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Queer Possibilities: Lesbian Feminist Abstract Painting in the 1970s and After

David J. Getsy

Abstract art has queer potential. By turning away from the representation of the recognizable world, artists can invest in forms and formal relations to conjure and present less restricted versions of how things might be—and be together. Since its emergence in modernism, abstraction has proved a useful place for some artists to register their lack of fit with expectations of sex, gender, family, and society that are based on a narrow, binary account of how people relate to one another.

In the 1970s, abstract painting, in particular, became an arena in which certain lesbian feminist artists confronted tradition and formulated other ways of seeing.[1] In the wake of the Stonewall Uprising in 1969, a more concerted and increasingly public movement emerged to speak to queer, lesbian, and/or gay experience. These developments were underwritten by the feminist movement and the profound impact it had on American art through the launching of countertraditions, new institutions, and a more activist mode of artistic practice. Lesbian and other nonheterosexual cisgender women were active participants, and a distinctly lesbian feminist art came into focus in these years.[2] On the one hand, photography and figuration took center stage (mirroring developments in feminist art as a whole). Artists such as Joan E. Biron (known as JEB), Tee Corinne, Honey Lee Cottrell, Diana Davies, Donna Gottschalk, and E. K. Waller sought new visual vocabularies for lesbian communities, often developing innovative modes of address and exhibition tactics to circumvent the sexism and homophobia they encountered in art institutions. Others turned to abstraction. The groundbreaking filmmaker Barbara Hammer (1939–2019), for instance, blended representation and abstraction in important experimental films that forged a different account of temporality, the body, and affective relations.[3] It was the medium of painting, however, that became pivotal in these debates. Abstract painters tackled the historical weight of art's traditions from an explicitly feminist and lesbian stance. Artists such as Lula Mae Blockton (born 1947), Mildred Thompson (1936–2003), and the three from the Shah Garg Collection who are the focus of this essay—Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond, and Joan Snyder—all drew on abstraction to visualize aspects of queer experience and community. Whereas the dominant art-historical narratives of the 1970s have tended to privilege dematerialized artistic practices such as conceptual and performance art, abstract painting proved particularly dynamic for lesbian feminist artists in the 1970s.

Painting—especially in its gestural, expressive, and animated forms, which emphasize the medium's capacity to be infused with action and performance—derives from and incites bodily engagements. As such, it was generative for feminist and lesbian artistic priorities that centered the meaningfulness of the body and its specificities. Abstract painting, furthermore, left behind the traditions of the figure (and the objectified female form that was their mainstay), instead creating a zone in which bodily analogies and empathies could be wrought through form and materiality. Examining works from the Shah Garg Collection, this essay discusses the ways in which artists rendered aspects of their queer experience and tendered different accounts of the body, community, eroticism, and relations from within the language of abstract painting. There is no unified or singular account of queer abstraction (or, indeed, of lesbian feminist abstraction).[4] More productive, rather, is to think of it as a shared questioning of how bodies, eroticisms, kinships, and potentials can be visualized without foreclosing any of the many ways that people can come together.

In queer versions of abstraction, there is often a concerted refusal of the recognizable and the categorizable. Instead, in the viewing of such works, allusion and analogy must be centered. Historically, one way in which lesbian, gay, and other forms of queer art have been limited, controlled, and compartmentalized is by demanding that they clearly and unequivocally produce visible evidence. Most often, some sort of eroticized or sexualized body or coupling has been expected, and anything that does not fulfill that limited iconographic requirement is doubted. This pattern of expectation reproduces the silencing and erasure faced by many queer people, as the only queer content that is valued is that which can be clearly seen—and, as a consequence, surveilled. But queer life involves much more than

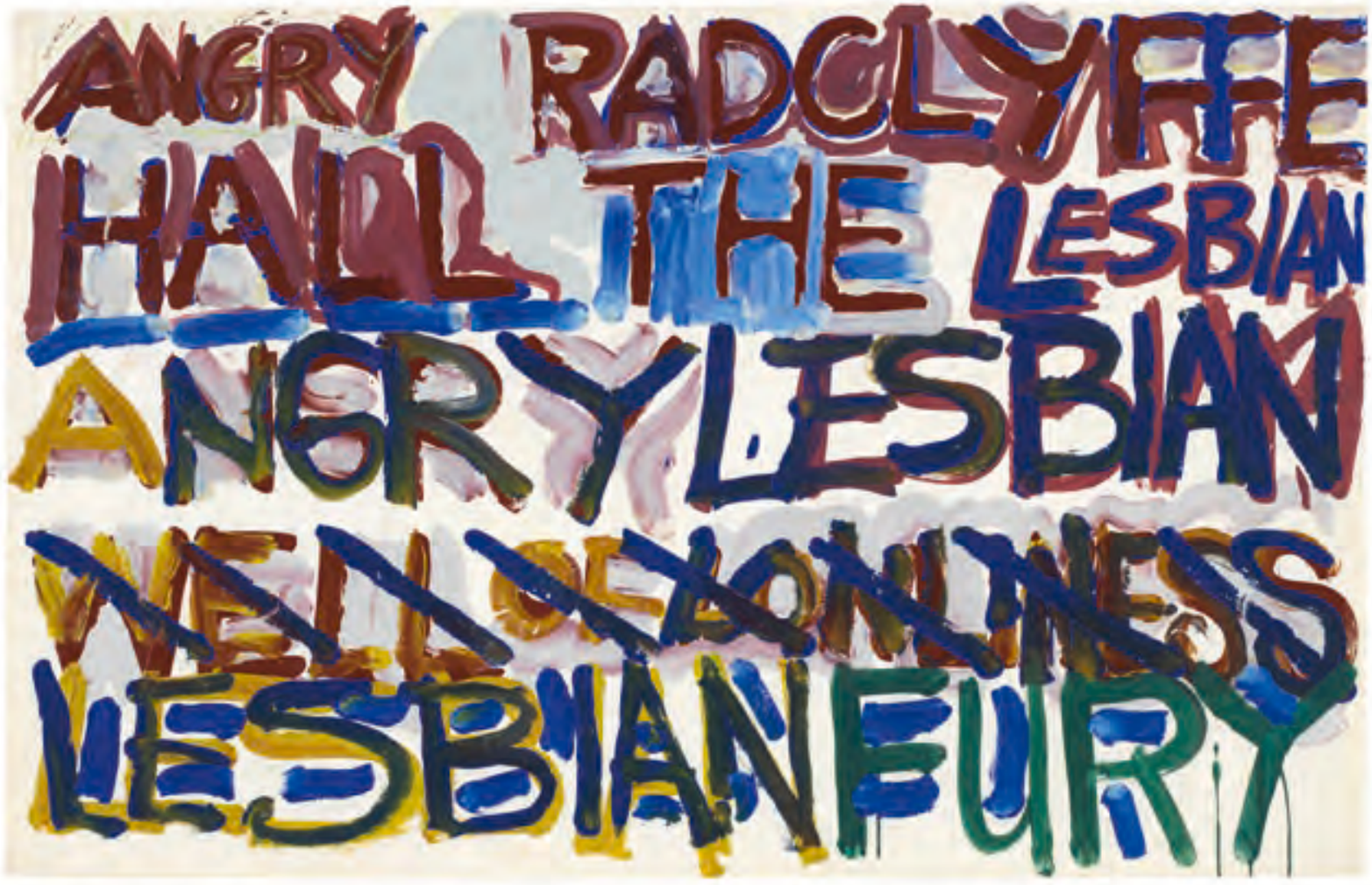


Fig. 1 Louise Fishman (1939–2021). *Angry Radclyffe Hall*, 1973. Acrylic on paper, 24 × 40 in. (61 × 101.6 cm). Louise Fishman Estate, New York

sex or eroticism (however defining those might be). Relations, domesticity, familial expectations, parenthood, others' misrecognitions, transformational genders, kinship, and aging are also components of queer lives. Because abstraction abjures the figure and emphasizes formal relations, it has proved useful in addressing relationality more broadly. Abstract paintings of queer experience (such as the ones discussed in this essay) do not repay any search for symbols or images; instead, they play out new ways of relating—to structures, to others, and to oneself—through forms, materials, and processes.

It is also important to remember that most artists working from minoritarian or marginalized positions will reject simplistic or reductive categorizations of those positions. Lesbian and gay artists, for instance, regularly claim that they do not make "lesbian paintings" or "gay sculptures." The reason for this is neither denial nor temerity. Rather, such rejections come from the understanding that their work is doing much more than that. These artists do not spurn the idea that their art relates to their identities but do recognize that others tend to limit their work to that category. The fight over the shorthand used to describe artists arises from a recognition of the limitations of labels and of their circulation as currency. But these same artists will often speak of the importance of their individual experiences and political commitments, which help give shape to their work. For instance, in 1977, Louise Fishman (1939–2021) wrote, "I've been a lesbian and I've been a painter for a long time. I have little respect for rhetoric, politics that squeeze the life's blood out of artists, or theories of lesbian sensibility or lesbian imagery formulated out of daydreams."[5] This refusal of categorization, however, does not mean that Fishman's personal and political perspective did not inform her work, and she rigorously and repeatedly sought ways to register her own experience and position in her paintings. Her famous *Angry Women* series of 1973—which couples the defiant word "angry" with the names of important female-identified artists and writers (fig. 1)—is a case in point.[6] Her other works, too, do not simply represent lesbian content or subject matter; rather, they activate questions about finding possibility outside of heteronormative expectations.

Fishman's 1972 *Victory Garden of the Amazon Queen* (pl. 31) is one example. The painting came after the artist's previous turn to a reductive, more minimalistic style. The remnants of this minimalism can be seen in the underlying grid structure: each of the four linen surfaces is broken into four square containers holding schematic but energetic diagonal strokes, some of which coalesce into a form

resembling a flower. *Victory Garden* sets the modernist grid in tension with the brisk lines that both constitute it and transgress its internal boundaries. Fishman combatted the grid's structure of regularity and consistency through the superimposition of dynamic strokes that outline and define the square form as a layered set of gestural tracings along the four right angles. This grid is not a preexisting and presumed regularity; it has been hard-won through a campaign of emphatically painted lines. Each of the boxes is utterly unique while still being part of a chain of sameness; they are all squares and something more than squares. In this endeavor, Fishman was in dialogue with other artists who explored a dynamic relationship between sameness and particularity within the modernist grid, such as Agnes Martin (1912–2004) and Eva Hesse (1936–1970). Fishman, however, pushed her grid further through the layered, vigorous lines—some thick, some thin—that make up the painting's lattice.[7]

One might be tempted to view each square in *Victory Garden* simply as a frame, within which is set a picture. Indeed, Fishman seems to have flirted with that pictorial possibility. Across the sixteen squares, a few contain tree- or flower-like forms, and some include horizontal lines that establish something like perspective. Elsewhere, however, the drawn tracks of paint extend across squares and even across the divided canvases, as with the pinkish diagonal line that jumps the gap between the second and third canvases in the lower register. Most of the squares seem flat and emblematic, and the V shapes that occupy certain of them stand bluntly before us, creating a kind of absurd endgame of pictorial illusion, flatness, and signification. (Here, Fishman was in conversation with the very different treatment of the presentness of the graphic letter by artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Indiana.) Others dissolve into opaque abstract fields filling the right-angled squares with allover compositions and diffuse gestures. (Think Helen Frankenthaler.)

Across Fishman's sixteen conjugations of a gestural grammar of square, diagonal, horizontal, and vertical, there is a profound examination of the pictorial possibilities of painting. *Victory Garden* levels the core techniques used to create images, illusions, surfaces, and depths. Pictures, emblems, gestures, and fields populate this grid, which is both foursquare and fulsome. The deep play with formal structures and with painting's possibilities in Fishman's work should be seen allegorically. The concerted unpacking of the grid structure and the contingency of the lines that compose it can be seen as a negotiation of the given versus the made: that is, the grid—that supposedly universal, objective, rational, and endlessly extensible modernist ideal—presents its sameness and regularity as the backdrop for uniqueness, interpretation, and potential. Each similar frame becomes not just a different picture but a different *kind* of picture—from glyph to landscape. With this lesson in the theory of painting, Fishman offered a demonstration of how to make difference from sameness.

The title of the work, *Victory Garden of the Amazon Queen*, reminds us that this questioning of difference and sameness is closely tied to feminism and to the potential of women's community and power. It conjures a utopian vision not just of the leader of the mythical Amazons but also of her preparedness and capacity for self-defense. Popularized during the wars of the twentieth century, victory gardens were planted (often by women) to increase self-reliance, boost morale, and contribute to war efforts. With her title, Fishman seems to have been implying that providing for one's own needs is a contribution to a greater effort. Through her reference to the stereotypical Amazon warrior, the artist invoked an all-women collective as the context for variation, possibility, and growth, and her painting can be taken as an illustration of how to cultivate those qualities from the stony ground of the modernist grid.

Like much predominantly abstract painting, Fishman's *Victory Garden* makes its claims through formal, processual, and material means. There is no blatant queer iconography in such a work; instead, abstraction becomes a place to evoke and imagine new ways a given form (such as the square) can be put into relation, appropriated, and transformed. A few years after making the painting, Fishman wrote:

> I want to caution against the dangers of purposefully and consciously setting out to make lesbian or feminist imagery or any other imagery which does not emerge honestly from the rigors of work. The chief danger as I see it lies in losing direct touch with the art, risking an involvement with a potentially superficial concern. This is not to say that the question of feminist or lesbian imagery is not a legitimate concern but rather to caution against its forced use.[8]

Fishman's statement provides a road map for understanding the ways in which abstract painting in the 1970s could register queer experience while refusing the spectacle and objectification that the direct representation of lesbian sexuality or eroticism might have incited. As with Hammond and Snyder, Fishman's larger aim was to capture modes of living and relating in greater complexity—evoked but not literally depicted. The art historian Jill H. Casid recently made a compelling and expansive case for Fishman's painting as a paradigm of queer expressivity:

> Fishman's working of the work of art offers us a way to grapple with the potentials of excessive expressivity as a queer, feminist creative praxis that draws on and with what is in excess of the regulated subject, both the abjected aspects of what is consigned to the merely "personal" and "emotional" of experience and also the immanent of the as yet—including what we might yet become.[9]

Forms and their relations are the terrain of abstraction, and abstraction becomes a vehicle for visualizing new variations and possibilities for them.

Modified grids, rectilinear planes, and right angles also provide a counterpoint in the works of Joan Snyder (born 1940), who often takes painting as an opportunity to compare related, yet distinct, aspects. This is the case with *Untitled* (pl. 36), made in a pivotal year in the artist's development. In the early 1970s, Snyder had developed a critical engagement with the terms of painting, resulting in her "stroke paintings" (fig. 2). These works took the stroke of paint as the basic unit of both painting and image making. The stroke simultaneously defines and covers, creating layers and depths that are both material and metaphorical. Snyder's works of these years often juxtapose grids (regular

or irregular) with declensions of isolated, colored strokes—each unique and separated while nevertheless connected to the others through their shared terms, shape, and orientation. The paint stroke's trace is inherently bodily, as it involves the redistribution of a malleable substance over a period of time (however short) by an animating body. In these years, Snyder was engaged with the expressionist discourse that saw painting as action and event, but she brought to that discourse a new determination about the painted mark not just as an effect of the artist's intention but as irreducibly material in and of itself. By juxtaposing the seemingly direct stroke of paint against tenuously drawn lines or grids, Snyder extended a new analytic to the expressionist gesture that both addressed its conventionality and put it in dialogue with its supposed opposite—the geometric.

Despite the success of the "stroke paintings," Snyder turned away from them in 1974, the year of *Untitled*. In new works, she explored color blocks and fields, replacing the grid with patchworks of rectangles that operated as both skin-like surfaces and interlocking panels. In her history of lesbian art in the United States, published in 2000, Harmony Hammond wrote that "Snyder is very conscious of using paint as a kind of skin, so that every gesture done with, on, or to the paint becomes a reference to the gendered body. In her use of collaged materials and of paint as an embodied material, Snyder is able to suggest narratives of gender and sexuality."[10] Throughout her work, Snyder often relied upon tensions between the painted mark and the painted surface, allowing for the staging of comparisons between them. As the art historian Jenni Sorkin has noted, "Through squares, diptychs, triptychs, and series of panels, Snyder's flexible sectioning is utilized as a strategy of differentiation, a way to separate and draw distinct boundaries between spatial areas and webs of ideas."[11] In *Untitled*, the comparative approach of the artist's earlier works comes into full force. The left side of the bisected canvas presents a series of horizonal strokes and washes, some of which bleed into the next. The underlying structure of horizontal bands becomes the scaffolding for boundaries that appear both porous and transgressed. One can see this structure and its breakdown in comparison to the more tightly controlled right side of the painting, with its clearly delineated blocks of color. The painting presents two options for seeing the same color relations: one liquid and intermingling, the other defined in a poised tessellation of monochrome rectangles and squares. Neither half is bounded or pure. An archipelago of defined horizontal rectangles extends into the left side of the painting, and two brown lines move into and across the right side's verticals. *Untitled* calls for a process of back-and-forth looking in which each side is perceived through the retinal burn and memory of the other. Despite its division, the work offers a synergy between its two sides' handling and composition.

The year of *Untitled* was one of transition for Snyder. For much of the first part of the year, she had stopped painting while recovering from Lyme disease; in the second part, she began to explore the new direction of these paintings that paired strokes with filled-in grids. This was also the year she began to make more explicitly feminist paintings incorporating words and language. In this context, *Untitled*'s dialectic of two different, yet related, sides can be understood allegorically. The brazen and the controlled coexist here, seen as reflections of each other.

Only later did Snyder come out publicly as a lesbian, but her paintings of the 1970s were—as she has remarked on numerous occasions—deeply informed by her feminism, frustrations, and abandonment of heteronormative expectations. In 1973, she said, "The painting always had to do with my life."[12] In the second half of 1974 and early 1975, in particular, she created works that struggled with acceptance of queer difference and with personal relationships. Her major work made the same year as *Untitled—Vanishing Theatre/The Cut* (1974)—derived from the dissolution of an entangled long-term relationship. The writer Hayden Herrera has noted that the painting "speaks clearly of conflicts of female sexuality."[13] Soon after, Snyder's 1975 *Heart On* also addressed her coming to terms with her sexuality.[14] *Untitled* sits alongside these two paintings chronicling the artist's realization and affirmation of her queer desire and future. Its bipartite comparison can be understood in light of the gradual fragmentation of long-held relations and emerging conflicts (both personal and interpersonal) between differing points of view. Snyder's works of this period speak to such crossroads and their divergences in perspective, presenting two related aspects of the same forms—one held together, the other dripping down—in which echoes of the one can be discerned in the other.

In contrast to the more gestural handling of oil paint deployed by Fishman and Snyder, *Letting the Weather Get In* (pl. 50), by Harmony Hammond (born 1944), might appear at first as a near monochrome, seamless and geometric. This distanced view is deceptive, however, as the shaped canvas came about from an intense bodily process. Up close, the dark surface reveals itself as a meticulously worked grid of warp and weft, created through the very thickness of the paint itself.

At various times in her career, Hammond has produced textile-wrapped armatures, floor-bound knotted tondos, and densely layered monochrome paintings punctured by grommets. Uniting all these works are two shared themes: first, the work of art is the outcome of a repeated and determined manual process (such as wrapping, knotting, weaving, or layering); second, a contest is staged in the work between the surface and the depths it struggles to contain. Hammond has long employed abstraction as a means to evoke openness and possibility, which are achieved through the manipulation of materials and the divergent forms that can be made from them. In an essay on the wrapped sculptures the artist started making in 1977 (the same year as *Letting the Weather Get In*), the art historian Margo Hobbs offers a compelling analysis of Hammond's abstraction and working process as analogues for lesbian experience:

> Two principles informed Hammond's production of her fabric constructions. She believed that there was a quality of lesbianness that consisted of more than sexual desire for women, but influenced her entire sense of herself in the world. And she thought that this quality expressed itself materially in her art-making practice, not just the final form but the process by which she shaped her sculpture.[15]

Indeed, the artist's materially rich abstractions offer a twofold evocation of the body: they result from bodily engagement, and they present their insides and outsides as an

Fig. 2 Joan Snyder (born 1940). *Dark Strokes Hope*, 1971. Oil, acrylic, acrylic medium, and spray paint on canvas, 6 ft. 7 in. × 9 ft. ½ in. (200.6 × 275.7 cm). Tate, Lent by the Tate Americas Foundation, courtesy of Tate Americas Foundation and Komal Shah 2020. On long-term loan

analogy to her (and her viewers') sense of their own embodiment. We all know that we are more than we appear, yet we do not always apply that knowledge to others. Hammond's works are concerted acts of making that remind us that more lies within: not only do the base layers and armatures determine the outer layers that subsume and hold them, but they also make themselves evident through and upon the upper surface.

Letting the Weather Get In is one of a series of abstract "weave paintings" Hammond made from 1974 to 1977, after creating her floor-hugging textile tondos. Part of her return to easel painting at the time, these works sought to transpose some of the manual techniques of her textile works to the medium of oil paint on canvas. This wedding of painting and textile processes was an attempt to tackle the historical weight and authority of oil painting and to challenge its association with male dominance. In the artist's words:

> This non-figurative feminist content in painting was radical at the time. I was very clear about what I was doing. By referencing weave patterns found in textiles and basketry, I was able to take the feminist project of creating a historical narrative of women's creativity back into the painting field, merging traditional and fine arts in the skin of paint.[16]

In *Letting the Weather Get In*, the fusion of textile processes and painting techniques is achieved at the level of surface. Hammond deliberately slowed the viscosity of her oil paint by blending it with a wax medium, giving the painted surface a literal depth and thickness. Rather than merely representing a pattern or weave, Hammond cut into the paint's layers to create a topography of orthogonal patterns that support each other in place, much as they would in a textile. The consequence is an active tension between order and variation. As the artist says about these works, "The resulting surface was irregular, lumpy and bumpy, emphasizing the painting surface as skin and indirectly the body. For me, the painting skin, that edge where art and life literally meet, always relates to the body as site."[17] Whereas traditional

paintings offer the surface as a window to be looked through into illusionistic distances, Hammond's practice demands acknowledgment that paintings—like bodies—have integuments and insides.

It is significant that Hammond undertook these formal and material procedures within the realm of abstraction, as they led to a more capacious account of the body as, itself, material potential. Avoiding the depiction of the figure allowed her to evoke more directly the experience of living in a body. Hammond was among those feminist artists—including Fishman and Snyder—who declined to represent the human form because of the traditional objectification of images of women in art history. (There were other feminist artists, by contrast, who complicated the same histories of the figure by confronting the heterosexual male gaze and its presumptions.) Her priority was to explore bodies as sources of meaning, connection, and resistance. She turned to abstraction for the ways in which its formal relations and material processes could speak to interpersonal relations and embodiment. The artist later remarked:

> Abstraction offers the possibility of erotic art that bypasses the problematics of figuration. Instead of focusing on the figure with its fixed contour and impermeable surface of skin, abstraction opens up time and space, allowing us (other women/lesbians) to feel/respond sexually "in the body" (versus "to the figure") to what we see.[18]

The horizontal lozenge shape of *Letting the Weather Get In* relates to other works in which the artist sought an alternative to the verticality of the figure while still evoking a biomorphic roundness. As the art historian Tirza True Latimer has noted, the rounded lozenge is also, for Hammond, a repudiation of the modernist grid:

> Exhibited in an architectural space defined by right angles, the lozenge shaped work rejects interpretation as a part of a larger grid system. Curved edges reformulate the way the eye/body moves through space. While paintings in square formats suggest the possibility of infinite grid-like repetition, the lozenge disrupts this logic and unmasks the complicity of "white cube" gallery architecture and other high-art display conventions.[19]

Hammond also used the lozenge, or quasi-oval, form to imply sexuality, engaging with contemporaneous feminist conversations around vaginal imagery.[20] Suggesting but not representing such imagery allowed her to circumvent the voyeuristic objectification of the body while nevertheless addressing its experience. For instance, in the same year, she made *Conch* (fig. 3), which consists of two ovular forms wrapped in painted cloth and suggestively stacked one on top of the other. (This was the work Hammond chose to have reproduced in the history-making 1977 "Lesbian Art and Artists" issue of the feminist journal *Heresies*.)[21]

The horizontality of *Letting the Weather Get In* imparts a sense of depth and horizonal endlessness, while its rounded edges nevertheless squeeze, or hug, that space inward. As one nears the painting physically, what first appeared as a singular, dark monochrome comes into focus as a variegated field punctuated by pockets of depth, revealing other hues in submerged layers. The title of the work suggests an open relation between inside and outside, and it calls to mind the opening of windows and doors to increase the flow of air and elements across a threshold. Hammond explains the title in this way:

Fig. 3 Harmony Hammond (born 1944). *Conch*, 1977. Acrylic on fabric, 14 × 12 in. (35.6 × 30.5 cm). Collection of Rosemary McNamara, New York

> I've always been interested in layers, or more specifically, underlayers—what's behind or underneath being revealed or asserting itself. The title *Letting the Weather Get In* refers to the revealed underlayers of color as well as the notion of the outside world (people/places/politics) affecting one's life/art. This visual strategy of underlayers of pigment having agency to assert themselves on the painting's surface remains engaged in my most recent thickly painted near-monochrome paintings.[22]

As with the other paintings discussed thus far, *Letting the Weather Get In* evades being seen singly, and it evokes queer experience by performing the queer insistence on being more than what one appears to others. Not only do Hammond's paintings dissemble as monochromes, but they also demand attention to *all* that might not be apparent at first glance. There are multiple ways to encounter such a painting, and one could easily treat this artist's material and formal

strategies solely as reflections on modernism, or craft, or landscape, or flatness. However, Hammond (like Fishman and Snyder) has insisted that her strategies are more than that. As she said of some of her later paintings, "In their refusal to be any one thing at the same time they are themselves, the paintings can be seen to occupy some sort of fugitive or queer space and in doing so, remain oppositional."[23]

Working in the ferment of 1970s feminism, Fishman, Snyder, and Hammond each discovered that abstraction's forms and materials offered possibilities to expand expectations and confront limitations. All three were forthright about their feminist commitments, and Fishman and Hammond were two of the most visible and catalytic lesbian painters and community organizers of these years. The experience of living outside the framework of compulsory heterosexuality took energy, bravery, and commitment. As Hammond recalled about finding artists for her epochal 1978 exhibition *A Lesbian Show* at 112 Workshop, also known as 112 Greene Street, "[It] was a radical and risky gesture not to be underestimated. . . . As one's personal life was made public, artists risked everything from family and community disapproval to job discrimination to artistic stereotyping."[24] In making work that declared lesbian experience to be foundational, these artists demanded that familiar forms (like the monochrome or the grid) be seen differently: received rules had to be modified or broken; presumed patterns of behavior had to be remade. These experiences were transposed back to their work, in which they, too, navigated expectations, categorizations, and conventions—and sought egress from them. The predominance of the grid (as a foil) and gesture (as embodied) stood in for the larger set of limitations that needed to be shrugged off or forged anew.

The careers of Fishman, Snyder, and Hammond extended far beyond the 1970s, and each deepened her sophisticated engagement with the histories and possibilities of painting in the subsequent decades, providing bedrock for ongoing conversations in and around abstraction. The foundations they established inspired younger artists also to consider gestural abstractions and modified geometries as urgent sites of identification and visualization. Amy Sillman (born 1955) was just starting out as a painter in the 1970s and was immersed in this context. A member of the collective that put together the Fall 1977 *Heresies* issue, Sillman remarked at the time, "In my personal life the power of the combination lesbian/feminist/artist is tremendous. By personal life I mean the life I lead in my studio, where I take measurements of myself and begin to invent hypotheses and possibilities based on these measurements."[25] Her comment helps to illuminate the ways in which queer experiences could become a resource for artistic priorities, and Sillman later played a central role in debates about the queer possibilities of painting. Works such as her 2005 *Untitled (Little Threesome)* (fig. 4) result from a layering of recursive revisions of the same painted field—so much so that they demand an almost archaeological appraisal of their imbricated layers. In much of Sillman's work, abstraction vies with schematic figuration to suggest body parts or limbs, but without fully coming into focus. Each canvas is an archive of fittings and coverings—of findings and losings—that accumulate on and as the surface. Sillman's paintings call for an understanding of their temporality and the ways that elements (be they material or formal) have been compacted into the painting. She once stated, "Abstract painting is a process of being in the world, of thinking, and not just a design. . . . Abstraction is a form of compression."[26] Sillman's layerings are a gestural action that is distinct from—but related to—the ways Fishman, Snyder, and Hammond used painterly or process-based gestures to confront the grid and the monochrome. Her layerings can be understood as records of attempted relations, some of which resolve and others that get buried. This, too, is a way of thinking about how the practice of painting can evoke both personal and interpersonal experience.

Similarly, Christina Quarles (born 1985) engages in processes of revision in her work. She often draws with paint on raw canvas, leaving some of the latter visible in the end. As a figure comes into focus, the artist will photograph the in-process form and manipulate it digitally before incorporating that visual and perspectival experimentation into the forms and fields she paints on canvas. As with Sillman's compressions, Quarles's paintings are records of modification and adaptation, but she focuses on the figure as a site of openness and relation in which inside and outside fold into each other. She has commented:

> I often say that my paintings are portraits of living within a body, rather than portraits of looking onto a body. A lot of the things that interest me about gender, race and sexuality are things that I want to convey through the sense of living in a racialized body, a gendered body, or a queer body. Oftentimes that sense of living within your body doesn't at all line up with what it is to look onto your body or to look onto another body.[27]

Fig. 4 Amy Sillman (born 1955). *Untitled (Little Threesome)*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 45 × 36 in. (114.3 × 91.4 cm). Shah Garg Collection

Quarles's *Meet in tha Middle* (pl. 119; detail opposite) is a figural composition in which doubling and sameness are interwoven with difference. Figures and their shadows occupy the same spaces, and viewers might see one, two, or even three figures depending on how they count the various limbs and parts. Through the fragmentation, layering, and mirroring of the body, the artist has attempted to visualize the experience of embodiment and touch. Quarles's work may seem to be more directly concerned with queer sexuality than the other, less figurative paintings by Fishman, Snyder, Hammond, and Sillman, but they all have the shared goal of moving beyond the image of the body as an object for others' visual consumption. By contrast, they seek to evoke the complexity of bodies and persons that are more than they appear to others. In Quarles's confounding fusions of limbs and torsos, patterns of sameness allow for a queer potential to arise; their doublings (and triplings) exceed any binary preconception of how bodies must interact.

All the works discussed herein refuse a simple designation as lesbian and/or queer and/or feminist, but they are infused with the personal and political ramifications of these terms and the new possibilities that might be envisioned from them. Sillman perhaps summarized it best:

> To me, the word queer means difference. Queer represents the state of being different, not binary, not strictly one thing or another thing, and not either, but both, or some of each, or some of more than two, or something like that. That kind of open-endedness is useful to me both personally and aesthetically, and it's no accident that in my politics and my erotics and my art, the personal is linked with the aesthetic, and desire intertwines with form and with content and with process.[28]

Paintings made from queer experience need not make themselves immediately and readily visible as such, and painters such as Fishman, Snyder, Hammond, Sillman, Quarles, and others, such as Carrie Moyer (see pl. 69), have all used degrees of abstraction to evoke more open-ended recourses for relating, desiring, aligning, and being in the world. They refuse to offer a consumable image of a queer life. Instead, they use painting's processes and histories as tools to visualize queer possibilities.

1. In this, they built upon the precedent of earlier artists who subverted expectations of gender and sexuality, such as Nancy Grossman (born 1940), Agnes Martin (1912–2004), Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), Betty Parsons (1900–1982), Sonja Sekula (1918–1963), and Lenore Tawney (1907–2007). See Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 127–31; Ann Gibson, "Lesbian Identification and the Politics of Representation in Betty Parsons's Gallery," *Journal of Homosexuality* 27, no. 1–2 (1994): 245–70; Judith E. Stein and Helène Aylon, "The Parsons Effect," *Art in America*, November 2013, 132–39; Elizabeth Buhe, "Painting Opacity," in *Betty Parsons: Heated Sky*, ed. Alejandro Jassan and Alexandra Seneca, exh. cat. (New York: Alexander Gray Associates, 2020), 11–18; Jonathan D. Katz, "Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction," in *Agnes Martin*, ed. Lynne Cooke, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schröder, exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 170–97; Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Keeping House with Louise Nevelson," *Oxford Art Journal* 40, no. 1 (2017): 109–31; and David J. Getsy, "Second Skins: The Unbound Genders of Nancy Grossman's Sculpture," in *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 147–207.

2. For an overview, see Harmony Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (New York: Rizzoli, 2000).

3. See Barbara Hammer, "The Politics of Abstraction," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson (New York: Routledge, 1993), 70–75.

4. For more on the potentials that queer artists have seen in abstraction, see David J. Getsy, "Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction," in *Queer Abstraction*, ed. Jared Ledesma, exh. cat. (Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 2019), 65–75.

5. Louise Fishman, editor's statement, in "From the Lesbian Issue Collective," *Heresies* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 4.

6. See Sarah Whitworth, "Angry Louise Fishman (Serious)," *Amazon Quarterly* 1, no. 4, and 2, no. 1 (October 1973): 57–59, and Catherine Lord, "Their Memory Is Playing Tricks on Her: Notes toward a Calligraphy of Rage," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 440–57.

7. For more on the role of the grid in Fishman's practice, see Amy L. Powell, "Louise Fishman Drawing," in *A Question of Emphasis: Louise Fishman Drawing*, ed. Amy L. Powell, exh. cat. (Urbana-Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum, 2021), 19–29.

8. Louise Fishman, "How I Do It: Cautionary Advice from a Lesbian Painter," *Heresies* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 75.

9. Jill H. Casid, "Queer Expressivity; or, the Art of How to Do It with Louise Fishman," in Powell, *Question of Emphasis*, 50.

10. Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America*, 37.

11. Jenni Sorkin, "Joan Snyder: The Geography of the Surface," in *Joan Snyder*, by Hayden Herrera, Norman L. Kleeblatt, and Jenni Sorkin, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum; Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 69.

12. Joan Snyder, quoted in Hayden Herrera, "Joan Snyder: Speaking with Paint," in Herrera, Kleeblatt, and Sorkin, *Snyder*, 41.

13. Ibid., 40.

14. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. See Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America*, 37.

15. Margo Hobbs [Thompson], "'Lesbians Are Not Women': Feminine and Lesbian Sensibilities in Harmony Hammond's Late-1970s Sculpture," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 12, no. 4 (2008): 435–54.

16. Harmony Hammond, email message to the author, November 24, 2021.

17. Ibid.

18. Harmony Hammond, "A Space of Infinite and Pleasurable Possibilities: Lesbian Self-Representation in Visual Art," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: Harper Collins/Icon, 1994), 122.

19. Tirza True Latimer, "Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome," in *Harmony Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome*, ed. Tirza True Latimer (Denver: RedLine Art Space, 2014), 19–21.

20. See Hobbs, "'Lesbians Are Not Women,'" for a fuller discussion.

21. On the issue and its contentions, see Tara Burk, "In Pursuit of the Unspeakable: *Heresies*' 'Lesbian Art and Artists' Issue, 1977," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2013): 63–78.

22. Hammond, email message to the author, November 24, 2021.

23. Harmony Hammond, "A Manifesto (Personal) of Monochrome (Sort of)," reprinted in Latimer, *Hammond: Becoming/Unbecoming Monochrome*, 4.

24. Harmony Hammond, "A Lesbian Show," in *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, ed. Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 46.

25. Amy Sillman, artist's statement, *Heresies* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1977): 48.

26. Amy Sillman, "Artist Talk: Amy Sillman" (lecture), The Art Institute of Chicago, October 30, 2017. See also Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8, 2020).

27. Christina Quarles, "Intimacy, Unknowing, and Discovery: David Getsy in Conversation with Christina Quarles," in *Christina Quarles*, ed. Andrew Bonacina, exh. cat. (Wakefield, UK: Hepworth Wakefield, 2019), 34.

28. Amy Sillman and Gregg Bordowitz, *Between Artists* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2007), 40.

Louise Fishman

Philadelphia 1939–2021 New York City

31. *Victory Garden of the Amazon Queen*, 1972
Acrylic on linen (4 parts)
Each 13¾ × 13 in. (34.9 × 33 cm)

Joan Snyder

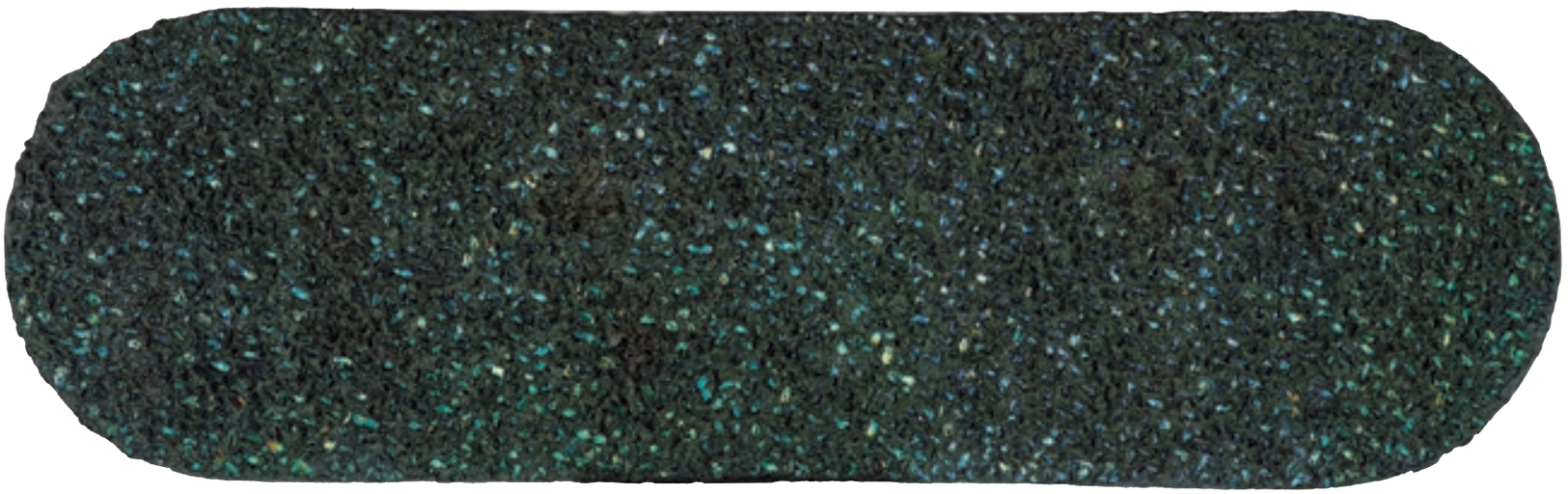
Born Highland Park, New Jersey, 1940

36. *Untitled*, 1974
Oil, acrylic, wax, gauze, and tape on canvas
60 × 60 in. (152.4 × 152.4 cm)

Harmony Hammond

Born Chicago 1944

50. *Letting the Weather Get In*, 1977
Oil and wax-resin compound on canvas
14 × 45½ × 1¾ in. (35.6 × 115.6 × 4.4 cm)



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