

Fur What It's Worth

Roaming beyond the art world grid with David and Chie Hammons

Jerry Saltz

published: February 27, 2007

David Hammons, the notoriously elusive, much admired, cult-like figure whose work can hit you in the solar plexus with its poetic ferocity and righteous anger, drops a heavy aesthetic anchor into murky waters. Hammons exudes renegade aura by living off the art-world grid, courted as he has been by countless high-powered galleries, refusing to sign with any, opting instead to go his own way. This hasn't stopped galleries, however, from mounting not one but two unauthorized surveys of his oeuvre in the last year.



David and Chie Hammons

L & M Arts

45 E. 78th St.

Through March 24

For this quietly fiery exhibition at a fancy Upper East Side townhouse—a gallery no one including the gallery itself expected Hammons to exhibit in—the 63-year-old artist contacted the dealers "out of the blue," according to L & M, with an idea that he said "would perfectly fit the gallery's space and history." True to his double-edged Garbo-meets-assassin form, however, Hammons—here, working with his wife, Chie Hammons—didn't divulge the idea, saying only that he'd fund the project, the work wouldn't be for sale during the show, and there'd be no press release. The gallery still doesn't know the price of the installation. To seal the deal, Hammons uttered two words most artists wish they could get away with but can't, for reasons of clout, money, or nerve: "Trust me." We should be thankful that the gallery did because Hammons and his wife are presenting something that, while stagy and seemingly simple, is also bitter and fairly brilliant.

The only thing you see upon entering L & M is the empty, opulent front gallery. In the elegant space beyond this, however, are five antique dress forms. Each has been outfitted with a full-length fur coat—two minks, a fox, a sable, and a wolf. Alone, upstairs, is a chinchilla. That's the whole show. A fashion friend told me these coats, if bought new, could cost more than a hundred thousand dollars—which is either mind-blowingly expensive for clothes or cheap for art. If you Google "killing animals for fur" you'll learn that, "To make one fur coat you must kill at least 100 chinchillas, 55 mink, 15 wolves, or 11 foxes. Animals that have been trapped die slow, excruciating deaths. If farmed, they are gassed, suffocated, or electrocuted through the mouth and anus so the pelt is not singed or stained with blood."

As if this weren't enough, Hammons and his wife have also painted, burned, burnished, and stained the backs of all of these coats, turning them into aesthetic/ethical/sartorial traps. This transforms the coats into paintings and the paintings into something much more double-edged than usual. At L & M, Hammons is also activating something he's often put into motion: The idea of a specific audience for art. Many clients who normally frequent this tony space aren't quite the same hungry hyenas prowling Chelsea for paradigm shifts. Thus, the specificity of this audience is skewed and erratic. The work is not only meant for "us" and "them," it throws these terms into question. In no time we're them, they're us, and it's not clear who's who. Hammons fans know this is the tricky quicksand he thrives in. As Hammons has said, "I like to talk in confusions."

This confusion has not only been influential, if firmly rooted in Dada, Duchamp, assemblage, and something deeply maverick, it's been intensifying for 40 years. Hammons has made and sold snowballs outside an art school; slung shoes over an outdoor Richard Serra sculpture; installed 50-foot poles with basketball hoops in Harlem; festooned trees in upper Manhattan with empty wine bottles; constructed a "Spirit House" in Battery Park; raffled sheep in Dakar; installed urinals in a Belgium wood; and performed on the streets of Zaire. As for the furs, not only are they an emblem for an art world in the midst of a feeding frenzy, and a world with little regard for the natural environment, they're an extenuation of the eccentric materials Hammons has always used, including hair, chicken bones, stuffed cats, and elephant dung (this last in 1978).

At L & M, Hammons adds his considerable feel for absence. Over the last 40 years this artist has made installations that entailed leaving a lot of galleries empty or semi-empty, notably the gigantic Ace Gallery in New York, which in 2002 he cast in total darkness, providing tiny

blue flashlights with which to navigate, or his 1998 installation at the Kunsthalle in Bern that entailed a bluish light and the music of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, among others. Hammons has said that he wants "to slide away from visuals and get deeper." At L & M, not only does Hammons do this; along the way he conjures thoughts of shamanism, politics, consumerism, animism, genre painting, animal rights, and jokes. Here, we're treated to a sensibility as barbed, serious, maybe fearsome, and as passionate as any in the art world.