

Arts & Leisure

Section **2**

THEATER

A musical with style and hattitude.
A young pawn in a battle with the pope.
Finding drama in a study of the poor.
PAGES 5, 6

FILM

Fighting (with film) in occupied France.
Elvis Mitchell on Michael Mann.
The sad story of Bob Crane and his camera.
PAGE 11

TELEVISION / RADIO

Sherlock Holmes's dysfunctional heirs.
Fifty invisible years of Canadian television.
PAGE 27

MUSIC

Jon Pareles on Tom Petty's 'Last DJ.'
Steve Reich's case against technology.
The surprising staying power of Bon Jovi.
Hugo Wolf's little songs and big demands.
PAGES 28, 30

DANCE

A choreographer's raw reaction to Sept. 11.
Dancing to George Harrison
PAGE 33

ART / ARCHITECTURE

Jane Hammond and the art of the word.
In ordinary objects, an American art.
PAGES 35, 37



Peter Muscato

A detail of Jane Hammond's painting "Dizzy Dice" (2002).

To a Painter, Words Are Worth a Thousand Pictures

By AMEI WALLACH

IN the beginning for the artist Jane Hammond is the word. It's impossible to talk about her painting without resorting to literature (not to mention Santa Claus, molecular biology, phrenology, Mao Zedong and the American flag). She'll pillage anything from her eclectic library or her notebooks of names, from those of pets to those of English castles.

The best metaphor for the method behind her rollicking, erudite, street-smart, angst-ridden, encyclopedic paintings is writing.

To make the point, Ms. Hammond passes along an article, "New Wave of Writers Reinvents Literature," by Michiko Kakutani, the senior book critic at The New York Times. The writers mentioned range from Salman Rushdie to the young Dave Eggers and Zadie Smith. In Ms. Kakutani's words, they write "Big Tent Novels: huge, inclusive, often mythic works that attempt to capture the chaos and cacophony of the world through whatever means come to hand."

Substitute the word "painting" for "novel," and you've got a fair description of what Ms. Hammond is up to. And that is to make paintings "as complicated, inconsistent, varied, multifaceted as you are, as I am, as life is," she said. She spoke on a recent afternoon in her sun-splashed studio-loft in SoHo, where she lives with Craig McNeer, a homemaker, amid works in progress and wildly blooming potted plants.

"I think my work deals very directly with the time that we live in," Ms. Hammond said. "There's a surfeit of information, increasingly bodiless because of the computer, and I bring to this an interest in how meaning is constructed."

For example, she will paint props — masks of Einstein and King Tut, puppet parts and a trompe l'oeil Arc de Triomphe — and pin them to the wings of a painted double stage on which a bear prances and a geisha dances (the geisha's head a likeness of Ms. Hammond). All these and more fill the 12-by-21-foot canvas of "Back Stage, Secrets of Scene Painting" (shown last spring at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris), while ropes, pulleys and backstage ephemera seem to jut out into the viewer's face. The painting is as much tour de force performance as a meditation on the nature of performance and manipulation.

"My work is about, 'O.K., I grew up in a world of mediated imagery,'" said Ms. Hammond, who is 52 and has sold out every show since her first one in 1989. "How am I going to be an imaginative, spirited, authentic, private, living, breathing self? How do I shape this stuff?"



"Good Night Nurse," a recent mixed-media work by Jane Hammond (below) whose title was supplied by the poet John Ashbery.

She will go as far as devising literary strategies to achieve her time-bending, media-blending mind teasers. One example, her nine-year collaboration with the poet John Ashbery, is the focus of a traveling show, organized by the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art and currently at Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston.

Mr. Ashbery's part, he writes in the catalog, lasted about four minutes in 1993, when in response to a request from Ms. Hammond, he "made a tour of a walled-off room somewhere in my unconscious" and returned with titles for paintings. She wanted titles to suggest paintings instead of the other way around.

Ms. Hammond was hardly expecting 44 titles to emerge from her fax machine. She certainly didn't predict that Ashbery phrases like "A Parliament of Refrigerator Magnets," "Do Husbands Matter?" and "The Wonderfulness of Downtown" would inspire a raucous flowering of 62 paintings.

Last summer, Ms. Hammond completed

the last of the Ashbery-titled paintings, "Prevents Furring," after looking up "furring" in the dictionary.

"Each meaning was more recondite and weird than the other," she said, "but one meaning is a coating of the tongue. So it clicked in my mind that when you read about old medicine or herbal medicine today, there are all these claims for cures that are romantic and fabulous." She invented "marrow tea," a product with a list of improbably miraculous benefits that she presented as a painting shaped like a collapsed box.

And that was the end of a nine-year project for an artist who said she had to have "something to do, otherwise, total panic." To avert crisis, Ms. Hammond had already begun working in new directions.



Andrea Mohr/The New York Times

One result, the artist book "Be Zany, Poised Harpists/Be Blue, Little Sparrows," is on view at Dieu Donne in SoHo. It, too, is a collaboration with a poet, Raphael Rubinstein.

A decade ago, Ms. Hammond heard Mr. Rubinstein reading his poem "Six Sex," a bawdy tour of European cities in six stanzas, each with six lines of six words of six letters. The poetic form is called *oulipe*.

"There's a formal strength," Ms. Hammond said. "It's not anti-self-expression, but it's not just self-expression. It's driven from the outside in, and the inside out."

For the artist book, she also chose Rubinstein poems based on two stanzas and four stanzas, then commissioned one of eight. She illuminated each poem with a different

Jane Hammond

Dieu Donne Gallery,
433 Broome Street.
Through Nov. 9.

system of image-making, from digital renderings of vintage postcards backed with erotic drawings to pull-out photographs and a fold-out print. For each book in the edition, she also concocted different covers from collaged and handmade paper.

Both the stringent poetic form and its infinite possibilities tally well with Ms. Hammond's own predilection for systems. For decades it has been her practice to limit all her paintings to mix-and-match selections from a total of 276 found images.

Multiplicity is her goal at all costs. Ms. Hammond has an abhorrence of the signature style. She wants her exhibitions to look like group shows. For all their inventiveness, however, they don't. She can escape the rectangular canvas; she can't escape her sensibility. But she can riff on it, sometimes revealing herself, more often concealing it.

A post-Ashbery painting like "Dizzy Dice" (2002) recapitulates her images in black and white as faux three-dimensional matchbook covers, an aloof commentary on objects of advertising and desire. In "Good Night Nurse" (2000-1), Mr. Ashbery's twist on the title of the children's book "Goodnight Moon," Ms. Hammond's impulse is autobiographical.

"Good Night Nurse" is set in a red studio, recalling "The Red Studio" of Matisse. The space, however, is eerie and deep, as in a set for a play. Young boys play leapfrog at center stage, a catcher's glove, soccer ball and other boy stuff at their feet. Their actions are frozen in white, like the marble of memorials. Scattered about are sarcophagi and the disembodied head of a nurse.

Like many of her paintings, "Good Night Nurse" first appeared to her in a dream. It occurred after she had visited her nephew, now 13, who for years has been struggling with a life-threatening disease. She dreamed he had died, and she was letting him choose the shape of his coffin.

Now she is working on paintings shaped like gigantic three-dimensional open books. The pages of these books are studied with rebuses. One spells "Ursula Andress"; another, on the facing page, spells "Paul Revere," an unlikely pairing of cultural icons.

"With the Ashbery collaboration, I went from words to pictures," Ms. Hammond said. "Now I'm going from pictures to words."

She has begun yet another collaboration, for a benefit sale for Dieu Donne. This time her collaborator is a psychic. □