

See Jane Paint

By Klaus Kertess

Jane Hammond fabricates tales of paint whose moral is uncertainty; her stories are either about the meaninglessness of meaning or the meaning of meaninglessness. She has urged into uneasy symbiosis with our consciousness" seemingly contradictory needs to objectify with systematic categorization and to subjectify with spontaneous free associativeness. Likewise she has conjoined line-dependent perspectival, three-dimensionality with a contradictory stubborn and sticky, painterly flatness. Hammond is a cartographer of the oxymoronic; she is now a gleeful, now sinister provocateur.

Hammond came of art-making age in the 1970s, when a variety of systematizers still held sway. Some, like Sol LeWitt reified self-evident geometric clarities; others, like Barry Le Va camouflaged their systems but left enough clues to give the viewer-sleuth the illusion of possibly solving their mystery. Hammond is prone to Le Va's ellipsis and is by nature predisposed to analysis based on sensory observation. As a child, she gridded off, with string, fifty square feet of woods and tried to identify and classify everything inside. Later, she wanted to become a scientist and admired such as Mendel and Galileo. Systems of thought and language were of no small interest to her. However, like many of her peers, Hammond found the self-reflexive systems and analyses so crucial to much modernism, could not satisfy all her needs. She sought to retrieve modernism's lapsed illusionism (both visual and psychological) and to ground it in factuality and the disjunctiveness of our culture's non-linear, image saturation. The exotic incongruities and steamy non-sequiturs once purely invented by the Surrealists are now banal givens of our everyday life. Hammond has an agile way with disjointedness.

In her early painting, Hammond gave compulsive and sometimes riotous reign to her strong attraction to the physicality of paint - and a variety of other materials pressed into painting's service and surface. They had a welcome and exuberant riskiness; but, just as their images were at risk of enslavement to the excessive surface physicality, so did Hammond feel at risk of enslavement to the self-generating coherencies of a unified style. To subvert the stylistic unities of her execution and configurations she set about constructing a systematic language whose inherent recombinative properties would permit and encourage a kaleidoscopic variety of imaging and making while remaining grounded in the finite, observable parameters of its given vocabulary.

Like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese calligraphy, Hammond's language, of course, had to be pictorial. Like conventional languages, hers is inherited; but, unlike them, her vocabulary is found and purely of her own choosing. To insure that her found ideograms remained as non-hierarchical as conventional language, each was given a number. Hammond chose 276 - a smaller number of units would be inhibiting, a vast number would void the structure. Unlike other ideographic systems, Hammond's has no formal coherence from image to image. Some were chosen from the realm of science, some from art, some from adulthood, some from childhood; some include words, some don't; some are pictorial, some diagrammatic. Almost none of the individual ideograms are charged with a strong contemporary iconicity (there are no recognizable, major product logos or media stars); many have the suppressed, often nostalgic resonance of obsolescence. Some are purely abstract, some quite specific and narratively hot. Even

found imagery resonates, to some degree, with the psyche of its collector. The personal idiosyncrasies of Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg can be read between the lines of their choice of found detritus. Many of Hammond's ideograms are of figures enacting some mode of ritualized performance - from burlesque to Christian to arcane medical procedures, to sado-masochistic bondage and cultish flagellation - they may be surrogates for the ritualized acts of art-making. The snowball, igloo, and chicken are found mementoes of her particular childhood.

Hammond is something of a pack rat; and many of her vocabulary units had already been collected over the years. But they only became part of a system some five years ago. She constructs her paintings without preordained plans - more like a poet probing language's shifting inflections and potential for metaphorical structure. The role of each image changes radically from one painting to the next, depending upon its linguistic relationship to its neighbors. Hammond uses her system to retrieve the polymorphous free associativeness of childhood recombinative play. It is from nonsense, perhaps more than from sense that we learn about the meaning of language; and Hammond gives painterly body to nonsensical wordplay. In the beginning, the elements of her language began to speak to each other out of a state of quite conscious, drifting receptivity (much art has emerged from the ritualization of what seems to be mindlessness or boredom). Of late, Hammond has begun to dream in her newfound language and full-blown combinations spring from her head - sometimes completely unconsciously (this means that quite a bit of autobiography might leak through).

All of Hammond's paintings are "Untitled" with the numbers of their individual components in parentheses. The whole or just a detail of each chosen number may be used. The color of each linguistic unit is independent of its information. Color is coded rather than local or descriptive, and is limited to six quite standard shades of red, orange, yellow, blue, black and white (Hammond feels she exhausted green in graduate school) - a chicken might be blue, a free-floating eye could be seen in yellow and black. As in mapmaking, color is used primarily to define and separate territorial boundaries from each other.

Once the language was learned, the play could begin. In one painting, a peak-capped and caped clown (247), as red of face as of clothes, confronts his mirror image, that, in spite of being of the same height and seemingly in the same of all yellow spatial plane, is standing on a blue stool. In another painting, the same number 247 (clown), now white of face, is engulfed and dwarfed by a cratered Martian landscape (229). The hysterical strangeness of his situation is heightened by the alien intensity of his costume's redness in the middle of the landscape's photographic black and whiteness. The ghostlike peaked rocks mime and overpower the clown's form. 229 becomes the rear window's view in a more earthbound conundrum that finds a hooded self-flagellant performing in front of a walled up side window. Is he oblivious to or expiating the erotic act of the two Japanese woodblock courtesans of the foreground? Here a snowball (223) is almost expectedly in proximity to an igloo and sky blue, there 223 weighs down the end of a diving board perched on a raft in a sea of red under a horizon of black that is embedded with the white, handwritten transcription of an Eskimo mourning tale. 31 is a looping line on a continuously interpenetrating path that looks like the tracks of abstract acts of making so favored by late modernists but is, instead, a chart of the fly's trajectory. Whether laid out in charts, in comic book-like strips, in free floating shields of heraldry,

or in pictorial dimensionality; whether abstract or figurative, we find ourselves in a world where Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of pata-physics. Like Raymond Roussel, whom she admires, Hammond maps out a carnival of intimate absurdities.

The linear depictiveness of Hammond's contours and forms reflects the illustrativeness of her found sources and would seem to mandate a corresponding, smooth, virtually textureless surface. But, indeed, her surfaces exploit the viscous physicality of oil paint and bristle with the coolly restrained but full-bodied painterliness we have come to expect from process revelatory abstraction. Bubbling pointillism, gummy checkerboards, patternings of tacky striation and coagulating ripples - all are variously embedded upon and insist upon the flatness of painting's plane. Just as the original narrative sense of Hammond's found units of language has been undefined and disjunctively redefined, with the units grafted to each other in precariously shifting symbiosis, so too has the visual unity of image and its making been disrupted. Two different means of imaging, perspectival pictorialism and more purely painterly opticality, have been unnaturally grafted upon each other; and they make moot their individual claims on believability.

Hammond's simultaneous commitment to extra-artistic referentiality, the objective verifiability of linguistic systems and the physical acts of making are, to varying degrees, related to the work of two older fabulists, Alfred Jensen and Philip Guston (in his later years). All three revel in robust surface texture. Whereas Jensen's engagement with historically given systems of mystic geometries strives for spiritual certainties, Hammond's language, like Guston's is far more prone to secular doubts. The carefully build up, cosmicomic vocabulary of Guston's late painting is purely invented and more coherently narrative than is Hammond's mismatched vocabulary; and his unsystematic, idiosyncratic images reside in unison with the physical acts of their evolution. Hammond shares in the more acutely self-conscious tribulation of her generation. Her appropriation of imagery and, to some degree, the means of its making, reflect the confrontation with the growing devaluation of personal experience that is so much a part of our time. The disjunctive rhythms of her systematized, adult nursery rhymes embrace and reflect the systematized disjunctiveness of our culture. She knows the only answer is to seek meaning, even though there can be none - and she makes it look like magic.