

## Jane Hammond's Imaginary "Charades"

Jane Hammond's paintings explore the intrinsic, if unstable, intersection that exists between images and words. As shared symbols, visual signs embody and reflect verbal counterparts; but images are inherently *not* literal and therefore not bound to the strict confines of syntax or grammar that words must obey. Unlike words, images present infinite recombinative possibilities. The basis of Hammond's practice draws on a fixed repository of illustrations taken from 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century books, especially travel and how-to books, whose drawings were intended to be as literal as possible. Her iconography-dense canvases, which she has been making for more than twenty years, place the suggestiveness of pictorial language within a thoughtful and often playful consideration of personal and collective cognition. "Each painting," reflects Hammond, "is a kind of lens of particularity through which I look at the same found images and see them in a different way."

The "Charades" series, begun in 2002, exists within a larger body of work produced during the same period, and departs somewhat from Hammond's previous work because of the potential for cognitive closure, because these paintings can in fact be *read*. Writing of the "Rebus" series, of which the "Charades" group is a subset, critic Terry R. Myers noted: "Never before in her work had we been given the green light to treat her paintings exactly like rebuses: in other words, never before have we found ourselves faced with using the specific names of the specific images in her paintings to come up with another very specific name and another very specific image in the form of---of all things---another person (or persons)."

The parlor game charades, popular today as a pantomime party game, originated during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a word game wherein contestants would compose poems as clues to syllables that formed a chosen word. The game's original style (portrayed in Jane Austen's *Emma*) required a certain level of literary refinement and was subsequently altered in the United States into the less demanding acting or pantomime version, by which it is still known and played.

In Hammond's "Charades" the category performed is exclusively composed of well-known names of artists, writers, actors, criminals, musicians, philosophers, athletes, pop stars, even two celebrated chefs. The persons referenced in these paintings were selected specifically for the imagistic quality inherent in their (English-language) names. Not surprisingly, many of them, especially those whose celebrity derives from the performing arts---Mae West, Tom Cruise---are known by self-adopted pseudonyms chosen precisely because of the memory aid inherent in popular, one-syllable, common nouns. Even before the advent of Hollywood stage names (and the more generalized American practice of abbreviating and anglicizing the surnames of immigrants), names often already connoted occupation, gender, class, geographical region and nationality. The pervasive American surname 'Smith', for instance, connotes ancestry of that profession during some distant epoch, as does 'Farmer', 'Lord', 'Cantor', 'Parson' and so many others. Certain individuals, such as Hart Crane or Virginia Woolf or John Locke, are gifted at birth with names as readily evoked through visual association as letters. In addition, a few notable historical figures have attained the special distinction of having conferred their names onto still-popular things, so that Napoleon's puffed pasty lives on long after the dust of his battles has settled.

Hammond's paintings have always celebrated and expanded on the possibilities of found pictures and the suggestive abstraction of language. With the "Charades" series she offers a collection of quixotic and punning 'portraits' of persons whose names are as redolent as their lives.

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