



## David Hammons: Give Me a Moment

George Economou Collection Athens 13 June to 30 September

David Hammons has always interacted with the art world strictly on his own terms and in doing so has created a mystique around himself and his oeuvre that compels us to remember it and to seek out more. Not apparently prolific, his works pop up in group exhibitions and draw the viewer in with a mixture of repulsion and fascination. Repulsion at the detritus and rubbish he often fashions pieces from, and fascination with his ability to invest this material with presence and meaning. Encountering his work can still make contemporary art seem at first both impenetrable and offensive: the materials used may be picked from trash, and Hammons will juxtapose objects to fashion obvious and sometimes clumsy visual puns. He seems to care little for the work's reception, but these deliberately anti-aesthetic strategies have, ironically, made him something of a cult figure.

Greek shipping magnate George Economou, collector and Tate patron, has opened a private museum in Athens for mounting exhibitions and displaying his own collection. Having acquired three works by Hammons, and a curator who used to work with him in New York, the mounting of a solo show seems a logical next step. Nineteen works, all from private collections, are displayed across three rooms, with half from the 1980s and the rest spanning 1969 to 2015. This is not only the artist's first solo show in Greece but also his first retrospective in Europe.

The first room has five works made between 1989 and 2008. Instantly recognisable are three signature Hammons pieces: *African American Flag*, 1990, *Rock Head*, 2000, and *Which Mike do you want to be like...?*, 2001. For anyone not familiar with these, the flag is the stars and stripes reworked in Pan-African green, black and red, deftly asserting black America; *Rock Head* – a term for a crack user – invests a rock with quasi-spiritual significance, while dressing it in

'Give Me a Moment'  
installation view



a wig made from Afro-Caribbean hair suggests an uncomfortable closeness between dignity and despair. *Which Mike...?* has three microphones, referencing Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson and Mike Tyson, neatly representing the three main pathways to celebrity open to young black men and capturing its irresistible yet dangerous allure. The other two works are *Untitled*, 1989, one of Hammons's series of basketball hoops fashioned from a steel pole, silver foil and a car windshield, and *Untitled*, 2008, which has an abstract canvas leaning face-against, and so obscured by, the mirror on a large wardrobe door. Two big critiques: one of basketball as the panacea for impoverished young black men, and one about the narrow, introverted scope of white art history. As an opening manifesto, this first space sets the tone for what is to come, with themes of race and class articulated with humour and not a little anger.

The next room contains a few examples that at first made me recoil, but then – typically for Hammons – intrigued. As part of a deliberate strategy to make 'unsaleable' works, Hammons has made sculptures from ephemeral materials such as snow and mud and even fried chicken. *Untitled*, 1989, consisting of golden chicken thighs suspended from cheap costume jewellery, is one of these. Repulsion at the thought of greasy fried chicken – a conservator's nightmare – quickly gave way to amusement at his riff on diet and bling, as well as the happy irony of the piece now being treasured in a private collection. *In the Hood*, 1993, is a hood torn from a sweatshirt and mounted on the wall. While it may be an irritatingly obvious reference, somehow it radiates an air of menace. *Blind Reality*, 1986, comprises some half a dozen old venetian blinds carefully fastened together to make a sculpture that is both elegant and desirable – Hammons quite simply turns ugliness into beauty. For comparison, two works from the early 1980s both deserve a mention. *Flight Fantasy*, fashioned from reeds, mud, hair and pieces of vinyl records, sits lightly on a gallery wall looking like a delicate ethnological fetish from a remote Pacific island. Only when the viewer moves in close is the reality of its less-than-exquisite composition revealed. *Untitled* works in reverse: an agglomeration of kitsch detritus – light bulbs, bottles, small dolls, jewellery, branches, tinsel, tartan fabric, key rings, wire, a raccoon tail – is fixed together and hung on the wall. Initial repulsion again gives way to curiosity and fascination as the objects metamorphose from rubbish to modern tribal fetish under my gaze.

Although a retrospective, the works in this show are not chronologically installed, which makes it clear how they all stand on their own – nothing in Hammons's oeuvre appears obviously dated when set beside something else. I could pick out more works to enthuse about, but an overview would best communicate the surprising power of Hammons's art. His startling juxtaposition of cigarette ends, bottle tops and old fried chicken with antique Japanese fabric, human hair and, say, elaborate antique furniture suggests a deftness in articulating his concerns with whatever is at hand. Moreover, his ability to infuse his media with meaning, to turn discarded rubbish into almost spiritual artefacts, testifies to the transformative power of his art. Artists influenced by him cite his work as being crucial to changing their attitudes about what is abject and ignored, and therefore widening their aesthetic boundaries. Drawing on African-American and Japanese culture, Hammons's raw materials root him within an 'anti-aesthetic' of rude, ugly craft, but charged with a knowing, cosmopolitan sophistication. His work feels like a new take on Arte Povera, though he uses objects that most practitioners of that group would have shunned. In doing so, he develops a new black American aesthetic which continues to shake my comfortable ideas about what constitutes the art object. ■

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