

Conversation

Harmony Hammond and Elvan Zabunyan



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

Symposium Proceeding *Women in Abstraction. Another History of Abstraction in the 20th Century.*

Organized by the Centre Pompidou in partnership with AWARE.

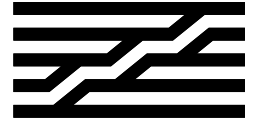
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Elvan Zabunyan: I would like to start our conversation by going back over your artistic career and, taking your *Floorpieces* in the “Women in Abstraction” exhibition as a pretext, ask you to describe the development of these works since the 1970s. I am particularly interested to see how this installation prefigured your contribution to the history of abstraction over the last five decades.

Harmony Hammond: Let me briefly go back to that moment in the early 1970s, when I and many feminist artists in the United States abandoned the male dominated site of painting and consciously began to use materials, techniques and formal strategies associated with women’s traditional arts and the creative practices of non-western cultures, precisely because of their marginalized histories and associations. Underlying this practice was the belief that materials and the way they are manipulated bring meaning into works of art.

We consciously brought gendered content to post-minimal concerns with materials and process. In 1973, I created a series of five floor paintings, three of which are included in the Pompidou exhibition. My daughter and I would go to the garment district in Lower Manhattan and collect the end-cuts of bolts of knit fabrics, industrial waste that was discarded in dumpsters or left curbside in big plastic bags. Strips of the knit fabric were braided according to traditional braided rug techniques, but slightly larger and thicker in scale, coiled, stitched to a heavy cloth backing and partially painted with acrylic paint – the braided rug physically and conceptually becoming, “the support of the painting”. Referencing braided rugs, but non-functional as such, the *Floorpieces* negotiate a space between painting off the wall and nearly flat sculpture. Placed directly on the floor as a group without anything on the walls, they call into question assumptions about the, “place of painting”.

Elvan Zabunyan: Although I thought it was important to start with the *Floorpieces*, we agreed to focus on your most recent work. However, I think it is important to briefly consider an intermediate period that, to my mind, enables us to understand your current production. I am thinking in particular of all your *Wrapped Sculptures*.



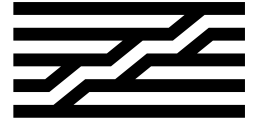
Harmony Hammond: The wrapped sculptures, from the late 1970s and early 1980s, were influenced by Eva Hesse. Her work had a profound influence on many feminist artists, including myself, and in fact, remains a huge influence to this day. Recycled fabric was wrapped around a wooden armature which functioned as a skeleton. The wrapped fabric became muscle or tissue, with the surface literally a skin of acrylic paint or latex rubber. So, the resulting forms were not stuffed. Nor were they about binding and bandaging. They were about building something out of itself from the inside out – a metaphor for that early Women’s Liberation Movement phrase: “the personal is political”. Moving from the personal out into the world, occupying space. The wrapping process which is a three-dimensional spiraling process, is additive, I would even say painterly, in that it is the wrapping process that activates the surface.

While the title *Radiant Affection*, comes from Annie Besant’s book *Thought Forms*, at the time I made these sculptures, I was thinking about Monique Wittig’s very important writing *The Lesbian Body*, where she describes the raw, passionate interior of the gendered body. The colors of the fabrics bled through the gesso and subsequent layers of skin-like latex rubber, suggesting the interior of the physical body. The forms themselves are stand-ins for the body or body parts. *Radiant Affection*, for example, suggests both female body openings and eyes. I’m very interested in all body orifices as places of passage.

Elvan Zabunyan: These elements that create a physical connection between the body and the making of the sculptures have a very strong spatiality. It is the human scale that guides the format of the works, and there is a powerful interaction between an interior and an exterior; as you just mentioned, the sculpture tells a story about the body in its multiplicity. How does the materiality of painting allow us to connect with these mixed physical and sculptural narrative forms?

Harmony Hammond: Eventually, I returned to the painting field, but on my own terms with gendered content. I did a series of small weave paintings, that look like they’re physically woven out of the paint. The weave paintings share some of the same visual strategies I still utilize in my work. From a distance, the paintings look monochrome, but up close, underlayers of differing colors are revealed.

For the last decade or so, I’ve made large, thickly painted, near monochrome paintings on stretched canvas. These paintings participate in the narrative of modernist abstraction, at the same time, they interrupt and subvert modernism’s narrative of purity and universality. Mostly, I do this through what I call material engagement, or the agency of materials and the way they are physically manipulated to bring social and political content into formal abstraction. So these paintings come out of the post-minimal and feminist concerns with materials and process that I’ve talked about, rather than modernist reduction. They intentionally invite content. My work is not pure, isolated, authoritative, universal, self-referential, self-sufficient, or removed from social function. I invoke references and associations. I welcome the world outside the painting edge into the painting field. The paintings, which include frayed pieces and patches of canvas and rough burlap, straps, laces, and grommets, along with layers of thick paint, engage formal strategies and material metaphors, suggesting connection, restraint, agency, and voice – what some call social abstraction.



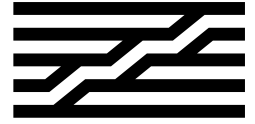
Many of these paintings are on grommetted cotton canvas. Metal grommets speak of tarps, tents, drop cloths – they are functional, they have a job to do. They protect the holes and keep them from ripping and tearing. They also have a painting history. In the late 1960s many artists used grommets to informally hang paintings on unstretched canvas. For me, grommeted canvas has additional associations. Many of the near monochrome paintings are on repurposed canvas that was originally used to cover the woven tatami mats used in Aikido, the Japanese martial art I studied for 36 years. Long, six to eight-foot-wide strips of canvas were sewn together to form a rectangular cover for the tatami that in turn covered the floor. When the mat covers wore out, they had to be replaced. I was given the old canvas covers, charged with repeated body contact, including my own, which I then stretched in place of the traditional art canvas. The grommets were found in the hems of the mat covers, which I cut off and began to use as straps. When I ran out of the grommeted straps, I started making my own.

Like the wrapped sculptures, these paintings are built from the inside out. They are layered. It's very much a back-and-forth process – painting, wrapping, then painting, then wrapping, etc. Once again, the physical manipulation of the materials activates the surface. There's no prior sketch, no prior research or anything that is considered preliminary. The work grows out of the process of making.

Elvan Zabunyan: I would like to pick up on this last sentence, which seems to me to be very characteristic of your work but also of many of the practices that flourished during the 1970s. Making and creating are linked to this process of becoming that you mention. The materials you use are also materials that be unrolled and rolled up, which give the visual and physical sensation of a spatiality linked to a temporality. This created space evokes the idea of protection, but at the same time also of injury and being cared for. The canvas and the body are once again treated as correlated, interdependent forms.

Harmony Hammond: For many people the straps suggest binding, bandaging, bondage and restraint. A body suggesting negotiation for freedom of movement. I have intentionally wrapped the straps around the stretched canvas, around the painting object as body. At first glance, the straps look restrictive, like they're holding the painting together. But if you look closer, it's quite clear the straps are not that tight. They do not restrict or constrict. The straps, which in fact, are often pieced or, for that matter, even the laces or push pins that were originally used to position the straps in place, do not hold the painting together. It's the paint, and therefore the act of painting that holds the painting body together.

Cinch VI (2012-2013) is torso sized. The parallel straps, call up ribs, but possibly also a corset. While the laces threaded through the grommeted holes suggest the possibility of drawing tight, pulling in and compressing, they hang down untied. This presents a tension. It speaks of potential. We could pull the laces and tighten the straps, or perhaps we could undo them, which would make the painting body more vulnerable. The same is true in *Rib* (2013), a much larger painting, however, the ends are just tied off. There's no lacing that zigzags back and forth between the rib-like straps. Instead we have a long rope and a long cord, which provocatively, hang there suggesting possible actions.

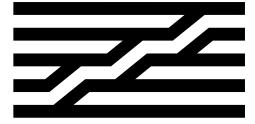


I would like to talk about the role of color in relation to light, shadow and meaning. The relief surfaces of the light-colored paintings like *Blanco* (2013), *Buffer* (2011) and *Cinch VI*, catch highlights and cast shadows emphasizing the sculptural aspect of the painting, thereby expanding the flat picture plane. The shadows are as important as the paint itself. In the darker paintings, like *Rib* or *Muffle* (2009), you can't quite locate color and surface. Despite the thick paint, depending on the angle of light and your position in relation to the painting, color and surface change... They are indeterminate, unstable, fugitive. I like the "outlaw" association with fugitive. In their refusal to be any one thing, at the same time they are themselves, the paintings can be seen to occupy some sort of fugitive or queer space, and in doing so remain oppositional, both in their refusal to participate fully in the received narrative of modernist painting and at the same time their refusal to look queer, though we might say the paintings perform queerly.

Elvan Zabunyan: To me, what you say seems very important: you conceive the sculptural work in its relation to its place in history and space. When you say that the paintings "perform queerly", I would like to bring surface into the conversation, in addition to volume. The surface is not smooth, its texture refers to skin and its roughness. In one of your statements, you say that all painting is linked to the "skin of paint". The skin of paint calls to mind the body and consequently the painted body. This notion of the "skin of paint", which I find very beautiful, is consistent with the notion of surface that you are working on and *Flap* (2008-2011) is a very good example, it seems to me, of the link with the skin of paint and thus the link with surface.

Harmony Hammond: Yes, most painting is indeed about the skin of paint, and the skin of paint, calls up the body and therefore, the "painting body". The painting body is both the painting object, but also the body that makes the painting - the painter. At their best, I believe the paintings transmute the painting field into the body, which hopefully then is felt on the viewers body.

Flap is a good example, because it's really all about surface. There is a flap across the center formed by two pieces of canvas that were stitched together as an Aikido mat cover. I like to show seams, flaps, straps, laces and push pins. I'm very interested in the connecting strategies being visible. I do not like digital seamlessness. A detail of *Flap* illustrates the relationship of monochrome and materiality. What I do, the not quite monochrome, the becoming or unbecoming monochrome, the disruption of monochrome, is one place that content enters in. A painting may appear monochrome from a distance, but up close, under layers of color are visible through surface cracks, crevices, and splits in the surface and grommets holes. It's all about what's hidden, what's revealed, buried, pushing up from underneath the painting, a surface under stress. I disagree with readings of monochrome based on absence, emptiness, or blankness, because they define monochrome in relation to image or signification. Those readings don't take into account the materiality of paint itself as a carrier of meaning. I try to use paint as a material equal to any other kind of material, knowing, of course, it isn't, that it does have its own history. I reference that history and push against it.



Elvan Zabunyan: To continue with these resonant ideas you bring up, I'd like to mention the *Bandaged Grid* series which, for me, is particularly representative of the different coats and layers of paint. There is an insistence on the visibility of texture, there is a thickness, a depth.

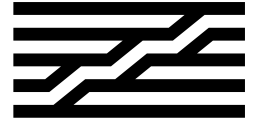
Harmony Hammond: In the *Bandaged Grids*, strips of canvas are fixed like bandages over an irregular grid of grommeted holes which puncture the surface of the painting, drawing attention to what is obscured underneath. Once again, as with *Flap*, underlayers of paint have agency as they assert themselves, suggesting blood and other bodily fluids leaking from the grommeted holes in the skin of paint and staining the bandages.

The oozing orifices and bandages refute the nature of the modernist grid by interjecting a messy, corporal narrative and even violent edge into the strict formalism. Bandages always imply wounds. So a bandage grid refutes the objective nature of the grid. A *Bandaged Grid* is an interruption of utopian egalitarian order, but, it also suggests, however fragile, the possibility of holding together, of healing.

The series of *Bandaged Quilts* follows the *Bandaged Grids*. *Bandaged Quilt #1* (2018-2019), participates in the male legacy of minimalist monochrome painting, but reclaims abstract compositions through the female vernacular of gendered craft traditions, specifically quilting. It is created from overlapping strips of burlap and cotton canvas applied from the edge of the work to the center in an irregular log cabin quilt pattern. Repeatedly overlaid, painted off-white with subtle staining, the fabric strips suggest bandages. Quilts have always been made out of different kinds of fabrics. Here we have what appears to be a quilt made of bandages, but they do not quite cover the entire surface. A central blood red slit remains exposed. The origins of quilts and quilting are gendered, and like the female body, they have been violated and exploited.

The *Bandaged Grids* also developed into a series that I call the *Chenilles*. The term "chenille" (French for caterpillar), is generally used to describe fabrics that have a thick pile consisting of raised yarn ends or tufts protruding at right angles to a fabric backing. Tufters, those who make the fuzzy yarn tufts, like quilters, share an undervalued history of needlework and similar technique of puncturing fabric from the back side. In these paintings, the "chenille" reference is visual, performed by paint and other materials on the surface of the canvas, rather than the puncture of needle and thread. Rough raggy-edged pieces and patches of burlap and grommets are incorporated into the thick layers of paint. The raised paint-covered grommets suggested the patterns of "chenille" tufts and the color white, suggested the soft, cozy texture and domestic warmth of tufted "chenille" bedspreads, which is why I call this series the *Chenille* paintings. However, the paintings are not soft and cozy. There's an edge, as under layers of color refuse to be buried and assert themselves from underneath, pushing up through split seams and tears in the burlap, oozing out of the grommet holes or seeping into the off-white paint, staining it a brownish gold. So color here has agency. It suggests the potential disruption of that warm white chenille coverlet.

Elvan Zabunyan: In this conversation, you have emphasized the need to consider details of the paintings. Detail enables us to see texture in a different way, and allows unprecedented visual immersion in the material. The art



historian Daniel Arasse proposed a 'close-up history of art' and said that 'The function of detail is to call out to us, to stand aside, to provide anomaly'. When I reread this sentence, it reminds me of the term 'queer', whose etymology from the German word *quer* links it to the idea of 'crossing', i.e., of not moving linearly but of moving across. I really like the way you analyze the detail in your own paintings. Could you for example come back to *Chenille #7*?

Harmony Hammond: *Chenille #7* has an exaggerated flap. Dark red peeks out from underneath. The feeling is, if we pulled up the flap, it would be like pulling off a scab, exposing raw skin and blood, the same blood red that seeps out of the grommets holes if they're not clogged with paint, which I use as a healing poultice. I am interested in the ruptures and sutures.

Elvan Zabunyan: You suggest the idea of injury and then healing and recovery. In one of your most recent series exhibited in New York, your *Crossings* paintings suggest both the red cross and, visually, an intermingling of the works. There is a dialogue, a back and forth between the works exhibited. This dialogue is a *crossing* that echoes the cross visible on each one.

Harmony Hammond: Yes, this is how you would see the work entering the gallery as you came up the stairs. The exhibition featured *Cross* paintings, *Bandaged Quilts*, a *Chenille* painting, and a *Bandaged Grid*. I did not start out to make paintings about crosses. They grew out of the *Chenille* paintings with big panels of coarse burlap from recycled coffee sacks placed over stained, white chenille fields like giant arms or cross shape bandages. Initially, I didn't even think of the shape as a cross, but rather as X marks the spot, an intersection, a plus sign, and even an abstract stand-in for the figure because the burlap sacks are a size that human bodies can lift and carry. For the most part, I cut the sacks along the seams, so they retained that body proportion. Initially, I tried to disregard the resulting cross form but it continued to assert itself. It was just so visible. After thinking to myself "I don't do crosses", which in hindsight turns out not to be entirely true, I found enough courage to deal with them not only as a flat shape but as a signifying form. Interestingly, despite the muscular scale and thick paint, as a sign, the cross is indeterminate. It references diverse cultural associations, including emblems of medical and humanitarian aid, religious iconography, martyrdom, plagues, and like the grid, the modernist historical canon. I really like what you said, Elvan, about the conversation going back and forth between canvases, across the gallery space. The white painting in-between the two crosses is *Double Bandaged Quilt #3* with its central red gash bandaged over.

The *Cross* paintings, started in the early summer of 2019, intensified in meaning over time given the stressful environment we find ourselves in today. You can see how the arms of the cross overlap in a kind of embrace, similar to the straps in the earlier paintings which embraced the painting body. You can also see my interest in edges as sites of negotiation and boundaries between the painting body and life. Ultimately, the *Cross* paintings, with their crossings placed over agitated white fields, speak of social injustices, BIPOC assertion, intersections, sacrifice, medical and humanitarian aid, and possibly healing and recuperation...



Elvan Zabunyan: To end with, I'd like to talk to you about the question of scale. In your work, this is very closely linked to body proportions. You say that the body occupies space and it seems to me that there is a common thread that has run through all your work since the 1970s. We started the conversation with the *Floorpieces* and continued to your most recent works. Even when presented in a white cube, your production resonates with the bodies of those looking at and experiencing it, there is an exchange that I would say is body to body.

Harmony Hammond: The relationship of the work to my body, and therefore bodies... That's just the way I work. It's not predetermined or conscious. It's just what I do. When I was working on the *Floorpieces*, I would literally sit in the center, coiling or spiraling the braids outwards to approximately five and a half feet. They're all a little different in size, but it was pretty much my arm width, my body space. They were made at the same time I was doing a lot of Aikido. I would literally sit in the middle of a *Floorpiece* as I worked on it – stitching the braided fabric, from the center out, onto a circular cloth backing. Then I'd take a break and go to Aikido class, where we would move in circles and roll around. After class, I'd come back and work on the pieces some more. It was all part of the work.

Elvan Zabunyan: A last point. You refer to the notion of crossing as an intersection. Could intersection also suggest intersectionality, in the contemporary definition of the term? I would love to hear your final words on this subject!

Harmony Hammond: Regarding the intersection and intersectionality... It is very clear to me. All art, including mine, participates in multiple narratives. So there are many intersections and many points of entry. That's what keeps the art alive and relevant.