

PAPER PULSE

A CONVERSATION WITH JANE HAMMOND

by Faye Hirsch



Jane Hammond is the quintessential paper artist. Primarily a painter, her *Back Stage—Secrets of Scene Painting* is currently installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris (through April 15), and an exhibition of Jane Hammond canvases with John Ashbery titles opens March 29 at the Contemporary Museum in Honolulu (to June 2; it opened at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art and travels in the fall to the Blaffer Gallery at the

University of Houston). But Hammond also makes many drawings and prints, and her iconography since 1988 has been derived from a lexicon of 276 images taken from all sorts of books and magazines, images that live in her studio on thousands of small pieces of paper. Visiting Hammond is an adventure in chaos, as she opens drawers and drawers filled with fine Japanese papers, printed sheets, cut-outs, paper objects, Xeroxes, etc. When I interviewed her on August 30, 2001, she was especially interested in explaining how she makes her drawings. —FH

Faye Hirsch When did you start amassing images?

Jane Hammond I probably always did. But in the ten years I taught in Baltimore [1980–90, at the Maryland Institute], I was kind of stuck in this bad neighborhood in the dark by myself, so I was constantly looking things up in the library, and Xeroxing, and collecting. But I had always had that retentive, scrapbooky personality. When I was a kid I cordoned off these 50-ft. square grids on our property with string, and I had notebooks, and I catalogued everything that was in there—the rocks, the trees. I mean that's the sensibility, either you have it or you don't have it.

FH Would you catalogue them with their proper names?

JH I would look them up. Some of it came from my grandmother. She made me memorize the Latin names of a hundred flowers when I was six.

FH So at the Maryland Institute...

JH The idea in the back of my mind was that I would have these constituent elements and then let them associate themselves in different configurations. Some of the paintings would be nonobjective, some would be narrative, some would be complicated and some would be simple.



FH How could they be nonobjective if you were using recognizable images?

JH Because many of the images I have are things like the path of a fly walking on the wall, or a Mayan knot. If you have half of the Mayan knot, and you blow it up big, you would call that an abstract pattern. One of the things I wanted to explore was keeping the meaning of any given image open, so it could be determined by its new life within a painting rather than by a preconceived idea you bring to it. I didn't even want the things to have names. So I gave everything a number, very arbitrarily assigned. There was no reason that this puppet was number five instead of number 17. And I had an instinct that the idea would be more interesting if it was finite, and it would be more complicated if it were big—you could do it with 20 images, but that would be too cute.

FH What were the images?

JH Well—the path of a fly walking on a wall is just a little line, but it was from an article in a science periodical about a family of mathematical shapes, like smoke rings or flames in a fire, that can be described by certain formulas.

FH So if you found something interesting, you would Xerox it, and then give it a number.

JH Yes. I would Xerox all these things, and then on a certain day I would look at them, and I'd say, You're in and you're out. On a subconscious level I was looking for a heterogeneity or a fullness or a universality or whatever, but I was also just collecting things that meant something to me.

FH The fly walking on a wall. Why was that meaningful to you?

JH Well, it's a beautiful shape that's also a concretely real thing. The track students make by walking through the snow between dormitories: it's never a straight line. Or the shape of a snake in the sand. It's a nothing thing, but the closer you look at it, the more interesting it is. I remember years ago [poet and art critic] Raphael Rubinstein came to my studio and said, Wow, there's so much rope and so many knots and costumes in your work.

FH Have you ever thought about why?

JH I don't know. I think it's some kind of elastic identity thing. I have chickens of many types—probably because we raised chickens when I was growing up.

FH You have that goose.

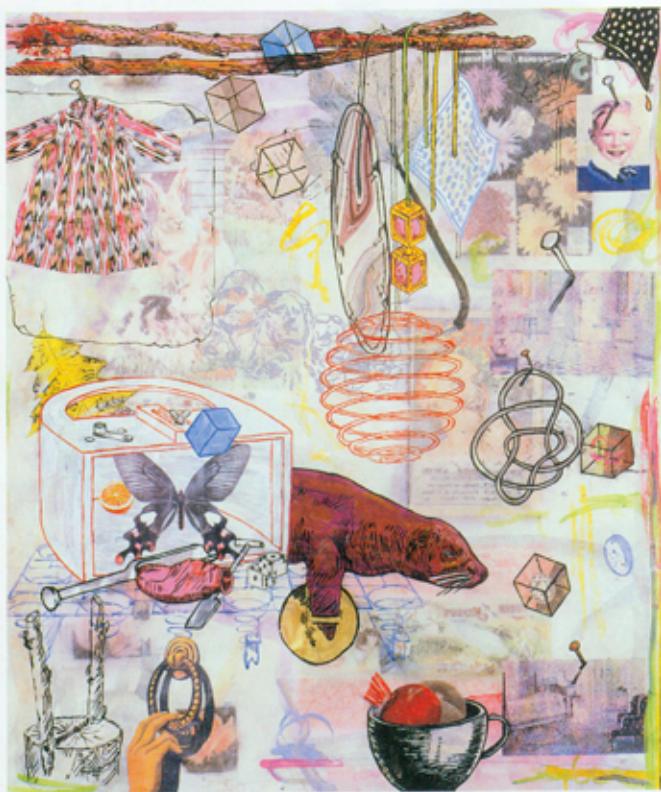
JH Yes, but I don't have a turkey. I have several different igloos, and snowballs, and ice holes. I don't know why I have what I have, and sometimes years later I see something about them and I sort of chuckle. Sometimes I categorize them. One day all the animals might be together but the next day it might be the things that are in a horizontal plane or the things that are in parts or the things that are Chinese. The point is, I wanted to fool around with the idea of how these images could mean different things in different contexts, and where the image becomes an image.

FH Obviously paper was rather essential to you from the start.

JH Almost every idea that I've had was on paper and came from books.

FH So what about this collaboration with John Ashbery?

JH From 1987 to 1993 every one of my paintings had the same title: *Untitled*, and then a set of parentheses, and within those parentheses a string of numbers, maybe one or two, maybe 25, that represented the pieces of information that were in the paintings. So if it was this moose with someone else's antlers with someone else's eyes, this rabbit with this water lily, this snowball, whatever: each thing would have a number. But in 1993, I got this idea to ask John Ashbery



Jane Hammond, *Still Life with Seal*, mixed media on Japanese paper (35-1/2x29-1/2 in.), 1999. Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody, New York.

to make titles for me. I associate John with playfulness, sound things, strategies, oddball eccentric methodologies. It just clicked in my mind one morning and I decided to call and ask if he would make titles for me. And he did it: he made 44 titles. And much to my amusement, I've now made 60 paintings with those titles.

FH Did you only use them in paintings? Or did you also use them in prints and drawings?

JH No. I've only made one print with a John Ashbery title—*The Wonderfulness of Downtown*.

FH Why no drawings?

JH I never begin a drawing with a title—I only title it at the

very end. I begin a painting with an almost complete idea in my mind of what it is going to look like. With rare exceptions, I start the drawing with nothing, except, of course, Japanese papers of all different kinds. I can buy thousands of dollars of paper at a time, and most of it doesn't make its way into a drawing. Then I have all this other stuff...

FH Plastic envelopes filled with all sorts of things. Here are images of big balloons...

JH This is from a novelty catalogue I bought at an old book fair. I Xeroxed the images. I turned the Xeroxes into lithographs—a little homemade kind of print process. I do them here, in the studio.



Jane Hammond, *Silver Rider*, mixed media on Japanese paper (42-1/2x32-1/2 in.), 1999. Courtesy private collector, New York.

FH Do you have a press?

JH I do now. So I have lots of this stuff. Some of it's organized by things, like balloons. Here are dice, these are edges...

FH Oh, this fish just fell out...

JH Then I'll put them together because they're tiny, or because they're red, or because they come in from the side... little heads, machines, butterflies...

FH So some are color Xeroxes, others are lithographs that you've made on painted paper—are there other things, too?

JH Yes. I have tons of linoleum block prints.

FH You carved them yourself?

JH Yes.

FH Here is a whole drawer full of linoleum blocks; all different shapes.

JH I worked like a dog in Maryland and I made no money. Finally, at the end, they gave me this measly little grant to make a print. But I didn't want to make a print. I thought prints were Fake Art. I felt forced to accept this grant, though I would have rather had the money. I got an assistant, Shelly, who said to me right away, "I'm only printing one plate, because it's too much work and I'm not getting paid." But I said, "I want to make something that's very complicated!" So I made an etching, but then I carved 23 linoleum blocks, and I overprinted it with the linoleum blocks.

FH The linoleum blocks that you carved—were they from your stock images?

JH Yes. It was a mini-lexicon on linoleum.

FH In Maryland, were you making an edition or were you making monoprints?

JH Well, after I made the prints—there were 23 of them, all unique—I naively took them around. The Baltimore Museum of Art bought one—which was a shock to everyone, including me. I took them to Roberta Waddell, to Barry Walker, to David Kiehl—I didn't know any of these people at the time. I mean, I wouldn't do this now for ten thousand dollars. One person said to me, "They're monoprints." And another person said they were an "édition variée." So I didn't know what they were. But this idea of a fixed lexicon that could be used recombinatively all came out of this. It came out of Shelly saying to me, "I'm-only printing one plate!"

FH So you're saying, in a way, that your method of working came out of prints.

JH Out of how you can live in this world, a forest of signs, and still be yourself, and your many selves.

FH There are tons of these things. What's this?

JH This is the mathematical schematization of the tail of a sea lion. I have one for a leopard, one for a cheetah.

FH What are your numbers up to? Are there hundreds? Are there thousands?

JH I have 276 images for my paintings.

FH So are there 276 linoleum blocks?

JH Well, sort of. Some of the things that I call one in 276 are compound images. So all three of the tails, for instance, are one number.

FH It's a sea, it's an ocean of pieces of paper.

JH I had this idea that when I made these drawings I wanted to... you know the idea of stream of consciousness in writing? Well, imagine if you were a really crappy typist—your hands couldn't keep up with your thoughts, and you really couldn't work that way. So certain technical things have to be at the ready if you're going to attempt to work as quickly as your mind works. Of course nothing physical is ever as nimble as the mind. But what I wanted was to have some of the indeterminate, complex, looping-around, unpredictable, matrix-y kind of quality of thinking itself.

FH In your drawings, specifically.

JH Yes. So immediately I knew that I needed to have a lot of stuff at the ready. What I did is maximize the potential to do

things in a quickly associative manner. First I make a sheet by taking some papers and gluing them together to make them large enough. I love this Japanese paper—this is a wood-grain—you can see this “sheet” is made up of three different papers glued together.

FH A wood grain, a stripe, and a kind of fleur-de-llys.

JH The next step is that I make a field of solvent transfers. You take something, for instance, images out of a book—here’s a seed packet, an old calendar, a Halloween mask or a piece of cloth—and create a color Xerox from it. Then you impregnate that color Xerox with a solvent, causing the color to run into the sheet of paper you’re working on. You press and you rub. You can make the images very photographic or you can make them watery and indeterminate.

They vary even when you’re trying to control the process. I have all these things I’ve saved to make transfers out of. You can’t put this stuff directly in a drawing, because it’s not archival.

FH Here’s a whole drawer full of cut-outs.

JH Placemats, bookmarks, a rug [that’s Xeroxed with Marilyn Monroe on it, old fruit labels . . . you get the idea. So then I begin to eliminate things that just haven’t worked out that well. If I don’t like the field, I’m not going to bother making a drawing on it. Also, I can work on six or eight drawings at once. Painting is more like you sit in the chair for an hour and you figure out if you should put the pigeon here or there. But with drawing, you say, okay, I’ll put the pigeon over here in this one, I’ll put the pigeon over there in that one, I’ll make him blue over here, I’ll make him white over there . . . These sheets I start out with are not works of art, they’re fields. And I think of these sheets as skins—that’s why I like the idea of tattoos.

FH The *Tabula Rosa* print [a digital print made at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) in 2001]—it looks very much like these solvent fields in the drawings.

JH Yes. That’s why I’m drawn to it. So the good news is that the field has that watery, in-the-surface kind of look. The bad news is that it’s one image over here, one there, one there . . . they’re not integrated. So the next thing I do is paint on the sheet. I just slop on this gouache with water and matte medium in it or acrylic with a lot of water in it.

FH And are you trying, when you do that, to create some kind of coherence in the solvent images that are already there?

JH It’s more a balance of energies.

FH So by the time you finish the painting part . . .

JH I just have a further developed field. It’s not coherent yet. There are four or five steps that are basically just field-building.

FH What’s next?

JH So then I make these frottage rubbings off of my own

linoleum blocks, often in graphite. You can slide these blocks around under the sheet very quickly, and instantly create an image by just rubbing it. Now my field is more thick with information, and I begin putting some images in the field, usually linoleum block prints.

FH So you begin printing on the surface?

JH No. I go over to this box of all these preexisting printed things, and get, say, this goddess, and I use an archival glue that allows me to stick her on, but also to pick her up and move her around. So I just start putting these things down.

FH This is the collage part.

JH Yeah—and it’s reversible, and quick—and imagine this box—the order of this box quickly begins to break down . . .

FH It already looks pretty chaotic to me . . .

JH Do you want a pink airplane or a blue airplane, do you want this airplane or that airplane . . . you can’t explain it. Sometimes they’re there for their cultural meaning, or sometimes for their shape or for the fact that they’re flying things or they’re routed . . . If you walk down the street, and you see this woman, and she has on this turquoise tee-shirt, and it reminds you of this dessert you ate at the Cape five years ago, you don’t really know—is it something about her bosoms, the way she smells, the dog walking next to her? But I believe it’s something real—it’s some little tiny nugget of information that’s in your brain. One thing has triggered an association. I just trust those associations. I don’t think, What is the grander meaning of this? Now, because I’ve collected all this stuff and cut it up already, and because I have much too much of it, I can move very quickly.

FH Is this the last of what you do to a drawing?

JH No. I then repaint small areas where lines have been lost under other images. So there are layers of the linoleum blocks, the lithographs, rubber-stamped images, and the color Xerox, all of which are collage features. But I still only have a field, you know what I’m saying?

FH No. It seems you’re pretty far along now.

JH I’m far along, but I still don’t have a focus. In most of these drawings, the elements that are more central, that are larger,

that are more important, are usually hand-drawn. It’s that classic Leonardo da Vinci idea of staring at stains on the wall. Out of that field, something gets triggered for me into a more formed thought—and that more formed thought tends to be hand-painted.

FH Do you prefer one medium over another?

JH I switch back and forth, and at the point I switch I always think, Ah, painting’s so much better than drawing, or Ah, it’s



Jane Hammond, *Tabula Rosa*, color inkjet print on handmade Japanese paper (75x30 in.), 2001. Courtesy ULAE, Bay Shore, and Galerie LeLong, New York.

so much more fun to make these drawings. So I really appreciate their difference. It's like if you go to Europe, and you're not feeling too broke, and you go out to a great restaurant every night for five nights in a row and you think, wow, this is fantastic. But after night 12 you're so glad to be home, so glad to cook in your own kitchen.

FH Where do prints stand in all of this?

JH Prints are such a major element of these drawings.

FH But a specific print project, where you go to do a collaboration. Where does that fit in?

JH In a way it's almost more like painting for me because my prints take a long time. I could make at least 12 drawings in the time I could make a print. My ideas for prints tend to be

there. It gives the object a sense of time. So that makes the prints extremely time-consuming. I'm always interested in a fragmented, multipartite reality. I like art with a high degree of internal contradiction, where order is wrenched out of a huge amount of chaos. De Kooning as opposed to Ellsworth Kelly, where it's specific, it's calm, it's of a piece. I respect it but I don't relate to it.

FH You put yourself in your work a lot—little self-portraits, the big digital portrait . . .

JH Not all the time, but some of the time.

FH But each appearance is very different from the next. Do you see it as a fragmented identity?

JH It doesn't feel fragmented to me.

FH Is it play-acting? Masquerade?

JH I don't know. This is the only head I've ever lived in. I'm a very different person to my boyfriend, to my mother, to my friends . . . When I was a kid I used to dress our dogs in elaborate costumes. Then I would hide. When my mother came home they would run out in evening dresses, with pearls.

FH Would she find that hilarious?

JH I think so. But I can't remember her reaction. It was more about my delight in doing it. My grandfather would hunt pheasants and he'd hang them up to do whatever it is they do when they're hanging there—age, I guess. I would make costumes for them and put them in baby carriages and take them around the neighborhood. Little bonnets and dresses. And they were dead.

FH Were you considered an odd kid?

JH I don't know. I lived in a world of adults so I don't know if anyone had any standards.

FH You seem to enjoy collaborations. You've done this thing with Ashbery, and you work frequently on prints.

JH I really like printmaking. The collaboration is part of what I like about it. I have never played sports, but I imagine it's what it feels like to be on a team. There are these other people, and they're trying to help you make your work look as good as possible. I wouldn't want to do it all the time but it's a very nice antidote to the complete solitude of painting.

FH So when you first began using this system of yours you were, in effect, kind of tripping yourself up, tricking yourself out of doing something that would be repetitive.

JH I was seeking a high degree of heterogeneity and not having to assign myself a place on the spectrum of style.

FH It seems that it was also a way for you to re-enter the work.

JH It doesn't seem odd to me that I devised a somewhat indirect way of approaching imagery.

FH But it could be seen as an indirect way of arriving at something quite personal. The myth is that if one starts out with something confessional, one has skipped a bunch of steps.

JH I actually had a wild childhood. I could work it. But it's not my inclination and it's not my nature. I agree with you—there's something about the indirect thing that's more interesting. But it's also somehow who I am. It's so ingrained in me I couldn't do it another way.

Faye Hirsch is editor of Art On Paper.



Jane Hammond, *Twelve Wishes*, acrylic and gouache on antique Chinese notebook pages (47x40 in. overall), 2000. Courtesy the artist and Galerie LeLong, New York.

big and elaborate—each medium has a voice. This is something that's preoccupied Jasper Johns for years—the relationship between the medium and the imagery, like two actors speaking the same part changes the meaning of the part. When I make prints, I like to use lithography, silkscreen, and etching.

FH Together.

JH Yes. And I really like to use collaged elements.

FH You mean something that's been stuck on the surface as opposed to printed on the surface.

JH Yes. Like my print *Full House* [made at ULAE in 1992–93]: all those things were printed, cut out, and collaged onto the print. And when you look at the print it has the feeling—this element is here now, but it used to be over