

sculpture

January/February 2017
By Robert C. Morgan

reviews

NEW YORK

David Hammons
Mnuchin Gallery

Over the decades, David Hammons's aesthetic originality has maintained relevance through his oblique use of materials and subtle manner of transmitting meaning through seemingly incongruous, yet fertile combinations of *objets trouvés*. There are many examples, ranging from rock and hair sculptures to vibrantly lyrical Kool-Aid paintings and his rugged use of black rubber, fabric, concrete, and steel, not to mention his snowballs and paintings concealed by tarpaulins. Hammons's remarkable assemblages invoke a sense of brilliant absurdity while manifesting an implicit awareness of African American urban street life. His body prints and assemblage works accurately reflect the human condition during a time of media transition

between the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Those critics obsessed with classification might ask whether Hammons's work is a vestige of the 20th century or a harbinger of what is to come. Although his work has not shifted in terms of its structural approach, the materials have changed or appear differently according to their context. This could be a normal layover from the post-Minimal era of the 1970s, when Hammons's career began to evolve. For example, eight years ago, the front space of the former L & M Gallery presented a grouping of fur coats hanging on antique racks. In each case, Hammons's elegant coats, whether of sable or chinchilla, had been assaulted—damaged by fire, petroleum, or paint.

In his recent retrospective, the same depth and humor persisted

with a presumably expensive coat, tarnished on its back side by blue enamel paint. This somewhat unlikely location ultimately provokes thoughts of the wealthy collectors fueling today's raging art market; one cannot ignore the excitement nor the bawdy allusion to sex-in-the-studio during a casual visit from a potential buyer.

One of the most moving works in the show dated from the early '90s, a lone hood cut from a dark sweatshirt mounted in isolation on the wall. No one could ignore the real-time poetic brilliance of this identity statement. *Basketball Chandelier* (1997) is equally brilliant and, for lack of a better word, heroic. The clarity of this ironic monument pulls into focus the aspirations of young black men and their routes to achievement, turning the desire for a better life into an indictment of

opportunities limited by racial and social inequity.

It is important to remember that Hammons is an artist first. His activist role is totally intertwined with his work. I remember seeing a few of his assemblages nearly a decade ago at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, in the context of a group exhibition of 20 artists from François Pinault's collection. The majority of works in that show appeared mediocre compared to Hammons's basketball metaphor; his work literally possessed the space. And whether he is considered part of 20th- or 21st-century art history, his work continues to articulate and dismantle the contradictions of our present time.

—Robert C. Morgan

David Hammons, installation view of "Five Decades," 2016.

