

ARTE FUSE

David Hammons: Five Decades Is On View at Mnuchin Gallery



Installation View from David Hammons, Five Decades

Upper East Side's Mnuchin Gallery is hosting Five Decades, an ambitious museum level survey of David Hammons' decades-spanning body of work. Nestled in one of the rustic townhouses of the upscale neighborhood, Hammons' works on social justice, African American experience and freedom of expression blanket two spacious floors, promising a coherent portrayal of the Brooklyn-based artist's profound work, accompanied by traditional Japanese court music chiming on the second floor.

Maintaining an uncommonly low-key persona within the art world, Hammons diverges from norms and necessities of the art market, rarely giving interviews, seldom participating in gallery exhibitions and almost never making appearances. The strength and immensity of his socially and historically conscious oeuvre does not really dictate any of those, per se. Starting his fine arts education at Chouinard Art Institute, now known as CalArts, Hammons moved to New York in 1974, rapidly immersing himself in the city's vibrant and diverse texture. Some of the few works on paper the artist created throughout his career include prints of his own body, for which he coated his skin with margarine and pressed against the paper to later finish the imprint with pigment powder. Departing from dimensional and expressive limits of typical wall hung works on flat surfaces, the artist established himself a practice that lives and



David Hammons, Basketball Chandelier, 1997

breaths outside, far from the restraints of typical the artist studio and free from aesthetic possibilities of traditional materials. Fetching everyday materials, some redundant and some utilitarian, Hammons embarked on the creation of three-dimensional pieces to depict his commentary on American society under the influence of Dada and Arte Povera. Leaving little need for verbal explanations, his striking mixed media assemblages, often accompanied by pun-induced titles and playful materials, problematize ingrained notions on African American identity and its imposed limits for self-realization by mainstream politics. Higher Goals from 1986 for example vividly illustrates such duality in meaning and materialization employed by Hammons, who locate basketball nets embellished with discarded beer bottle caps and mosaics on top of telephone polls. Attributing to the escapism basketball promises to black youth in popular consumerist culture, goals that are covered both with mosaics and garbage still seem impossible to reach. Burgeoning akin to a flower or a spider, Untitled from 1992 signals all major components of Hammon's artistic drive: comprised of a long list of mundane elements such as used tea bags, pantyhose, empty food cans, string and feather; the sculpture, on loan from the Whitney, bursts metal wires covered with human hair



David Hammons, *Smoke Screen*, 1990-95

collected from Harlem barbershops alongside a sledgehammer. The mundanity of human hair yet the political and social charge it holds for African American identity is juxtaposed next to the destructive force of the sledgehammer and arbitrariness of found everyday goods. Commonly appropriated during Black Lives Matter protests is *In the Hood*, the cape part of a hoodie pinned on a wall—still bitterly relevant however the artist created the piece twenty-three years ago. Humorously implanting additional survey quality to the exhibition is a series of photographic documentation of Hammons' performances over the years. Replacing many large-scale works loaned from major institutions and collectors upon the artist's request, these low-key photographs within sloppy frames pay homage a once unauthorized survey of the artist that solely consisted reproductions of his work.

Hammons' return to wall-hung pieces in recent years has only been to subvert the basics of the genre and to dismantle its singular viewing ritual. Shrouded by fabric, tarp or steel, vertical wall pieces, mostly canvases and occasionally mirrors, stand to depict incompleteness and dysfunction stemming from the limitedness the artist imposes on the work itself and his audience. Restrained, silenced and covered; visual narratives await behind their blankets.

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