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W web exclusive

in conversation: Mary Hambleton

with Ron Janowich
March 2004

In anticipation of Mary Hambleton's show *Nothing By Mouth* at Littlejohn Contemporary, Ron Janowich talked to the artist at her Brooklyn Studio in early February. Hambleton teaches in the Fine Arts Department at the Parsons School of Design, and lives and works in Brooklyn with her husband, artist Ken Buhler, and their son Jacob. Since this is Hambleton's first solo show New York in a number of years, they discussed issues surrounding the current body of paintings and drawings as well as its connection to Hambleton's earlier work.



Mary Hambleton, "Mirus" (2003), shellac, charcoal, acrylic on paper.

Ron Janowich (Rail): Mary, I'd like to talk to you about your current body of work. Maybe we could begin with the time frame it embodies. Like many artist in the 1980s you exhibited your work rather frequently, having a show every year or eighteen months. Today, I'm struck with the longer time frame that this work reflects and how the depth of the work seems contingent on that time frame. Specifically, how do you visualize your ideas of mind and spirit into the complexity of these paintings?

Mary Hambleton: This body of work began around 1999. I've always been a slow painter, lots of layers, lots of considering. It was even trying to produce for a show every year and a half. I had my first solo show in 1988 at Pamela Auchincloss Gallery. I felt as if I'd had thirty years to paint the work for that show. It was a strong show. I was lucky, due both to the work and it being the late eighties that the show was successful. Then based on that success, opportunities and pressure came. I was never an art star, but I often couldn't keep up and missed a number of possible shows. Yet, I did push myself to produce and often wasn't able to reflect or allow the work to develop, simmer. In the new show, there is a great range in the scale and form of the paintings. I'll be showing over forty

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pieces, some are quite small and some are works on paper. I've had a long time to develop this body of work; I'm pushing both imaginatively and materially. It is labor intensive. A lot has happened in the last years and I hope that the richness of experience of mind and spirit is embodied in the work.

Rail: To go a little further on this: I assume that the theoretical ground of the work is similar to what you were working with in the 1980's, however those paintings were probably done in a shorter time frame. I'm curious about what working method you prefer. Is it that your work now is more about the natural rhythm of your life? By that I mean that your work evolves in its own time and for this body of work it seems somewhat long by today's standards.

Hambleton: My concerns in many ways have remained the same through the years. I'm attempting to fuse into an abstract painting emotion and sensation, the simultaneity of our experiences in life and ultimately a quality of wonder in the world. Looking at the world is the mind's eye connected to the spirit. I'm not sure what the natural rhythm of my life is anymore. Like everyone, my life is extremely complex and busy. The advantage of being left alone in the last few years is that it allowed me space to experiment and for my work to evolve. I'd always been a very serious, often too serious, "abstract" painter. Having time away from the public eye allowed me to break some of my own rules, to connect to my own pulse; it allowed a sense of humor to emerge, and much more color to enter my palette.

Rail: How does this longer time frame embrace the possibility of profundity in the work?

Hambleton: Much of the work I see today can be absorbed almost instantly. My work in contrast is slow to emerge, although I aim for an immediate and fresh read. I want it to open up more gradually, to ask of and give more to the viewer.

Rail: I feel that this body of work reaches for an emotional and spiritual complexity within its visual language that parallels a life fully awake.

Hambleton: That's my goal.

Rail: In your press release you mention that science is important to how you develop and understand your work. I'd like to know just how specific you get. Through the centuries painters have had a relation to science to one degree or another. For instance, in the renaissance a painter might use the mathematical principles of perspective to articulate space in their work. Even today an artist like Turrell uses sophisticated computer programs to help him find the appropriate dimensions of a room. Up until the twentieth century it's conceivable that an artist might have been able to have a good understanding of the science known in his time. Today very few individuals really know and understand the science of our time. It therefore seems like the use of science

The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice-- Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best Investigative News Story--Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the RNC" (June 04).

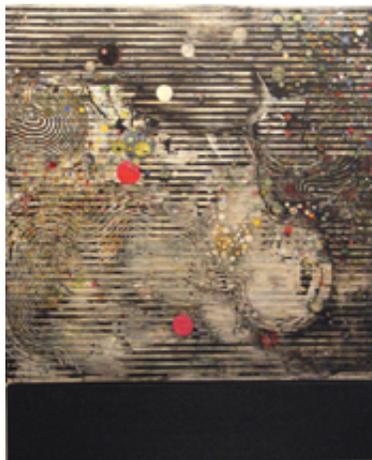
Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).
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in your work is intuitive.

Hambleton: I've always been fascinated by science and the aesthetics of science: how everything breaks down into beautiful parts, cells, molecules, genetic mapping. There has always been a grappling in my work with the philosophies of life —of living and dying, presence and non-presence, being and non-being. Where did we come from and where do we go from here? The theory of quantum physics has fascinated me for years and it enters my work subtly, not in any formal way. It's amazing that every part of our world and us can be broken down into nothingness. We are nothing more than particles and waves. The act of observation transforms the observed. The forces of nature bind us. You can never lose energy; it can only be transformed from one state into another. We constantly reflect the chaos and order that exists in nature. It's just the rules of the universe that astound me and feed me. Science really, is simply the nature of looking at things.

Rail: You've often talked about how nature informs your work. When I look at your work I feel as though I'm looking at a landscape where the veil has been lifted. So even though I'm not looking at recognizable imagery, it seems more truthful to the way I understand the world.

Hambleton: Observation is no longer simple; we can't trust what we see. Everything exists in relationship to everything else. I mean hundreds of years ago people began to understand how things had evolved. The world seemed permanent and stable. Seeing any aspect of nature, any living thing now, we know how fragile it is, often how tainted it is. How much of our world is being destroyed and polluted?



Mary Hambleton, "Query" (2004), oil and alkyd on wood panel.

You might be looking at an amazing sunset, but the truth is that the beautiful is because of chemical pollution. It's savagely awful. Things aren't as simple and direct in the world just as they once were. One aspect that is new is that some of my works have dimensions or added elements. They are there to make you look again, to consider the other side. A painting isn't just a rectangle to peer inside. Nothing is so simple. Look out at landscape, what do you see? How far is an electric cable or cell phone tower? Or you see water; do you dare drink it? Swim in it? What is in that water, where does it come from? Will there always be water there? There is part of my life that sees the world and experiences it as wonderful and in wonder. There is a root word, *Mirus*, which I have used to title a series of drawings. It comes from the Latin word for wonder. Then

there's a lot that I find horrific. We terrify me as human beings. It is so black and white on some level. Sometimes I see my work as providing me a way to celebrate the world and hide from it at the same time.

Rail: Another thing that comes up is the idea of transience and how it relates to this body of work. It seems as though transience has become part of the very fabric of your work. The paintings seem never to be fixed but are always evolving in one way or another. They seem open for long periods of time. Is transience something that came into your work as a result of your battle with cancer or is it something that was always in it? By that I mean is there an eastern or Zen Buddhist component to how you understand the world that gets reflected in your work.

Hambleton: I think a concept of transience came to me very early. There were many deaths that touched my young life. In some ways I've always lived it and it's always fed me. I was born in Baltimore and grew up in this regional farm area of Maryland. When I was a month old I first came to New York City, and forever after as a kid lived in both places and moved back and forth on a regular basis. It allowed me to see, to really focus on the differences and changes. It is often when you leave something and then return you can see where you were. Sometimes then you can see it as if for the first time. Each time going back and forth from this urban environment to a rural environment I would appreciate one to the other. That part is now in some ways woven in to my paintings —field into the architecture

Rail: Yours seems closer to the western idea of permanence or the world being a fixed place that goes through changes over time. That's different than the idea that you are in the world, yet the world is disappearing the moment you have the awareness that you are present. The world is constantly dissolving. It seems that there has been a shift toward an awareness that the world is constantly dissolving. It makes the present also more potent and awake.

Hambleton: I think I really experienced that when I was diagnosed with cancer. I experienced a paradigm shift. I was into some major denial but it also made me acutely aware of the present. Life was so normal and fine the day before, but it wasn't—I just didn't know. Now each day exists somewhat the same but my awareness is permanently altered. It makes things very complicated and very simple all at once. I've been given a new reality. One that I kept waiting to go away, but it doesn't. It's now part of who I am. As dire and intense as it is to have an illness, there is also an absurdity, senselessness to it. Some of the playfulness in the work is becoming more exaggerated and enhanced because of it too. It is about survival. You have to have that element of hope and lightness and humor and belief in things that don't make sense at times.

Rail: Yeah, because the alternative is to sink into a depressive black hole of hopelessness.

(Laughing)

Hambleton: Painting for me...allows all these difficult and wondrous things to exist at one time.

Rail: Metaphorically that's what painting is like. You're making an object that you want to somehow have a permanent impact on the world, or at least convey something of the human condition. When I think of great paintings and how they communicate, I often think that they communicate so well, not because their makers had an awareness of their future viewers, but because they were absolutely aware in their present, of the future being enfolded in the present.

Hambleton: I think that's true.

Rail: The other thing that I'd like to touch on is experimentation and risk in your work. Up until recently a painter's work was expected to develop and deepen over a lifetime. It was through this search and self-criticism that mature work evolved. An example would be the abstract expressionist. If we look at work from the 1940s it's apparent that risk and discovery as well as a refusal to settle into known models of acceptability allowed them to evolve highly original manifestations of their aesthetic beliefs. There seemed to be an authentic discovery going on in the studio that had the ability to communicate to a larger audience. Today, with the explosion of art market, the painter finds himself/herself in a radically different context. If you're successful early in your career you're encouraged to repeat that and forge an image that becomes your signature. The odds of this being in any way original are very slim. More likely is the possibility that you will be doing a type of genre painting. When this happens there is a shift from the painter's development growing out of dialogue with other artists to its being determined by market and career forces. The success of abstract painting in our culture is a double-edged sword. On one hand the success allows for more opportunities and on the other hand it exerts a very real pressure to deaden and minimize experimentation and risk. In your work I feel that experimentation and risk as well as peer dialogues are important factors in how you develop.

Hambleton: It's very important. Although I feel I often take baby steps. As I said I had my first show 1988. I had always been a very serious abstract painter. After I left the gallery in 1996, I realized I had been very constrained by my idea of what I was meant to do. I hadn't let my spirit take off. Other important things had happened. I'd had a child. Suddenly there was intense color in my life and it gradually entered into my work. It's been progressively important to allow myself to do what comes into my head. There have always been subtly figurative lines or forms that alluded to a figure. It was very important to me to have the allusion, but not to cross the line into actual figuration. The line was intentionally mercurial. It is just a line, it is just a stroke of paint, but it could be a figure, a

female form. There is also a lot of obvious allusion to cosmic realms. A circle is a circle, but it is also a moon, a planet, and the world.

A few years ago my paintings shifted from a singular frontal plane to having additional side views. Then also there are attachments to some of the paintings. Mostly now its colored cubes of varying sizes, but other shapes are coming in and images as ways of shifting the plane, shifting the dialogue, catching the eye and getting the viewer to look again. Shifting the idea of the rectangle. Many of the paintings are on a square, which to me is like beginning with perfection and then screwing it up, so that gradually I can seek out perfection again. The painting travels through a complete transformation, from a perfect beginning to varied forms of chaos, to some kind of resolved experienced end.

In many paintings there is an underlying rhythm of striping. I see in some of these paintings that Agnes Martin is my mother. I begin with her sense of quietude, but I can't stay there and then have to go off in my own way.

Rail: I walked into the studio and I was immediately drawn to the painting "Query." I feel that there is shift going on in this painting; it's a risky painting because of the emotional range going on in the painting. I'm feeling things like anger, aggression, as well as gentleness. They all seem to be coexisting and they've all been given their own space. The formal level of the painting also has a broad plastic range. You have areas that are dense and opaque as well as areas that are thin and transparent. The graphic articulation of geometric forms like a circle defines a space that is both dynamic and expansive. Again, I feel this is all in the service of the emotional content of the painting.

You talked before about Agnes Martin. She explored a very narrow range of human experience and within that was able to find infinite possibilities. That is reflected in how and where she lived. Your life is very different. You're living in Brooklyn, married with a small child and battling cancer. I can imagine that you're constantly challenged by broad range emotional and intellectual factors that are rather intense. "Dot Calm" is much more about a gentle Agnes Martin type of space, but this painting "Query" seems more about where your life is now.

Hambleton: "Dot Calm" was finished almost four years ago, "Query" only recently, although I've been working on it on and off for at least three years. It's gone through all the recent experiences with me; so they are different.

Rail: I can understand the appeal of wanting to express a meditative calm like "Dot Calm," but I also feel that it's possible to express a meditative present that allows for a dynamic range of emotional and spiritual possibilities. "Query" does that for me; I perceive that dynamic within the painting. It's calm and edgy at the same time and doesn't necessarily

differentiate, but rather allows them all their own existence.

Hambleton: This is a painting that has been worked on for a very long time and therefore reflects a lot of the intensity that I've experienced recently. The other aspect to "Query " is that it "Query' has hundreds of tiny colored dots; I can't bear to imagine how many. They are only perceptible within an intimate viewing, from just inches away. When you break away from it and get back to the whole, the larger moves. I've always been interested in having a painting that would pull you in, seduce you. That too is why I love tiny paintings —the intimate gaze.

Rail: It's apparent just by looking around the studio that drawing is very important to you. Could you talk a little about how and why you do drawings? Is it a daily practice? How consistent are you? Are there phases when you draw and ones that you don't?

Hambleton: I've always done works on paper. I do them quite regularly, not daily. There are phases. I find that drawing often calms me, balances me. It gets me into a kind of zone in which I can get lost. Painting can do it similarly in moments, but there is the scale and the stuff of the paint whereas in drawing, which is done with some water media, occasionally some oils, there is this point where I lose myself. I am lost I am not making the drawing, but the drawing is making itself and making me make it. There is an obsessive element in many of them —the dots, the rhythms and the build up. The series you're looking at now really began in the summer of 2000. I started them in the country. There was this quietude. I was in my studio with the barn doors open, no music, just listening to the sounds of the trees, of wind and making these very meditative drawings.

Rail: The painter Bradley Walker Tomlin is interesting in that he painted many ambitious large scale paintings, however in the later part of his life he developed a body of small scale intimate drawings. I've always felt that somehow these small drawings speak to me in a way that was more humble and direct than the paintings. Sometimes the smaller statement is in fact the larger statement. Your drawings have the intimacy of a journal. If you were to live with them I'm sure that the experience would be a kind of private one on one conversation. The paintings on the other hand seem more like public statements. I was wondering how you felt about how each medium communicates. Can you articulate how you feel paintings and drawings differ?

Hambleton: The drawings are quite pleasurable. Intimate sometimes playful sometimes obsessive, but without a kind of intellect, decision making, the bravado or ego, the physicality and the mess that sometime needs to come to the paintings. But then I love the physicality of the paint the color, the surprises. How I can move from a small mark to a great a sweep. How varied the touch can be, how endless. I'm also enjoying the physical and dimensional possibilities I'm

exploring in the paintings. In the drawings I rarely get into the long and lost search, which moves me in my paintings. They each allow for a different kind of search and exploration. I realize I need patience often for both and I need to do both. I've come to recognize and accept my obsessive nature.

Rail: Mary, how would you sum up this body of work? Do you see it as a summation of a specific body of work or is it more of an arbitrary bracketing do to the fact that you will be having a show?

Hambleton: I'm really pleased to be showing this body of work right now. It couldn't be clearer to me that it represents a transformed period of my life and work. I'm also thrilled to have the work out of my studio. I have so many ideas, and now feel I can think again. The title for the show, Nothing By Mouth, has a medical reference, but ultimately reflects that this show, which aims to reach mind, body, and soul, is first of all a retinal experience, a visual feast and must be entered through the eyes.

Ron Janowich is a painter and independent curator who lives and works in New York and Florida. He teaches painting and drawing at the University of Florida, Gainesville. His work was included in the recent show Breathless at the Neuberger Museum.

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