Artists

such as Judy Chicago, who created *The Dinner Party* (fig. 2), said the imagery was a reclaiming act, and one that dismantled societal constructs surrounding vaginas and women.³ Though it is not explicit in any way in this work, knowing about Hammond's sexual identity can definitely lead the viewer to such an interpretation. The bright red portion at the top is also an indication of vaginal imagery, and could make the viewer think of menstruation, or more bluntly, a clitoris. The piece feels very personal, especially when one thinks about how it was made, and the care Hammond had to take to wrap the cloth and color it, and what or who she may have been thinking of when creating the work. Wrapping also suggests a feeling of care, such as with dressing a wound or swaddling a baby. We could also think of this as self-care; the time it takes, the tenderness we use, and the comfort we may experience while doing it. This piece is at the very end of the time frame we are looking at, a time when Hammond has been out of the closet for over a decade, forming relationships and further exploring her identity. Though she does not explicitly say if the work is about anyone in particular, each viewer can get a sense of what Hammond may have been feeling.

Duo (fig. 3), another wrapped sculpture from 1980, is made of cloth, gesso, acrylic, and wood, as are many of the wrapped pieces, but also has glitter and fake pearls decorating its surface. The two separate elements each stand 84 inches tall by 45 inches wide, and lean on the wall behind them. There is a black-colored piece and a pink-colored piece, and the black stands behind the pink. It almost looks like a shadow of the pink piece. The pink piece has the glitter and pearls on it, as well as some extra cloth hanging off the sides, ruffled rather than wrapped like the other cloth pieces. Each element is ladder-shaped, with four rungs and an open top and bottom. Again, it looks as if some sort of connected tubing has been wrapped.

The wrapping looks rough, bumpy and uneven, as if strips of cloth or string rather than large pieces were wound around the rungs.

The two separate pieces bring up the same idea of two people, possibly Hammond and a mother, daughter, or a partner again. One could be a more “femme” person, who wears pink, glittery, frilly clothes, and adheres to more feminine traits. The other could be a more “butch” person, who wears darker, plainer clothes, and might have more masculine traits. Another interpretation could be that the two figures are the same person, but at different ages. One could say the pink ladder represents young Harmony, dressing in whatever her mom picked out for her, doing what she thought little girls were supposed to do. The black ladder could represent Hammond as an adult, one who knows who she truly is, what she likes and dislikes, and who is reminiscing what it was like to be that young. It could represent the carefree attitude of a child versus the responsibilities of adulthood and parenthood, or even parenthood itself, as the pink ladder could be Hammond’s daughter as well. Yet another reading is that the two ladders are two sides of someone’s personality, one being a more serious, darker attitude, and the other a more lighthearted and fun aspect. A more Freudian interpretation that would definitely lead us to thinking the two pieces are partners is the idea of the ladder representing sexual desire. Working one’s way up the ladder could stand for getting closer and closer to climax. This piece could really have multiple meanings for each person who sees it: a mother, someone queer, femme, or aging.

Hunkertime (fig. 4) is another one of Hammond’s wrapped sculptures, dating from 1979-1980. The piece is made from cloth, wood, acrylic, metal, rhoplex, and latex rubber, and contains nine separate units ranging from 60 to 83 inches tall and 18 inches wide. The units

vary in color; one is all black, one white and black, four mostly white/ off-white, one a darker yellow, one a lighter yellow, and the last being speckled yellow and black. The units are ladder-shaped, with two sides and three or four rungs on each. The sides and rungs are all very similar in diameter, but vary slightly in the way they are wrapped. The cloth used to wrap them makes them look bumpy and uneven, but still uniform. Two units have ruffles on the outer sides, not quite reaching from top to bottom but stopping about three quarters of the way down. The units do not stand alone, they are either resting against the wall behind them or on each other, the majority of them huddled in the middle of the arrangement.

Because this work has so many elements and is so involved, one could interpret it in many ways. When we think about other wrapped sculptures in the ladder shape, we think of bodies, possibly partners or family members, or even versions of the same person. We can do the same here. Does each ladder represent a different partner? A different influential woman? Perhaps a family matriarch and her kids or grandkids? Each is so different in size and color, it is hard to determine if one idea is "correct." One thing that can be said is that the figures "hunkering" together, leaning on and supporting one another, is applicable in each case listed above. Ladders can also make us think of ascension, or the effort needed to climb the ladder, and why this process was so prominent in Hammond's work at this time. Even if we decide the figures are not lovers or family members, that they are just a group of women, this gives us a feeling of community and support and care that is so important to feminists. We could say the different colors and sizes are different types of women, and that in the end, we have to support each other and our causes no matter how different they may seem. Hammond was involved in

many activist groups and women's groups, so it is likely these ideas were floating around in her work space as well.

In an interview at the Brooklyn Museum in 2012, Hammond talked about the inspiration she got from artist Eva Hesse⁴. Even without knowing Hesse's full body of work, one can see that the piece *Hang Up* (fig. 5) is one influential work Hammond may have seen. The work is a large wooden frame with a cord attached to the top and bottom. The wood is wrapped in cloth and painted with acrylic, and the whole piece measures 72 by 84 by 78 inches. Hesse was looking at the two-dimensional quality of most art works on museum walls, and throwing it all off by incorporating the cord that sticks out into the room. Hesse's references to the body, her layering of materials, and expanded painting are developments Hammond took note of, and incorporated into her own work.

As we see all the ways Hammond's identity could have shaped her wrapped sculptures, we can move on to her floorpieces to examine the same ideas, and add some new ones.

Floorpiece VI (fig. 6) is the last of six pieces in a series from 1973. Hammond used found cloth and acrylic paint to create a 65-inch in diameter "rug." This piece is one of the larger works in the series, as well as one of the more vibrantly colored. The cloth is braided and swirled into the center, and then painted in red, blue, black, white, green, orange, and pink. There is no discernable pattern to the colors, though the largest portion is red. The braids are sewn together and then placed on the floor. The "rug" is too thick to actually act as a rug, as people would likely trip over it in a museum setting.

One way to view the work is through a queer lens, trying to specifically relate Hammond's identity to the way she made it. The braiding she used could be seen as a sexual

act, the way she spiraled the braids, and laid them on the ground together. Even the way she painted the braids could be read queerly, as well as calling the piece a “rug.” Words like “rug” and “carpet” have other meanings associated with the female pubic region or sexual acts.⁵ Furthermore, we could bring back the “central-core” imagery to this work, as concentric circles and spirals were a large part of this hypothesis. This work speaks less of bodies and relationships, however, and more of women’s history and commentary on what was seen as women’s work. There is a noticeable shift from Hammond’s vertical hanging pieces to the horizontal rugs, which could also be seen as a shift from high art to craft. Women’s work would often include quilting, embroidery, weaving, or anything else that they did in the home while the men were out working. This work was never seen as art, but as “mere craft,” and women were rarely given credit for their beautiful creations. By making this series of rugs, Hammond is reclaiming the “craft” and showing how much work really went into each one. These works could remind the viewer of a Lynda Benglis poured piece, such as *Fallen Painting* (fig. 7) from 1968, that looks like a colorful painting on the ground, but that is also recalling this aspect of women’s work and rug making. As Hammond herself explained, she wanted to rely less on the materials and more on the meaning⁶. The way colors are juxtaposed or the texture of the fabric she used could mean different things, but they are all hard to define.

As I look at each of these pieces, learn about the way they were made, and gain more insight to Hammond’s life, I have a new appreciation and admiration for them. In many art history courses, queer artists are not typically covered, or their queerness is not mentioned. Only in a handful of classes do I remember an artist’s sexual identity being clearly stated as it relates to their work, and when it was stated I was itching to know more. As a queer student

sitting in a classroom where you are not sure how welcome you are, it is so refreshing to learn about someone like you. You hear their story, learn about their loved ones who get incorporated into works, and make your own guesses at why they used a certain color or shape based on what you learned. Hammond has not only discovered herself through her art, but she has also helped younger queer artists and future art historians discover something about themselves.

Images



1. Harmony Hammond, *Radiant Affection*, 1983-83. Cloth, wood, gesso, acrylic foam rubber, rhoplex, latex rubber. 92" X 106". Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



2. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974-79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile. 576" X 576". Brooklyn Museum.



3. Harmony Hammond, *Duo*, 1980. Cloth, gesso, acrylic, wood, glitter, fake pearls. 2 units, each 84" X 45". Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.



4. Harmony Hammond, *Hunkertime*, 1979-80. Cloth, wood, acrylic, metal, rhoplex, latex rubber. 9 units varying from 60-83" high. Approx. 18' wide. Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.



5. Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*, 1966. Acrylic on cloth over wood; acrylic on cord over steel tube. 72 X 84 X 78". The Art Institute of Chicago.



6. Harmony Hammond, *Floorpiece VI*, 1973. Cloth, acrylic. 65" diameter.



7. Lynda Benglis, *Fallen Painting*, 1968. Pigmented latex rubber. 30' long. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, New York.

Notes

1. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Oral History Interview with Harmony Hammond," Smithsonian Institution, 14 September 2008. Web. 3 Apr. 2017.
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-harmony-hammond-15635>.
2. Ibid.
3. Chicago, Judy, and Miriam Schapiro. "Female Imagery." *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. (2010): 40.
4. *Harmony Hammond*. *YouTube*. Brooklyn Museum, 5 June 2013. Web. 3 Apr. 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhHhiYj-Ny0>.
5. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Queerly Made: Harmony Hammond's *Floorpieces*," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 2, no. 1 (2009): 69.
6. Bryan-Wilson, "Oral History."

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