

Art in America

June/July 2016
By David Markus

DAVID HAMMONS Mnuchin

In a small photograph included in “David Hammons: Five Decades,” the first authorized David Hammons retrospective in twenty-five years, the artist can be seen seated, chin in hand, exhibiting a composure that might lead one to overlook the fact that the elegant chair beneath him is missing its front legs. With his dark shades, crossed legs, and nonchalance toward his apparent balancing act, Hammons is the embodiment of cool contemplation. It was with the same poise that the rest of the work in this long-awaited, artist-conceived exhibition inhabited Mnuchin Gallery, filling two stories of the Upper East Side town house with a subtle menace and a set of social concerns that the neighborhood’s brass-handled doors and iron gates seem designed to keep out.

Hammons’s works often defy thematic generalizations; however, one of their prevailing concerns is the black experience in America and its intersection with—and exploitation by—the country’s obsessively aspirational culture. After being greeted at the entrance to Mnuchin by one of several guards on duty for the

David Hammons:
In the Hood, 1993,
athletic sweatshirt
hood with wire, 23
by 10 by 5 inches; at
Mnuchin.



exhibition, viewers were met with *Which Mike do you want to be like . . . ?* (2001), a work comprising three microphones on stands of varying heights. The title riffs on the jingle from a Gatorade commercial that was ubiquitous in the early '90s, a period during which Michael Jordan pioneered the phenomenon of black athletes securing astronomical commercial endorsements, which helped affirm the myth that the best way out of the inner city was through one's athletic prowess. With its simultaneous invocations of Mike Tyson and Michael Jackson, the more infamous Mikes of the period, the work reflects on the narrow sphere of mass-media representation afforded to African-American men.

This theme was continued in the adjoining gallery with *Champ* (1989). Comprising two boxing gloves attached to a flaccid section of inner tube hanging from a nail and suggestive of flayed skin, the work is a sorrowful homage to the black athlete-martyr. *Untitled (Man with Flag)*, part of a celebrated series of "body-prints" from the late 1960s and 1970s, is another unsettling meditation on what the American Dream has meant to the racially marginalized. Hammons created this series by pressing his margarine-coated body against sheets of paper, which he then dusted with pigment and embellished with various images. In the work in question a man solemnly displays an American flag that appears to be twisted around his neck in a subtle allusion to a noose. A 1993 work titled *In the Hood* likewise conjures the specter of lynching. It features the severed hood of a sweatshirt held open by a wire frame and hung high on the wall. A devastating prescience has come to be associated with this work following Trayvon Martin's murder and the ensuing transformation of the hoodie into a widely recognizable symbol of the perils faced by young black men.

Exhibited on the second floor, *Fur Coat* (2007) evokes the more benign violence occasionally visited upon those flaunting