

April 20-26, 2016
By Joseph R. Wolin

Art

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David Hammons

A rare look at an artist who refuses to play ball with the art world.
By Joseph R. Wolin



DAVID HAMMONS HAS long kept his distance from the art world, legendarily declining exhibition offers from museums as if refusal itself were an artistic material. So this eloquently concise though nonchronological survey should incite the envy of curators everywhere. Hammons is probably best known for an absurdist 1983 performance in which he sold snowballs on a wintry downtown street corner, but he came of age with the civil rights movement. In the earliest work featured in the show, the 1969 self-portrait *Spade (Power for the Spade)*, he imprinted his own body—fist upraised in a black power salute—doubled and reversed onto paper like the playing card of the title. Race has remained his great concern, inspiring much of his enigmatic work: Rocks uncannily coiffed with hair swept from Harlem barbershops point to hardheadedness or stoic endurance of the black subjects they evoke; empty fortified wine bottles (*Night Train*, *Thunderbird*), glued into a spiral standing on edge, conjure the dissolution of inner-city alcohol abuse—a gritty image belied by the Minimalist elegance of the work. The most chilling work here, *In the Hood*

(1993), prefigures the murders of Trayvon Martin and other young African-American men with a ghostly, disembodied sweatshirt hood mounted high on a wall. Taking hoop dreams as its theme, *Basketball Chandelier* (1997) strings swanky sconces and glittering crystals around the frame of a backboard, hinting at the double-edged aspirations that

seldom come true. For the large drawing *Traveling* (2002), Hammons dribbled a dirty basketball on paper to limn sooty abstract clouds embossed with the texture of the ball and his shoes. Turning the high seriousness of late-1960s process art into a kind of joke, the artist hid an old suitcase behind the frame, doubling down on the punning title while also referring to his own role as a peripatetic trickster.

Recently, Hammons seems to have changed tack, taking aim at the art world instead of American culture. Covering generic brushy abstract canvases and antique mirrors in ornately carved frames with found trash—ripped plastic tarps, frayed muslin, weathered sheets of steel—he rousingly denies the self-appraisal and aesthetic delectation cherished by the one percent (admittedly a rather white demographic). Yet this biting of the hand that feeds him paradoxically ends up producing attractive art objects avidly snapped up by collectors. Even our most shrewdly elusive artist can't escape the implacable double bind of the market.

WHY GO?

Race matters for the artist, but so do the disparities of class.

→ Mnuchin Gallery, through May 27



Untitled