

## Looking for Art in the Elsewhere: Fifty Years of David Hammons on View at Mnuchin Gallery

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27, 2016 AT 10 A.M.



*Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery/Tom Powel Imaging*

In earlier years, the great David Hammons made work in the streets. "The art becomes just one of the objects that's in the path of your everyday existence," he said in an interview with art historian Kellie Jones in 1986. "It's what you move through, and it doesn't have seniority over anything else." In other words, let art interrupt the cityscape, let it steal your attention for even a brief moment, but don't let the experience of art become rarefied — or let its true values be overshadowed, or bloated, by market ones. "Let me be a bad guy," he also told Jones, "or attempt to be a bad guy, or play with the bad areas and see what happens." In 1981, he peed on Richard Serra's 72-ton T.W.U. sculpture for a work he titled *Pissed Off*, an act of disrespect in which Hammons wryly marks his own territory for art. (Serra's piece was also the site of *Shoe Tree*, for which Hammons lobbed 25 pairs of shoes onto the minimalist's grand steel structure.) His most infamous performance, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), involved him setting himself up next to street vendors on a wintry day in Cooper Square to sell snowballs, priced according to size — art here presented as an absurd, precarious thing.

Inside the impeccable Upper East Side townhouse of the Mnuchin Gallery — where an exhibition of fifty years of Hammons's art is currently on view — those days feel long gone, though not at all forgotten. Hammons has never stopped creating crucial, critical, potent work. He is, by the estimation of many, one of the most important artists working today. Having mastered conceptual art's particular detonations, he uses its dissident forces to speak of and to a culture plagued by racism and class struggle. For Hammons, black lives are matter — have always been matter, subject and content for his work. The Mnuchin

retrospective is by no means exhaustive — there are just 34 pieces here — but it's precise, nuanced, and a rare opportunity to witness his art conferring with itself.



*Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery/Tom Powel Imaging*

Hammons has always used humor to cut many ways at once. His titles can be punny, even corny, twisting the cultural mainstream, rerouting it into slipperier territories, and revealing it to be a double-edged condition. *Which Mike do you want to be like...?* (2001) is a trio of vintage microphones standing together, unplugged, their cords coiled on the floor next to the stands. Their human analogues are Jackson, Jordan, and Tyson, so the courses of action on offer are to entertain, play ball, or box. Are these the only options? Stepping up to the mic means stepping into the world and assuming the role: The work points to supreme achievement and limited access all at once, Hammons's mics amplifying nothing but silence in response to the question at hand.

Hammons often sculpts around missing figures — or rather, his sculptures imply figures missing, absent, gone. *There's Champ* (1989), an inner tube flayed open, a pair of bright-red boxing gloves taped and tied to rubber strips that dangle like the arms of a fighter defeated, deflated. There's no body here to fight. High on another wall hangs a hood severed from a sweatshirt, its eerie form keeping shape with the help of wire. Hammons made *In the Hood* in 1993, almost two decades before the shooting of Trayvon Martin, which pundit Bill O'Reilly notoriously blamed on the teen's sweatshirt: "I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was." Hammons has always tapped the multivalence of symbols and their meanings, but in 2016, *In the Hood* — which also graces the cover of Claudia Rankine's award-winning poetry collection *Citizen: An American Lyric* — has become a more pointed emblem.

As installed, certain of Hammons's works face off with each other. A paint-spattered fur coat hangs on a dress mannequin (*Coat*, 2007), which is angled toward a ten-foot-tall mirror covered by two sheets of galvanized steel bolted into its frame (*Untitled*, 2014). No body in the coat, but there's no reflection to be had anyway. This dynamic repeats between *Orange Is the New Black* (2014), a two-headed African "fetish object" that's been painted institutional orange, and a gold mirror draped in swaths of tattered fabric

(Untitled, 2013). Hammons's humor marks the object as "dangerous": both sharp (nails have been hammered into its body) and felonious (bearing the color of prison jumpsuits). Again, the covered mirror reflects nothing, but who's to say that a mirror is the clearest way to see oneself or the world anyhow?

Before the show opened, Hammons reportedly changed what the curators had planned, taking some works out and putting others in. He added a score, too: Recordings of traditional Japanese court music played on the koto (stringed instrument) and shakuhachi (flute) have been piped into the gallery, creating a space within a space and further uniting the show into a single world. (He's long been an admirer of Japanese culture.) Hammons also installed a series of small photographs in inexpensive frames, some of which document works not present, some of which seem to be works on their own. Although they appear incidental at first — afterthoughts, perhaps — what's notable is how these images are hung in odd places throughout the gallery: high on a wall, in far corners of the room, or down near the baseboards. Against the vivid presence of the other works here, they feel like puncture points, tiny portals into other realms, breaking up the clean sightlines of the otherwise meticulous exhibition space, reminding us to look for art in the elsewheres of the world. After all, what's in the gallery isn't all there is to see.

**David Hammons: Five Decades**

Mnuchin Gallery  
45 East 78th Street  
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