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The Upper East Side Goes Grungy in David Hammons's Gallery Show

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The New York artist David Hammons, who has a raved-about show at L&M Arts on the Upper East Side, once said in an interview with the art historian Kellie Jones: "I can't stand art actually. I've never, ever liked art, ever."

What he meant, I take it, was that he hated the exclusions and pretensions that surround art, the kind that led an art school teacher to tell him he'd be better off in a trade school.



David Hammons

An untitled work at this artist's show, which comes to a close on Friday at the L&M Arts gallery

But, hate art or not, he's had a long career, going back to the 1960s. And he's been an immensely influential figure, particularly among young black artists, partly because he's been so independent-minded.

He's always worked on his own schedule. A little something by him — a pile of barbecue chicken bones and hair swept from Harlem barber shop floors — would suddenly appear somewhere. Then for a long time nothing would.

Labels rolled off him. What do you call a basketball hoop set 30 feet up on a telephone pole? Conceptual art? Sculpture? An installation? A joke? Yes, and no — to all.

Among other things, staying independent has meant staying clear of commercial galleries. So when, in 2007, Mr. Hammons had [his first show at L&M Arts](#), an outlet for Modernist painting (Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline) founded by the collector Robert Mnuchin, a former longtime partner at Goldman Sachs, there was talk. Had the outsider come in to join the club after all?

The show, it turned out, was Mr. Hammons's idea. He proposed it and paid for it. He wanted to use L&M as a kind of stage. And he did deliver some drama. When you entered the town-house-style gallery, you saw five fabulously expensive full-length fur coats — mink, sable, chinchilla — hanging on clothes dummies. When you inspected the coats more closely, you found that the backs had been scorched, as with a blowtorch, then swiped with strokes of thick paint and varnished.

Various readings of the show were possible. But it would have been hard not to see it as, above all, a blistering response to the gallery itself, with its billionaire

clientele and retread, marked-up trophy objects.

Mr. Hammons's [current L&M exhibition](#) is a bit more of a puzzler. It, too, is a painting show, which was basically what the first one was, but different. Most of the dozen works are brushy, oil-on-canvas abstractions, reminiscent in style of de Kooning or Gerhard Richter, which have been overlaid with obscuring materials: black plastic garbage bags, torn industrial tarps and worn-out blankets and towels. We think Modernism, but we also think street people, construction sites, trash.

Mostly, the plastic is hung or draped in layers over the canvases, leaving the painting visible only around the edges or through tears in the sheeting. A blanket glued directly to the surface of a painting has a kneaded, twisted texture, like the aftermath of a struggle. A piece of gun-metal gray plastic stretched tight over another surface looks agonized, as if it were being ripped apart.

The earliest work here, from 2007, has no painting; it's just double curtains of opaque plastic. And one painting has no covering layers, but has a tall wooden armoire placed right in front of it, pinning it to the wall.

You make of all this what you will. Some of what's here is quite beautiful, in painterly ways. And to judge by the hosannas the show has inspired ("marvelous, possibly great, art," *The New Yorker* said), beauty of a certain kind — familiar, object-based, museum-ready — is what certain viewers need from Mr. Hammons now, so that they can finally assign him a spot in the post-everything — post-race, post-class, post-politics — canon of greatness.

Within that canon, he can continue to act the rebel, but he'll also be a team

player, one in respectful dialogue with art history, with de Kooning, say, or with Rauschenberg, or Duchamp. He'll be an artist, in short, who loves art.

A comparison with Rauschenberg, at least, is not inapt. Like him, Mr. Hammons makes art out of everyday life, though he has often gone for grungy, don't-touch stuff (hair, bones, liquor bottles). If Abstract Expressionism is about the preciousness of the painter's touch, Mr. Hammons's arrangements of raddled plastics and frayed blankets are about the touch of ordinary bodies laboring, sweating, sleeping, trying to stay warm.

This isn't to say that his new work adds up to a sociological statement. Mr. Hammons is allergic to these. But it does seem motivated by his understanding that the art world, which he is part of even if he'd rather not be, is a microcosm of the real world, and that he feels bound to keep a critical eye on it.

That eye has clearly taken note of art's popularity as a luxury investment of the unregulated rich, and of the art industry's single-minded promotion of painting as the power-medium of choice. The first observation may have brought Mr. Hammons to L&M Arts, where art and Wall Street converge. The second, in some complicated way, may have prompted him to do two shows of painting, a medium in which he had before shown scant interest.

The arrangement has been a sweet deal for all parties. Having Mr. Hammons on board is a feather in the gallery's cap. The artist found a provocative platform from which to develop fresh ideas and got, I would guess, some cash.

The important thing is that he has used his opportunity well. In the current show, on through Friday, he brings to Wall-Street-on-the-Upper-East-Side the spirits of

many other streets and neighborhoods in the form of big, funky, solemn, charismatic, painting-like things, which, with terrific flair, turn an elite gallery into a receptacle for exalted trash. Arguably, that's what all galleries are.

Mr. Hammons no doubt guessed that the show would have the art world doing a little dance, though he may be surprised to find himself in danger of being ushered onto Olympus. It is when faced with such absurdity that hating art, or seriously mistrusting it, comes in handy. It provides distance, enforces perspective. I, for instance, will probably be thinking of Mr. Hammons's exhibition for some time to come, not because I love the show, but because I love the idea that he doesn't want me to.

The David Hammons exhibition continues through Friday at L&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; (212) 861-0020, lmgallery.com.