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Tea, Delicate Lines and Sardonic Art

Tom Sachs, Hedda Sterne and David Hammons in this week's Fine Art

DAVID HAMMONS: FIVE DECADES

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By Peter Plagens

Mnuchin Gallery

45 E. 78th St., (212) 861-0020

Through May 27



David Hammons's 'Bird' (1990) PHOTO: Tom
Powel/ David Hammons/ MnuchinGallery

The art world today is filled to overflowing with bright-idea, quick-execution art—usually assemblage or collage, although some “zombie formalism” (imagine a graffiti-covered Mark Rothko with one stretcher bar removed) qualifies. What is it, then, that elevates the nominally similar work of David Hammons (b. 1943)—a

MacArthur “genius grant” winner in 1991—so far above the pack that it seems as if he’s landed from another planet, equipped with X-ray vision and telepathy, hoisting our foibles about race and class with a variety of pithy petards?

It’s simply old-fashioned talent, which in this case is an artist-provocateur’s equivalent of, say, Richard Serra’s unerring sense of weight and scale. Mr. Hammons has demonstrated this since the 1980s: selling snowballs outside Cooper Union in 1983, constructing 30-foot-high basketball hoops in Brooklyn and calling them “Higher Goals” in 1986, and painting Jesse Jackson with blond hair and white skin in “How Ya Like Me Now?” in 1988.

In Mnuchin’s selective reprise, Mr. Hammons repeatedly demonstrates a wicked subversiveness that’s as sharp as one of those Miyabi knives that you don’t know has cut you until you see the blood on your hand. Almost all the 30-odd pieces in the show have some kind of sociopolitical charge, but a few are especially compelling and poetic. “Bird” (1990), for example, is a 6-foot-tall birdcage stand holding a basketball and a few feathers encased in chicken wire. The work effectively alludes to Charlie Parker, the way basketball is enshrined in the black community, and polite white people propping it all up. The work is unabashedly sardonic, and so, too, is the presence of the whole exhibition in a blue-chip gallery ensconced in an Upper East Side townhouse. Don’t think for a minute Mr. Hammons doesn’t know this.