

Selective Visions

Jane Hammond's art is a collection of diverse images.

By Sue Scott

A visit to Jane Hammond's SoHo studio on any given day can be filled with surprises. On the walls, in various states of completion, are canvases of every shape and size. Drawings, most of them done in the past few months, are stacked in a corner, while sketches from *The Magic, Magic Book*, by magician Ricky Jay, litter the floor. A print proof, with images to be hand colored, has just been delivered, while brightly hued paper clown suits proliferate on a daily basis.

There is little in Hammond's winsome disposition to indicate such obsessive activity. Yet the more she talks, the more this visual cacophony makes sense. This is a woman who not only loves information and thrives on facts, but is driven to collect and catalog in order to make sense of it all. Why else would the artist, as a child, cordon off a fifty-foot square in her backyard and proceed to identify and categorize everything in it? Why else would the artist, as an adult, keep lists of dogs' names and scraps of paper with interesting phrases, not to mention countless files of ephemera? This restless intellectual curiosity that propels Hammond to investigate ideas like a bee searching for honey not only describes the person, it defines the artist.

The direct, or perhaps indirect, manifestation is a set of images—276 to be exact—that has evolved over the years and now forms the basis of Hammond's visual vocabulary. The sources for these images are diverse; they are drawn from phrenology, palmistry, alchemy, magic, science, beekeeping, tango dancing, puppetry, and children's drawings. Both Western and Eastern cultures are

represented, the old and the new, the world of the child and the adult. High-brow images from art history share the canvas with lowbrow sources culled from entertainment and popular culture.

Hammond is interested in recombinative structures and the language of memory, so various characters from her personal cosmology may inhabit her paintings. Size, relationship, and scale change from picture to picture. The visual flatness and conceptual artificiality of these images is counteracted by placing them on a thick, abstract painted background that is created by mixing oil paint and wax and applying it over a ground that contains grog (fired clay that has been ground). The result is a canvas with a luscious tactility, even if the eccentricity of its images is initially off-putting.

This union of a specific system with

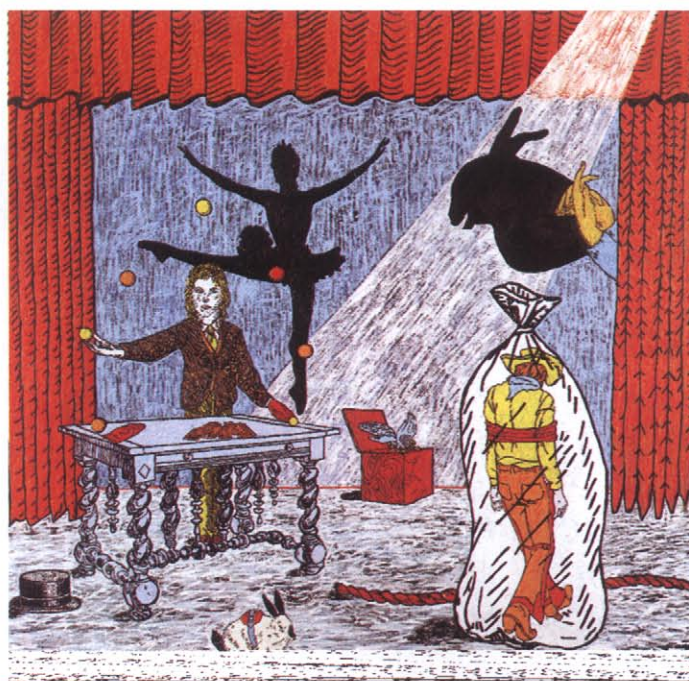


Above: Jane Hammond in her New York City studio, standing in front of her 1994 painting, The Hagiography of This Moment. Below: An untitled Hammond painting from 1992 that displays the artist's style of combining a variety of disparate images into a single work.



a strong facility for painting has enabled the forty-four-year-old artist to carve out a unique niche for herself in the contemporary art world. Difficult to categorize as representing any particular style, her work is a peculiar mixture of conceptual and systemic art, abstraction, realism, and even a bit of pop art. "She is an incredibly inventive and adventurous artist with a great sense of humor in the way she deals with taboo subjects and taboo approaches," says Adam Weinberg, curator of the permanent collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Although some might see the use of pre-selected images as limiting, for Hammond it is the door through which she enters an otherwise unreachable world. "I was searching for a way that wasn't about having a style," she says. "I thought art should be open and in-



Above: A 1992 untitled work that plays with ideas of role reversal and gender switching. Left: Sore Models (1995) was inspired by a title suggested in a collaboration with poet John Ashbery.



vestigatory, capable of surprise while allowing the artist to grow and expand and change and go deeper. There is an inherent conflict between having a style and having those beliefs." Hammond can make paintings that are abstract or realistic, overtly sexual or sweet, feminist, autobiographical, or objective. Rather than limiting her, the system provides her with maximum freedom.

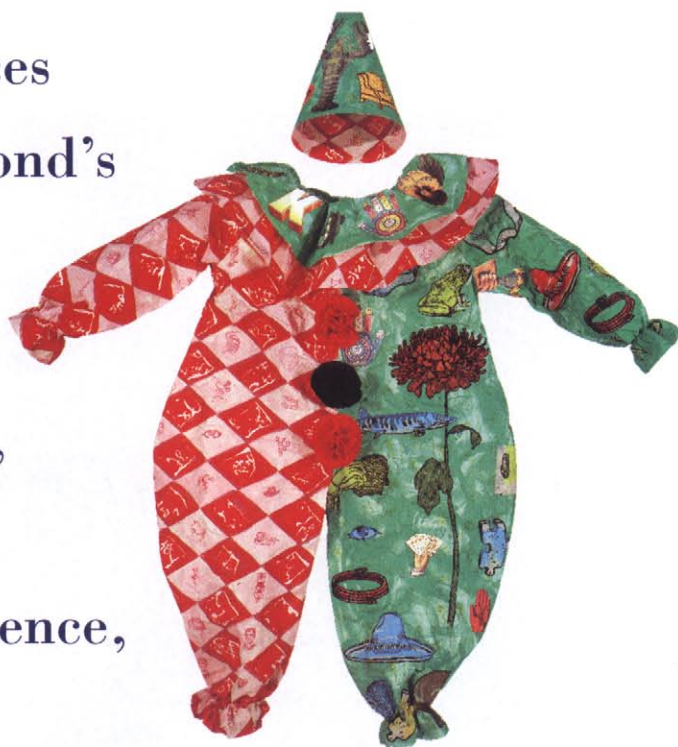
What is the genesis of these paintings? "I only make paintings because they come to me unsolicited," says Hammond. "I don't get ideas from the images, I get ideas in the images." After a few years, Hammond knew she was fluent when she began dreaming in her own language. "I had this dream that was exactly this," she says, pointing to a picture of one of her earliest paintings, her 1989 *Untitled* (247,214,62), a painting of a red clown in a cage against a white back-

ground with faint images of Asian faces. The titles of her paintings come from the numbers that reference the images. "I really trust when the idea comes to me as a fully formed thing, and it's in my mind, and it starts demanding to be made, like a kid demanding to be fed. I don't critique it. I just assume that it comes from a very rich place. That place isn't me; I am just the medium."

There is little in Hammond's background to account for her fascination with circus performers, particularly the clowns that recur throughout her work. Born in Connecticut, she is somewhat guarded about her early years. Her exposure to art came through her grandmother, a hobby painter, who twice took her to Europe to look at paintings. She studied biology, poetry, and art history at Mount Holyoke College, briefly studied ceramics at Arizona State University, and received her M.F.A. in sculpture from the University of Wisconsin. She spent most of the 1980s teaching at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and painting when she could.

Her interest in the circus seems to have come not during childhood, but as an adult and an artist. "A lot has been written about how artists see the circus as an analogue for art, a special world set apart from the regular world," she says. "It's an artifice with its own set of rules, particularly elaborate and baroque and made for the eye, for delectation of a certain sort. But the

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Above: Clown Suit is a 1995 lithograph with silk screen and collage, one of several Hammond works with circus themes.

circus has this double edge of being very beautiful and enchanting, but also having an underlife. This circus is filled with misfits."

Does the clown, then, symbolize the artist? "I rarely use the word 'symbol' in my work," says Hammond. "I feel like one of the things I discovered in working with a fixed body of information is how elastic the meaning of anything really is. So I reject the idea that a given 'sign' has a given meaning over and over again. Sometimes I use the clown for questionable gender and sometimes it's simply that I'm playing with the shapes of the hat and the nose. I do think that people who become artists do so because they feel apart in a way. And I think this clown with its elaborate costume is foolish and beautiful and artificial. This is something about being an artist."

Not all ideas for paintings spring out like Athena from Zeus's head. Some are much more vague, beginning with a general impression which then spawns the imagery. For instance, in an untitled

painting from 1992, Hammond started only with the mental picture of a curtain. Using images from her personal alphabet, she then free-associated, allowing one form to suggest another. In the center, a young girl in a red dress takes a bow. Paintbrushes in her hand and splatters on the board on which she stands identify her as a fledgling artist. Adjacent to her, on a much larger scale, a trollop dangles a tiny man puppet. Posted on a sign next to the little girl are the Chinese characters for "woman" and "paintbrush." Elsewhere, a devil rides in a boat, fish swim, a hand reaches for a rope through a hole in the curtain and, as if to add to the theatricality, a man in the lower right hand corner takes a photograph of it all.

Here, Hammond creates a contained space in which some sort of makeshift performance is taking place. The curtain functions as a device to create a world within a world: the artificial world on the curtain echoes the world of artifice of the canvas. At the same

time, it calls into question the relationship of the curtain and the curtain maker, the canvas and the artist.

Perhaps one is witnessing the birth and recognition of an artist. Yet Hammond resists autobiography as the only reading. "I also see the painting in other ways—a series of illusions where one image leads to another, a visual logic spinning out a story that couldn't be repeated. It has a degree of narrative that experience has, not the shaped experience of literature."

In another untitled work from 1992, a curtain establishes a background of artifice against which the action takes place. Hammond plays with ideas of role reversal and gender switching by making herself the magician and her assistant a man. He wears the costume of a cowboy (the consummate manly man) but his arms are bound and he's encased in a transparent sack. Shadows bring into question the world of illusion. The female magician, dressed as a man, casts the shadow of a ballerina, the quintessence of femininity. A pair of hands cast a shadow puppet rabbit on a screen. In the foreground, a real rabbit moves away from a top hat, carrying a message strapped to his back.

One can clearly give this painting a feminist reading. The woman is in control, the man is helpless. "Why is it," Hammond asks, "that magicians are always men and their assistants women?" There is also a rich vein of autobiography present in the work: the artist as illusionist, using the tools of her trade to create a separate reality.

"There's a kind of madness there," says Judy Pfaff, a New York artist and an enthusiastic supporter of Hammond's work. "Some people see them as random, but I don't think that's the case. They are emotional, strange, diaristic, and personal. They are like Jane."

This, it seems, may be the most logical way to make sense of Hammond's paintings. To see the images not as cyphers to be decoded, but as characters braided together in a nonlinear narrative. It is fascinating to think of them waiting in the wings between appearances, assuming roles that change

with each painting. "She constructs her paintings without preordained plans—more like a poet probing language's shifting inflections and potential for metaphorical structure," notes Klauss Kertess, adjunct curator of drawings at the Whitney. "The role of each image changes radically from one painting to the next, depending upon its linguistic relationship to its neighbors."

A collaboration with the poet John Ashbery, whom she commissioned to invent titles for paintings not yet made, has generated not only a new series, but a fresh approach to painting. One of Ashbery's titles, "Sore Models," caused Hammond to envision the feet of Buddha. Rather than painting them, Hammond shaped the canvas like two feet, thus giving three-dimensional form to her images. Since then, she has made numerous clown suits and a paper tutu, and has plans for an alchemist's suit and a large shaped head, much like the phrenology painting from several years earlier.

As surprising as Hammond's leaps of imagination are, they are not as surprising as her stature in the art world vis-à-vis the price of her work. Over the past four years, her exhibitions have consistently sold out, and there remains a waiting list for her paintings. She is represented in more than twenty-five museums, many of them the most prestigious in the country. Her paintings have twice been honored by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She joins the likes of Jasper Johns, Elizabeth Murray, Robert Rauschenberg, Susan Rothenburg, and Kiki Smith to be among the select few invited to print at Universal Limited Art Editions, one of the country's top printmaking workshops. Last year alone, she had two one-person museum exhibitions and exhibited the Ashbery collaboration at Jose Freire Fine Art. She recently joined the Lühring Augustine gallery in New York's SoHo and has gallery exhibitions planned internationally for the upcoming season at Galerie Barbara Farber in Amsterdam and Wetterling-Teos in Singapore. Next year, the Santa Monica Museum will show fourteen of her sex paintings



*"I had this dream that was exactly this,"
Hammond says of the untitled work shown above.
The 1989 painting is one of her earliest.*

in a one-person exhibition, with a catalog written by Allen Ginsberg. Her paintings cost \$15,000 and her drawings sell for \$3,600, astonishingly modest prices for an artist of her stature. But they are consistent with the artist's mind-set. "I was poor for so many years that \$15,000 seems like a lot of money to me. My first thought isn't, 'How can I make triple this?' Because it's so great now. But then you look in *Vogue* and see that someone spends \$15,000 on a dress, and I certainly think a painting is more valuable than a dress."

Clearly, money is not the driving force behind Hammond's obsessive art-making. As she says, "I appreciate a career that allows me just to work.

Because what I want to do more than anything is make great paintings over a lifetime." For now, the key to Hammond's productivity is the universe she has created out of 276 images, a system that has proved to be extraordinarily liberating. "I came to this system because I wanted to be intellectually rigorous—I was filtering out self-expression which, with my late-'70s bias, was very unhip. Now the whole thing has turned inside out and it's much deeper and more psychological, more about the unknown and much more a process of self-discovery." □

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