

There is nothing minimal about the riotous profusion of images in Jane Hammond's recent paintings.

Jane Dare, Jane Kahlo, Jane of Arc, Jane Claus, Jane Christ, Jane on whose naked butt rests a fried egg sandwich on a plate, Queen Jane, Sister Jane... A rack full of dress-ups in Jane Hammond's closet. Costumes like those you cut out to put over your paper dolls.

The artist Jane Hammond reminds me of Jasper Johns, Johns without the heaps of pretentious writing about his art that finds his painting not half so interesting as the intellect it supposedly illustrates; the Johns whose flags had a power that has only been diminished once we know that some distant relative of his raised the flag every morning on the green of a southern town – in other words Hammond is Johns before critics and art historians (they seem indivisible today) go over her work with a fine tooth comb and relate every image in it to her personal history.

Johns employed the target and American flag, images from our common storehouse that already said something. Target: competition, accuracy, weapon. Flag: nation, patriotism, home. Through his encaustic method and by focusing our attention on target and flag in an art context where they at first seemed shockingly not to belong, Johns aroused a host of other meanings. So many, in fact, that images we thought we knew well changed under his handling, becoming charged and mysterious, with auras that cling to them, at least somewhat, to this day.

Hammond, who early in her career worked in encaustic and still favours its rough, stucco-like surface now that she works in oil, followed Johns in going to our common storehouse for the images in her work. But where he demurely chose only a handful and kept them discrete from one another like the child who doesn't want his beets to touch his mashed potatoes, Hammond plundered the storehouse. She drove up a dump truck to haul away a bewildering array of images that, despite their number and, in many cases, the arcane corners from which they came, are ours or at least someone's: knots a sailor or boy scout might tie, Native American masks, bronze baby shoes, Tantric signs, magician's paraphernalia, the pictorial contents of several decades of Western painting, inventions that have been patented but never manufactured, all manner of heraldry...

Hammond accumulated these and more by haunting secondhand bookshops, antique stores and junk shops, where she finds the books that contain many of these images. Johns has famously explained that he saw the flag in a dream and upon waking he painted

William Corbett

Queen Jane Approximately



Jane Hammond, *Wonderful You II*, 1996, oil and mixed media on canvas, 208.3 x 218.4 cm (two panels)



Jane Hammond, *Wonderful You III*, 1997, oil on canvas and wood, with mixed media, 251.4 x 304.8 cm



Jane Hammond, *Midwife to Gargoyles*, 1996, oil and mixed media on canvas, 188 x 249 cm

it. Hammond's images are sought out in her waking world, then, in a neat flip of the Johns equation, are randomly connected in a seemingly nonsensical logic that we experience in dreams.

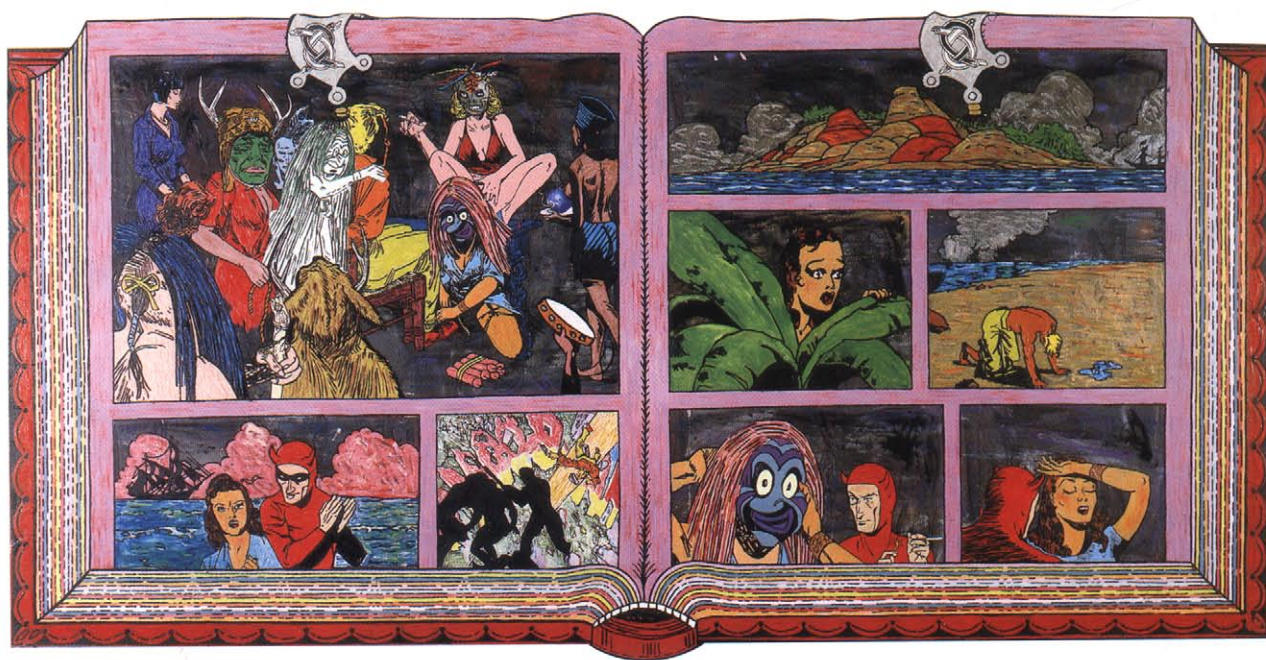
Over the last four or five years, Hammond has been collaborating, albeit distantly, with the poet John Ashbery. Perhaps needing the jump-start of another's imagination, or interested to see in what directions another's combinations might push her, she asked Ashbery to come up with an unspecified number of titles. Hammond will, it seems, make a work for each of the 40 or so that Ashbery supplied.

The connection between these two artists goes deeper. Like Ashbery, Hammond is omnivorous, her appetite for images is as large and ferocious as his for words, and neither has any limits of taste. Where Ashbery's language comes from business, high-brow philosophy, low-brow movies and the schedule of school hot lunches printed in the local paper, Hammond too sees no point in restricting herself. Both artists are stimulated rather than suffocated by plenitude. Both artists have chosen the way Ashbery proposed in the opening lines of his poem *The New Spirit*:

I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer way.

Hammond, like Ashbery before her, chose the first, or it chose her – the less true way, the Dionysian way of welter, mess and agglomeration in ongoingness. To leave all out would be, perhaps, the way Marcel Duchamp followed when he declared the snow shovel and his other ready-mades art. His aesthetic (remembering the man's elegant trimness one wants to write ascetic) is as physically reductive – the very air of Paris, for instance – as it has proven to be mentally expansive. Early Johns extended out from Duchamp's shadow but, in a marvel of one-upmanship, did so in paint, which the master had given up on.

The way of Duchamp and Johns pauses at the doorway of a philosophy class and often enters, but Hammond's work would have to be pushed over that threshold. Looking at her pictures it is easy to imagine them provoking debate about appropriation, Post-Modernism, the role of women artists, feminism, etc. But because these pictures are too much – antic and generous in spirit, open, undoctrinaire, eager to disclose themselves, sometimes



Jane Hammond, *Night Stick*, 1996, oil and mixed media on canvas, 157.5 × 297.7 cm. All photographs courtesy Luhring Augustine, New York

unsure of exactly what they are saying but frankly attempting to excite the viewer's imagination through the friction caused by all these images – philosophy or aesthetics seems beside the point. There is so much going on so raucously in these paintings that the unavoidable first order of business is to see what exactly is happening.

There are six Hammonds in her altarpiece *Wonderful You II*, where one, Jane Claus or Jane Christ, could have made a clear point. But if she had chosen one role to a painting, how precious and affected, Jane's Claus, Christ, etc. would have seemed. Hammond multiplies because it is her nature as an artist to do so and because she prefers the overwrought to the well-wrought. Her paintings are crowded, indeed feverish in their pursuit of putting 'it all down'. She does not devote her paintings to sex or pain, but likes to see her brightly coloured images jostle each other. The effect in *Wonderful You II* is exhilarating; all her different imagined selves are on parade.

In *Wonderful You III*, Hammond is Frieda Kahlo, of whom, over the past decade and more, only sacred words may be said. Hammond's Kahlo is flanked by five skeletons all wearing different coloured towels around their waists and all in a fashion-model pose. Death is crucial to the real Kahlo's art, but Hammond suggests that it is also something of a prop. Her Kahlo is more working artist, palette in hand, than feminist art-saint. She has on her left a bedridden figure putting on a Punch and Judy show (Kahlo, plagued by physical problems, continued to work) and to her right a studio still-life arrangement of monkeys, jugs and the sorts of things an artist paints because she likes their shape and texture. It is probably impossible for this or any other painting to breathe life through the myth that has hardened around Kahlo, but Hammond's refusal to respect art-world pieties while seeing Kahlo as an artist points us away from the divine and toward the human clay.

Since books are so often Hammond's source of images, it is fitting that in recent years she has completed a number of canvases in the shape of open books. She has divided *Night Stick* – given the garish contents of the painting, a change to *Night Schtick* is irresistible – into panels like those on a comic-book page. Her lurid story, what we can gather of it at any rate, involves a heroine, a super-hero, a desert isle and what looks to be, in the large panel on the viewer's right, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* dressed up for a costume party.

The Picasso is not, I think, an act of what is characterised as appropriation, of wrenching an image out of context. Appropriation implies that the artist does violence to the image and could not care less. Hammond has violated Picasso but in a way that shows how inexhaustible his grouping of women is. As some of them have African masks for faces, Hammond has given them Native American masks. Who has not, the panel suggests, carried what is perhaps the most famous twentieth-century painting into her world? On one level Hammond's art enacts how we raid images from the common storehouse and make them our own.

While Hammond usually works in bright, what might be called American, industrial colours that in their souped-up state appear nowhere in nature, she sometimes paints a muted picture like *Midwife to Gargoyles*. Its action must be taking place in Roman catacombs or a medieval dungeon. The pictures theme is... well, I really have no idea how the baby carriage, Pueblo Indian pot, gargoyle-faced creatures, Jane as Virginia Dare, the chessboard and everything else link up. Yet the painting somehow avoids obscurity. Size may have something to do with this. At 74" × 98", *Midwife* is on the small side for Hammond, but it is large enough for her images to appear to exist in a grander, more public space than that of the artist's obsessions.

Indeed, even when Hammond's paintings do not speak coherently – or perhaps I do not have ears to hear them – Hammond never leaves me feeling that she is withholding something. Her images resemble a vocabulary to which she is constantly adding and, over time, mastering. The viewer attracted to her paintings takes this sometimes bumpy road with her.

Of her recent work the painting that is the most ambitious in terms of content, *Keeping the Orphan*, Hammond's elegy for her grandmother, is one that looks back to her past in two ways. The first is to her Connecticut childhood – thus the painting is in the shape of the State – and the second is to her prints. These bridged Hammond's early, single-image paintings and her present work. She took from them the freedom to fill space with the horde of images she was busily unlocking.

Keeping the Orphan is not so much complex as chock-a-block with such a host of things that their number alone implies the rush of images that come unbidden in grief. It is that storehouse we each carry inside ourselves, tipped on its end and spilling out as emotional shock will cause it to do. This is a highly personal picture, but it is also close to folk art (you could imagine it as a mural in any Connecticut public building). The canvas shaped in the State's outline comes from that sort of impulse to the obvious and anonymous. Thus Hammond's memories could trigger those of any viewer. To me this transformation of the personal into the universal is deeply satisfying and the direction, I think, in which her bold paintings are heading. □

'Jane Hammond; Drawings', 20 November – 20 December, 1998, Galerie Barbara Farber/Robert Jurka, Amsterdam.

Jane Hammond's work will also be included in an as yet untitled group show organised by National Touring Exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery: 17 October – 5 December, firstsite, Colchester; December – January 1999, Arnolfini, Bristol; February – April 1999, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham.