

David Hammons at Nahmad Contemporary, and Elsewhere



Installation view of David Hammons: Basketball and Koolaid. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York.

David Hammons: *Basketball and Kool Aid*

[Nahmad Contemporary](#)

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By **ZOË HOPKINS**, June 2021

This past year, New York City has been awash with the work of David Hammons. February ushered in a widely celebrated exhibition of his body prints at the [Drawing Center](#), where visitors were privileged to more than a decade of these resplendent visualizations of embodied life. And last month, the Gansevoort Peninsula across from the Whitney Museum was christened with [Day's End](#), Hammons's new permanent public sculptural installation that resuscitates a work by Gordon Matta-Clark of the same title. Further uptown, [Nahmad Contemporary](#) completes a trifecta of sorts, dazzling its visitors with an exhibition of two of Hammons's lesser-known series: his collection of basketball prints and kool aid paintings.

Featuring over a dozen works, *David Hammons: Basketball and Kool Aid* is an ode to Hammons's unique command of everyday materials and social criticism. The exhibition foregrounds Hammons's experimentations with the titular sport and beverage, stereotypical motifs of Blackness which Hammons uses to articulate a celebration of Black culture alongside a critique of America's stereotyping, monetizing, and fetishizing of it. The show spans an impressively wide stretch of years, the basketball works dating between 1995 and 2012 and the kool aid works dating 2003-2007. To this end, the exhibition is also an invitation to investigate the works in the show and the themes that they draw on—commercialism, mass production, and how these structures inform stereotypes of Black life—within the broader arc of Hammons's career.



David Hammons, Untitled (Basketball Drawing), 2006-2007. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York.

The basketball works are the product of chance encounters between ball and paper: Hammons created the series by coating balls in charcoal and dirt—usually collected from the streets of Harlem—and bouncing them off the paper from random angles. These interactions give birth to nebulous dances of shadow and light. Beneath and inside the haze of charcoal, we can barely discern arching lines, bold faced logos, and other markings a basketball conventionally bears on its surface. Though the basketball is the primary symbol of concern, its meanings are enriched by an elaborate and wildly surprising web of materials including rock, asphalt, alarm clocks,

and suitcases. These material interventions cleverly place basketball within the broader schema of American racial capitalism. For example, in *Untitled (Basketball Drawing)* (2006-2007), a monumental diptych rests precariously atop a jagged asphalt from an outdoor court, slanted at an incline that suggests the possibility of toppling to the floor, thus prompting a comparison to the precarious security that professional sports guarantee Black youth.

Tucked away in one of the gallery's smaller rooms is the *Basketball installation* (1998), an inside joke in three parts. A vase beckons us to peer into its interior, where we discover a basketball mercilessly trapped inside, having been inflated only after it was placed in the vase. Offering a cruel bait, a basketball hoop juts proudly from a half-painted log resting on the floor, a few feet away yet entirely unreachable. The sculptural component of the work is quietly minimalist in comparison to the prints that polka-dot the walls: earthy brown basketball prints, strikingly bold against the white walls. Finally, Hammons's touch seeps into the room via a set of instructions accompanying the installation. "No more than ten prints on a wall" Hammons instructs with rigid specificity. And then, in a few lines that resonate with something akin to bathos, Hammons leaves it all up to our discretion: "jug with ball can be placed anywhere in the room. Tree can be placed anywhere in the room." In this subtle comedy Hammons dares us to keep pace with this zigzagging between the particular and the open, the determined and the undecided.



David Hammons, Untitled (Kool-Aid), 2003. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York.

In the kool aid works, the thrill of chance once again runs up against the threat of order and instruction. Whimsical abstractions that evoke the works of Helen Frankenthaler and Frank Bowling, the kool aid works swirl with light pastels and thickly saturated hues. A thrilling textural variety emerges from the interactions between the powdered beverage and the paper. At times, the kool aid undulates across the paper, blurring the canvas in breathy curvilinear forms. Then it explodes into scattered, agitated dots, a dappled milkiness that is suggestive of the cosmos. Teasing the banality of instructions listed to make beverages like Kool aid— “empty powder large pitcher, add 1 cup of sugar, add water”— Hammons inscribes these directives on a number of the works in beautifully rendered Japanese calligraphy. In so doing, he obscures and reconfigures elementary language into forms that are at first glance the height of elegance, deceiving the sensibilities of the aesthete.



David Hammons, Untitled (Kool-Aid), 2006. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York.

Like the basketball works, the Kool aid works are adorned with unlikely material accoutrements: staging an irreverent juxtaposition of textures, Hammons frames the work in rough, Dollar Store quality terry cloth, which he occasionally drapes with luxuriant silk veils. Hung in various stages of revealing and unrevealing, the veils situate the paintings drew me to W.E.B. DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folk*, in which the inimitable thinker draws on veils as a metaphor to describe the epistemic standpoint of Black Americans as split in two: “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world.”



David Hammons, Day's End, 2014 - 2021. Courtesy of David Hammons. Photograph by Timothy Schenck.

Hammons is famously quoted saying “the worst thing in the world is to say, ‘well I’m going to see this exhibition.’ The work should instead be somewhere in between your house and where you’re going to see it, it shouldn’t be at the gallery.” So to close, I’d like to leave readers with a lingering question: how might these works function outside of a white cube gallery? One might call this meditation overdone, but after the installation of *Day’s End*, which sits in the water on the shores of Manhattan, divorced even from the street itself, it feels charged anew. Hammons’s kool aid and basketball works seem also to breathe with the pull of the public commons, the shared spaces like basketball courts that Black life has so carefully touched and enlivened. **WM**



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