



JANE HAMMOND'S RECOMBINANT DNA

by Amei Wallach

Jane Hammond came of artistic age as the 1970s morphed into the 1980s, a time when artists of every stripe were diagnosing the contagion of secondhand images that infects the ways we see ourselves. Many artists turned to photography, a medium complicit in the situation, for their critique. Cindy Sherman photographed herself as women in the thrall of B-movie pipedreams. Barbara Kruger's texts told you what not to think about what you thought you were seeing in her appropriated photographs.

Jane Hammond kept on painting, because for her all that visual static out there in magazines and newspapers, on televisions and movie screens, was simply the landscape of everyday life, like daffodils to Wordsworth or taxicabs to Frank O'Hara.

"I grew up in a world of mediated imagery," she says. "How am I going to be an imaginative, spirited, authentic, private, living, breathing self? How do I shape this stuff?" In her paintings and prints, for nearly three decades, she has shaped it with Big Tent inclusiveness. She foraged flea markets, used-book stores, and antique shops for prints, stamps, tattoos, cartoons, refrigerator magnets, and illustrations out of molecular-biology, phrenology, and physics books. Her interest from the start has been in "how meaning is constructed," as she puts it, particularly if that meaning is a private re-imagining of public information.

For many years Hammond limited herself to 276 specific found images, which she disengaged from their various contexts, altered in scale, and reshuffled. A red lotus became a medallion in a doily border, in concert with Gandhi's face, a blue rabbit, and a set of dice in her painting *Bread and Butter Machine* (2000); it colonized the sole of a foot in the double cutout painting *Sore Models #2* (1994); it marked the spot where Hammond lives on

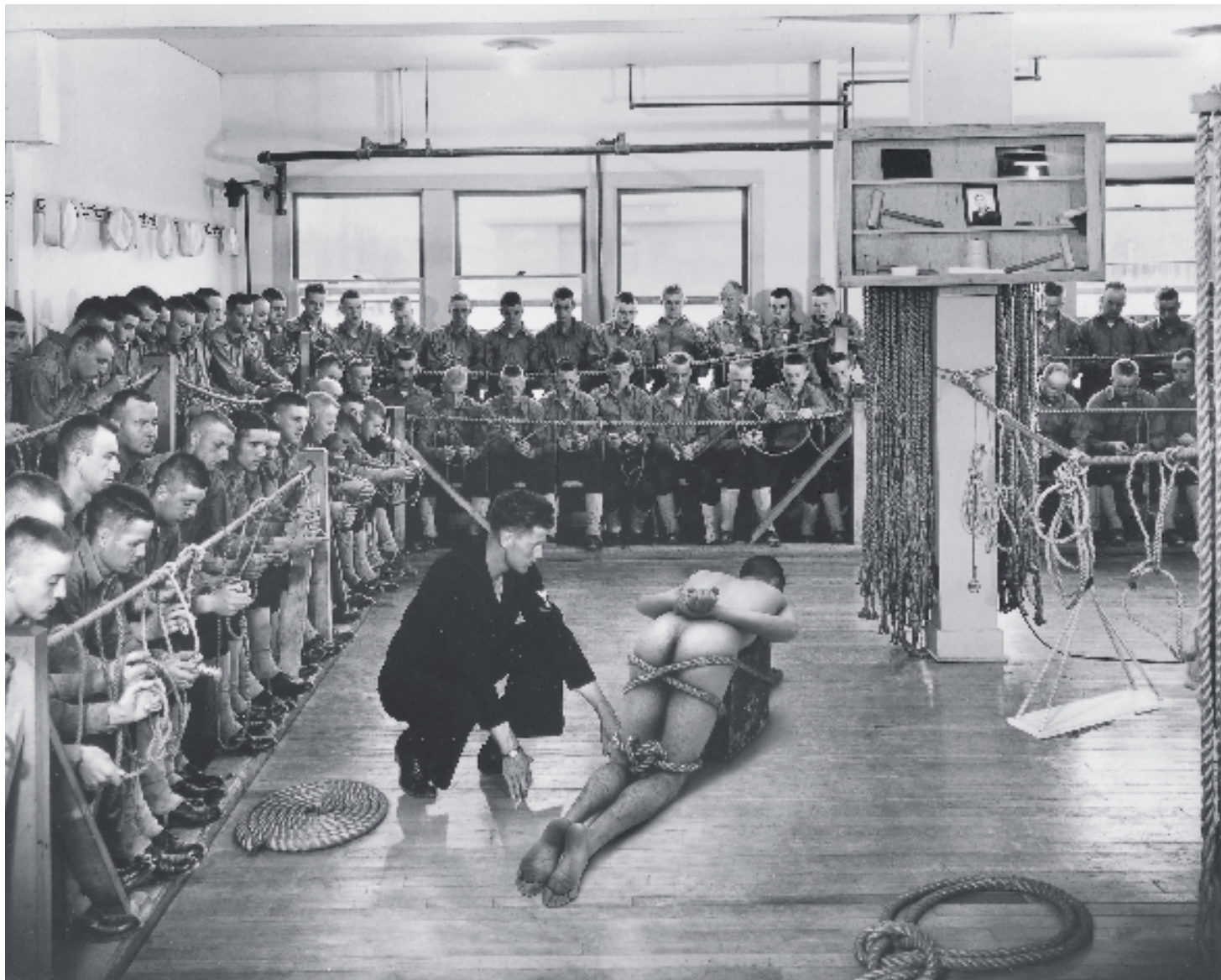
a detail from a New York City map—also enigmatically decorated with a mouse, a shoe, a woman on a trapeze—in *The Wonderfulness of Downtown* (1997).

Suddenly, three years ago, Hammond began applying her scavenging, recombinant sensibilities to photography. The resulting images are and are not heirs to the photomontage traditions of Russian Constructivism, Dada, and John Heartfield. They are neither political nor fragmented, though they share a strain of theatricality with the Surrealist Max Ernst. Hammond doesn't so much collage her images as re-contextualize them. They create their own narratives, alternate universes that appear seamless no matter how bizarre the associations or elaborate the effects. As a painter does with colors, Hammond alters weight, hue, and meaning through juxtapositions.

In the fall of 2004, Hammond was investigating frogs in every imaginable medium for her *Scrapbook* series of paintings and prints. She had already found a frog rubber stamp and had made a rayogram from a frog skeleton. She wanted a frog photograph. By now she often let the Internet do her walking, and she typed in "frog." Then she typed in words for images she'd riffed on in her paintings—like "snowman." She found images of World War II soldiers bayoneting Hitler snowmen for target practice, sexy women snowgirls at the Dartmouth Winter Carnival, and one diminutive snowman from a rare Southern winter.

That December, on her studio floor, she sorted selections from her growing collection of over a thousand photographs by classification. And then she went off to fix supper. Like a song, in her mind, a particular photograph kept repeating—it was "the kind of black-and-white photograph your mother had on the dresser,"





she says. When she realized that the photograph in her mind was actually a sampling of details from many photographs, she had embarked on what to date has resulted in forty-five photographs and two bulletin-board snapshot compositions.

Hammond had always, in a sense, been collaborating with the culture in which she lived. She now began collaborating with a series of anonymous photographers and with the Internet. “This has been my thing: recombinant DNA,” she says. “Searching, linking, all this stuff—it’s like a wave; it’s perfect for me to ride on.”

One of Hammond’s first photographs, *Perpetual Love* (2005), resulted from her desire to make a still life. She needed a table to put it on. She typed in “ping-pong” and discovered a genre of S and M called “ping-pong bondage,” in which participants spank each other with ping-pong paddles. The act of bondage replaces the still life in the classic Renaissance triangle she has constructed from a postwar British photograph of two girls playing ping-pong without net or ball in a bombed-out setting whose details are borrowed and

reconfigured, including the insertion at the apex of the triangle of a bare bottom being paddled.

Bee Line Trucking (2005), one of Hammond’s most effective photographs, collapses eras and styles. It evokes American Abstract Expressionism as well as the whole history of Soviet art. The crashed Bee Line truck slashes into space like one of Kazimir Malevich’s painted semaphores, which the Socialist Realists would later translate into heroic trains. The trains, in turn, were appropriated into the irony of 1980s Moscow Conceptualism. It’s not only *time* that Hammond is jamming here, it’s duration and speed. The stopped truck, the departing car, the crawling snail are all made more palpable through formal devices derived from her painting practice.

PAGE 50: *Men*, 2007; PAGE 51: *Bee Line Trucking*, 2005; ABOVE: *The Regular* Matthew Walker, 2007; OPPOSITE, TOP: *Cabrito*, 2007; BOTTOM: *Us*, 2007.

