

## Need Supply Co.

Interview with Carl Hammoud  
March 20, 2016



Focus | Graphite on paper | 50x60 cm | 2013

We first encountered the work of Carl Hammoud through our friends at Schnaydermans. The Swedish shirtmakers commissioned Hammoud to create pieces that interpreted the sharp tailoring that they have become known for. It was a clever match, Hammoud's paintings are executed with the sort of taut precision that all designers hope to achieve. But there is an unsettling undercurrent to Hammoud's work. The world his paintings exhibit is a bit too perfect, too precise, too real. We reached out to Hammoud to learn a bit more about his process and his work.

**Hometown:** Stockholm

**Current Location:** Stockholm

**How do you take your coffee?** From my coffee brewer, first thing every morning when I get to the studio at 7 am.

**What's your Sunday ritual?** I rarely take Sundays off, so they are basically the same as any other day. Although, things may get done a little later and a little slower.

**Can you walk us through your beginnings in art?** It may be a cliché, but I have always known I was going to be an artist. It was just a question of letting it happen.

When I was little I used to draw all the time. It was all I wanted to do. A lot of it was about traveling into another dimension. Fantasizing about anything, since what I drew was not

bound by physics or common sense. As I got older, my interest shifted focus to the actual making of the drawings (and paintings). On how to gain more control of the medium.

I grew up in a simple environment, in a galaxy far away from art, so to speak, so I had to look and listen elsewhere. In the 80's and 90's, things were not as easy to find as they are today. Information was not as accessible without the internet. At 15 I had no idea about art schools and knew of no plan on how to become an artist. I thought it would be enough just to get good at drawing and painting. But as fortune would have it, I automatically got in to a high school that had programs for arts and music, simply because it was the school located within closest range to where we lived. Besides seeing and learning about a potential life as an artist, many of the student at that school, who would become my friends, had parents who were artist. All those things kind of helped me discover what was possible.



The Protest | Oil on linen | 355x300 cm | 2013

**What is the first work of art that you can remember being infatuated by?** I cannot really remember if there was one particular work. There were a few paintings, or reproductions of paintings in art books, that stuck on me. I remember how fascinating it was learning of art history and seeing the visual chronology of modernism. But the experience of facing something in real life and being inexplicably drawn to it is something that came quite late for me. It was probably a Mark Rothko retrospective at the Whitney in New York in 1998, when I was 22. I was studying painting at an art school so I knew of Rothko. I did not understand his work and was not really interested. I only wanted to get better at painting, whatever that meant. But as I entered the show at the Whitney there was no escape. It was unlike anything I had seen, or experienced. I am not going to try to put words to it. All I can say is I still think of that exhibition today - 18 years later.

**Your compositions often feature containers - boxes, books, card catalogs - that are conspicuously void. What do you mean to suggest with this absence?**

In many of my works I like to focus on the traces or marks we leave behind us. Like a palm print on the walls of a cave. We were here and we did this. I often find that a trace of someone gives a clearer mental image of how we relate to them than the actual presence of that person does. Where there is no need to communicate, there is room to contemplate. If you look at a city and remove all the people, you are more likely to see what it is that we have achieved as humans in terms of physical accomplishments. We created all this. We invented civilization and refined it.

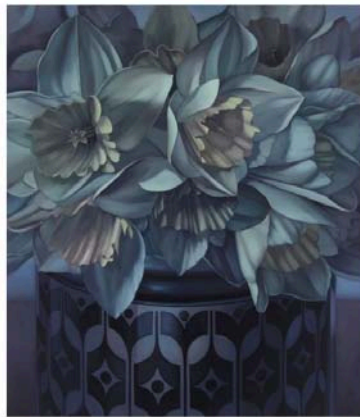
A great deal of what we do is to organize our surroundings. We create systems to understand the world, to get an overview that we use to progress and evolve. And I think this applies to all fields of intellectual and emotional discovery. The containers you see in my works are the idea of the systems as such. Not what they contain, but what they are. A system, at its core, is about reducing complexity. Fitting things into a container is one way of creating a boundary or limit. A book is kind of a container, an area with a limited number of pages. Whatever you print in that book is a transmission from a specific source. It is the story told by one person or an idea from a specific field of study.

I am not sure that these thoughts make sense, but then I am not sure that I want them to. The important thing to me is that they are my thoughts, that this is my way of creating a system to understand something. Since I work within the realm of art, I think there is room for inexplicability. I am not writing a thesis or a scientific paper. I am merely trying to find some abstract pattern in something I have observed.

Over time I have encountered sociological and philosophical studies that observe similar phenomena, and to me this gives my work a wonderful sense of rhythm or poetry. That thoughts connect. It does not matter where your starting point is, as long as you really observe and think about something you will eventually meet its reflection.

**This absence of humans in the manmade environments of your pieces environment has the echo of a Twilight Zone mystery, especially when the works are taken as a whole. Do you consider a continuation of narrative between your pieces?**

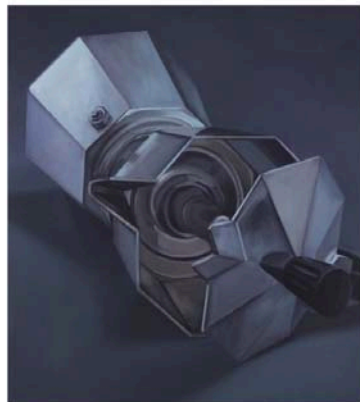
About 10 years ago, in the beginning of my professional artistic course, I often thought of the images in my works as stories. If I depicted something happening in one painting, I wanted there to be a reaction in another painting. There was almost a chronology between the pieces. Over time I found this to be a restricting approach. However, I do believe the works connect in a way, perhaps in a broader sense. If I try to communicate certain ideas through a painting, I hope those ideas will teach me something that I can use in the next one. In that sense, a work in progress always relate to the previous – and affects the coming ones.



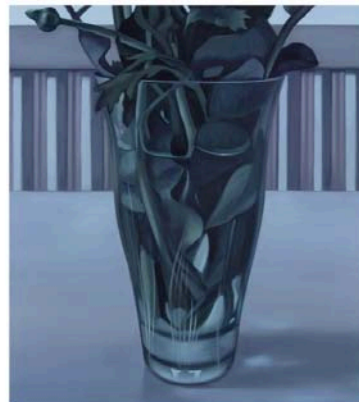
Untitled (Witness) | Oil on linen | 80x70 cm | 2016



Untitled (Tomorrow) | Oil on linen | 80x70 cm | 2016



Untitled (Lunar Module) | Oil on linen mounted on panel | 50x45 cm | 2016



Untitled (Forest) | Oil on linen mounted on panel | 50x45 cm | 2016

**In your paintings that do feature human figures, there is a distinct focus on the gaze of the subject, either they have their back turned away from us (the viewer) or their eyes appear covered. What is your relationship to looking and seeing?** As an artist, your eyes are your most important tool. If a painting is successful, accomplished, it's because I could see how to mold the elements. If not, it's because I failed to see. Just like hearing, our vision is one of our most immediate and complex senses. The moment we see something there are thousands of little things set in motion in our minds – instinct, emotion and intellect working together. The more we look into things, more begins to happen. How we react to something is not always how we thought we would react. More importantly, what we see depends on how we see it.



There is a line in a song by Bill Callahan that goes, "Have faith in wordless knowledge". The way he sings this is almost mumbling the words, so for a long time I thought he said "Our faith in worthless knowledge," but to me it almost has the same meaning. Instinct does not always make sense, but most of the time it points you in the right direction. Sometimes we may need a long time to understand why we reacted a certain way. Sometimes we may reach new conclusions in life without really understanding how.

To a certain degree I think we look at things a bit too practically. We put our faith in knowledge we have no use for. Being imaginative is not necessarily being illogical. Our minds create rational chains of thought even when we are imagining something we know nothing of. Like creating a fictional universe. We always discover a continuity to follow. There are simply many different ways of understanding, it all depends on how you look at it.

**The technical aspects of your work are incredibly concise, what is your working process like?** I usually start a full body of work simultaneously, so that each step of the process corresponds between the works. This way they remain within the same color range, etc. I think it is about keeping them in the same "room". I have no calculated method, but there is a route I usually follow, with a few deviations. The source would be what comes first. I will use my own photos, a picture found on the internet, or a combination of several pictures that I put together in a photo editing program.

Next step is to get a sketch of that image on to a paper or canvas – and that is where I have several options. I like to leave room to do things differently each time, to create variations in the process. You have to remember that the absolute majority of my time is spent with unfinished pieces in my studio. It is within the process that the joy in my work takes place.

Sometimes I use charcoal to make a sketch, other times I start to paint with oil directly. If it is a drawing I can start by sketching on fine paper, or do a rough sketch on a simpler paper and then trace it on the fine paper. After that it is just a question of getting things to work together. But I always leave room for both sudden and slight changes. To get the balance right.

It's difficult to say how long I work on one piece. If I am deep inside my "work bubble" and feel a flow I can make a medium size painting in two or three sessions. Other times it could take months. Most of my exhibitions comprise 12-15 pieces and have taken about 4-6 months to produce, including pieces that end up in the trash can.

**Who do you look to for inspiration, both aesthetically and thematically?** I look pretty much everywhere. At art history, contemporary art, literature, music, movies and television.

It was funny you mentioned The Twilight Zone. I think it aired on Swedish television when I was a kid. I recently bought a DVD-collection of the series from the 60's, the Rod Sterling seasons. I have found that show to be very inspiring. It's all about ideas; how we react to those ideas and their consequences. And of course, the inexplicability of things. Even though there are details that may appear a little silly to us today, I definitely do not watch it ironically. I think it is very visionary.

When it comes to what art I look at it does not necessarily resemble what I do. Giorgio Morandi is one of my big favorites, as is Edward Hopper. I love the work of Tacita Dean and



The Principles of Perspective II | Oil on linen | 80x70 cm | 2014

William Kentridge, among the artists of the present. The work of Vija Celmins, especially her studio paintings from the sixties. I think I look for connections, however marginal, rather than immediate inspiration.

Aesthetically, my pieces sort of have their own way. I try not to interfere too much. There are a few basics I go by. I avoid labels, tags, chords and printed text such as logotypes, etc. The less details the better – I want them to be visually silent. And I try not to include contemporary technology. It won't make the paintings more relevant or relating to our time.

One thing to consider is that when drawing or painting human figures, you are placing them in a permanent position. They are cursed to stay in that very space, looking in the same direction forever. So I think it's only fair to look over things such as grooming and what they will be wearing, etc.

**Many painters leave their works untitled, but your titles have a sort of gravitas to them, what interests you about the titles of your work?** Titles are an important part in the communication of a work. I think a title could either be descriptive or suggestive. A third option is to have the title simply throw off the narrative. Create a crack in the code of the work.

In the majority of what I do, the titles appear very naturally. It's like I am thinking so much about what the works are that the titles feel as if they were already there when I started. But sometimes I can put a lot of energy into getting the titles right. I will read dictionaries, look up synonyms and how words are used in specific contexts. Those are occasions I really enjoy, because as I am doing this I am also learning, discovering new things. Just as in the process of making my work, it becomes a journey of discovery.

**In your most recent paintings, it seems that you've introduced an element of nature into your contained environment. Can you speak a bit more about this newest body of work?**

These works, as well a few other upcoming ones, are a little different from my previous. The approach is a bit more intimate, with objects that are within reach and shown up close. But they do follow the same chain of thoughts, relating what we see and how we see things, what makes sense and what doesn't. I think of them as objects as they are when we are not present. How we have exited a room at night and turned off the light, letting only the moon illuminate them. How much of us can we see in them, and are they still the same objects without us there to use them?

When you really look at something, for a long time, you start to discover less evident features. There is a scale to man made things. We make things that relate to our bodies, but what if, for instance, these objects already existed? If they were not made for us? What would their scale relate to? And these are objects that are in paintings, with minimal if no background to reveal their size. As paintings, there is no telling if they actually exist in real life, since they consist only of color. Unlike photographs, they are not a reflection of actual light.

So there is even a possibility that they are recounted items from a fractured mind. All titles point towards something other than what we see in the paintings. The coffee maker is called 'Untitled (Lunar Module)'. Perhaps I thought I was painting a lunar module. After all, there is something about the different parts of the coffee maker that brings to mind the stage in lunar travel when fuel tanks are released. I think there are endless possibilities in how to view them. I want them to be what they are to each viewer. That the viewers life experiences will connect the dots. Giorgio Morandi once said in an interview: "I believe that nothing is more abstract, more unreal than what we actually see. We know all that we can see of the objective world, as human beings, never really exists as we see and understand it. Matter exists, of course, but has no intrinsic meaning of its own, such as the meanings we attach to it. Only we know that a cup is a cup, a tree is a tree".

**What's next for you?** I have just shipped the works for my third solo show at Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin and am finishing new works for Frieze New York (with Galleri Magnus Karlsson) in May. I also have some other things in the pipeline that are yet to be announced.