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David Hammons

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Hammons's paintings reveal more than they show.

Howard Halle

Race is the third rail of American life, the moral hazard that so many in this country refuse to acknowledge. And no artist has addressed its intractability as eloquently, ambitiously—and dare I say soulfully—as David Hammons. His current exhibition at L&M Arts is, for my money, the best solo show so far this year. The objects work their way into your mind with multiple layers of meaning; if you give them enough time, they will whup you upside the head.

Hammons, who is black, was born in Springfield, Illinois, in 1943, making him part of same generation of artists as Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman and Lynda Benglis. Although his work shares broad formal affinities with theirs—the same Post-Minimalist propensity for decentered presentation, for example—it's always been focused on the vicissitudes of urban experience, as the concept was generally understood before gentrification made city life safe for the wealthy and white. This demographic transformation was in many respects propelled by artists, an irony that doesn't appear lost on Hammons, whose pieces often take the piss out of the art world. The offerings in this show sure seem to.

Known primarily as maker of sculptural works and installations, Hammons typically uses the detritus of the street as material: bent basketball hoops recalling the hardscrabble courts where matters of honor are settled; empty wine bottles of the sort associated with brands like Thunderbird and Night Train. But while his latest pieces maintain an undeniable thing-ness, they are paintings, or about painting anyway, a subject that in contemporary art circles has achieved its own level of denial. As Amy Sillman demonstrated in her exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins last year, artists really can't indulge in the medium without putting quote marks around it. Hammons lays on some big ones—interrogating race, yes, but also class, social marginality and the efficacy of art itself.

His methods are deceptively simple. He's created a series of untitled abstract canvases—one might even call them lyrical—subjecting each to a kind of passive-aggressive defacement. One is displayed with an old wardrobe shoved directly in front of it, a move that doesn't quite obscure the composition but certainly interrupts it. We aren't even

accorded the indulgence of contemplating this salvaged item of furniture, since its scratched and scuffed back is turned toward us. Head on, it looks like a collage element against the rest of the painting—a slab of beat-up brown haloed by soft feathery flourishes of purples, oranges and greens. In another piece, a surface of silver and blue has been gouged and sanded down; Hammons has added green garbage bags to either side of the canvas, and draped the front with a swath of a shiny deep-green fabric that looks like silk or polyester. Beyond making the piece look a bit like a homeless person, Hammons relates these physical interventions to the pirouettes of brushwork.

In other instances, he revamps Jackson Pollock's peekaboo abstraction, covering the works in waterfalls of torn plastic sheeting that allow glimpses of the "real" art underneath. One painting features a white muslin drop cloth ruptured by two squarish holes; it reminded me of the hood worn by the Elephant Man, or perhaps a Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan.

As a whole, there's something tender yet splenetic about these gestures, which on the one hand appear to protect the paintings from some ill effect (falling plaster?), while on the other, making them partially invisible. That's exactly how minorities are viewed by society, and it takes some gall to accord the same treatment to culture's most conspicuous luxury item. But it works for the same reason that Gerhard Richter's "smear" canvases do. For Richter, the act of squeegeeing thick blankets of pigment over carefully rendered images speaks to the pleasures of painting being necessarily obfuscated by historical circumstance (in his case, as a German touched by the abominations of Nazism and Stalinism). As an African-American who's had to put up with racial bullshit, Hammons, I think, does something similar

here. Yet you get the sense that whatever the larger issues, they're being dealt with as lived experience rather than as a theoretical construct.

This quality is precisely what's distinguished Hammons from younger artists of color who reduce identity to an elegant abstraction, a thing to be primed and paraded like a poodle at the Westminster Dog Show. You could say that he was "postblack" *avant la lettre*, but that label doesn't do him justice. For a long time, his work has alluded to a truism the rest of us are just waking up to: that in this casino called the U.S. of A., anyone can wind up living on the sidewalk, grateful for a tattered shred of plastic as shelter from the rain. This is what has made him an American artist, period—and one of our greatest at that.

