



ALLISON JANAE HAMILTON

MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

BIOGRAPHY

Allison Janae Hamilton (b.1984) is a visual artist working in photography, video, sculpture, and installation. She was born in Kentucky, raised in Florida, and her maternal family's farm and homestead lies in the rural flatlands of western Tennessee. Hamilton's relationship with these locations forms the cornerstone of her artwork, particularly her interest in landscape. Using plant matter, layered imagery, complex sounds, and animal remains, Hamilton creates immersive spaces that consider the ways that the American landscape contributes to our ideas of "Americana" and social relationships to space in the face of a changing climate, particularly within the rural American south.

In Hamilton's treatment of land, the natural environment is the central protagonist, not a backdrop, in the unfolding of historic and contemporary narratives. Through blending land-centered folklore and personal family narratives, she engages haunting yet epic mythologies that address the social and political concerns of today's changing southern terrain, including land loss, environmental justice, climate change, and sustainability. Each work contains narratives that are pieced together from folktales, hunting and farming rituals, African-American nature writing, and Baptist hymns. Drawing from all of these references, she envisions what an epic myth looks and feels like in rural terrain. In this vein, Hamilton's art practice centers on imagination in order to meditate on disruption and magic within the seemingly mundane rituals of natural and human-made environments.



INSTALLATION VIEW, *A ROMANCE OF PARADISE*
MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY
MARCH 27 – APRIL 24, 2021



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Allison Janae Hamilton

Black River Under a Blue Sky, 2021

Signed and dated in ink (verso)

Archival pigment print

Image dimensions: 40 x 60 in

101.6 x 152.4 cm

(AJH.18352)



Allison Janae Hamilton

Once Again Amid the Pine Trees, 2021

Signed and dated in ink (verso)

Archival pigment print

Image dimensions: 40 x 60 in

101.6 x 152.4 cm

(AJH.18354)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Floridawater II, 2019
Archival Pigment Print
Image Dimensions: 24 x 36 inches
61 x 91.4 cm
Edition of 5, with 2AP
(AJH.15792)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Floridawater IV, 2019
Archival Pigment Print
Image Dimensions: 24 x 36 inches
61 x 91.4 cm
Edition of 5, with 2AP
(AJH.15793)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Rooster Wire Mask, 2020
Vintage fencing mask, rooster feathers
13 x 13 x 13 inches
33 x 33 x 33 cm
(AJH.17838)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Full-Faced Flower Mask, 2020
Vintage fencing mask, wood flowers
13 x 10 x 10 inches
33 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm
(AJH.17830)



Allison Janae Hamilton

Blackwater Creature III, 2019

Mixed media (wood, chain, rope, horse hair, resin, misc. objects)

66 x 6 x 6 inches

167.6 x 15.2 x 15.2 cm

(AJH.15795)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Fencing masks, 2018
Mixed media
Dimensions variable



Allison Janae Hamilton

Fencing mask 8, 2018

Polymer gypsum, fiberglass, steel, pigment

9 1/4 x 8 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches

23.5 x 21.6 x 19.1 cm

(AJH.16048)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Fencing mask 11, 2018
Fencing mask, mixed media
13 1/2 x 8 1/4 x 7 3/4 inches
34.3 x 21 x 19.7 cm
(AJH.16049)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Fencing mask 12, 2018
Fencing mask, mixed media, unique
14 3/4 x 8 1/2 x 9 inches
37.5 x 21.6 x 22.9 cm
(AJH.16050)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Yard Sign VIII (Wicked Problem), 2018
Acrylic on canvas
44 x 24 inches
111.8 x 61 cm
(AJH.15797)



Allison Janæ Hamilton
Three girls in sabal palm forest III, 2019
Archival Pigment Print
24 x 36 inches
Edition of 5, with 2AP
(AJH.16754)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Sisters, Wakulla County FL, 2019
Archival Pigment Print
24 x 36 inches
Edition of 5, with 2AP
(AJH.16755)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Floridawater I, 2019
Archival Pigment Print
24 x 36 inches
Edition of 5, with 2AP
(AJH.16752)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Floridawater III, 2019
Archival Pigment Print
24 x 36 inches
Edition of 5, with 2AP
(AJH.16753)



Allison Janae Hamilton

Wakulla Cathedral, 2019

Single-channel video on monitor, 03:25 min.

Video stills

Edition of 5, with 2AP

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/525778058/b1ad5a8a4e>



INSTALLATION VIEW, MOOD: STUDIO MUSEUM ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE 2018-2019
MOMA PS1, QUEENS, NY
JUNE 9 – SEPTEMBER 8, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton
Blackwater Creature II, 2019
Mixed media
(Feathers, wood, hair, resin, metal)
13 x 62 x 90 inches
(AJH.16765)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Yard Sign with White Feathers, 2019
Mixed media on panel
54 x 32 x 8 inches
137.2 x 81.3 x 20.3 cm
(AJH.16767)





Allison Janae Hamilton

A Pale Horse, 2021

Single-channel video projection

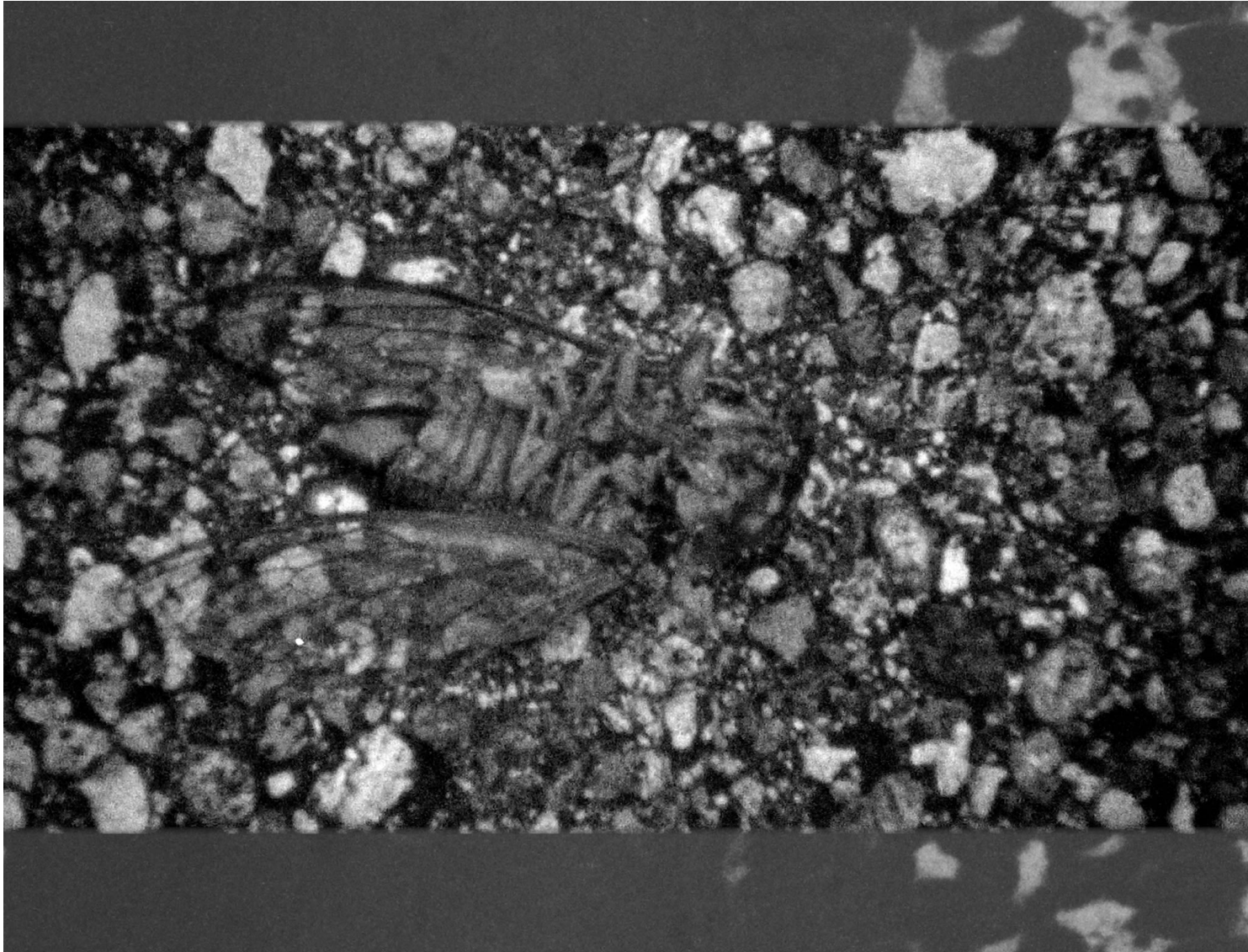
Total runtime: 3:02 minutes

Variable dimensions

Edition of 5 plus 2 AP

(AJH.18351)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/522105638/6d0c9c557b>



Allison Janae Hamilton

Lemon Tree, 2021

Single-channel video (8mm film)

Total runtime: 6:00 minutes

Variable dimensions

Edition of 3 plus 2 AP

(AJH.18384)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/522105790/bbb9e9b11a>



Allison Janae Hamilton

Waters of a Lower Register, 2020

Five-channel video, 13:42 min

Video Still

Edition of 5, with 2 AP

(AJH.17967)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/552594354/5bbbe720e9>



INSTALLATION VIEW, *WATERS OF A LOWER REGISTER*
CREATIVE TIME NEW YORK
DECEMBER 16 – 20, 2020

Allison Janae Hamilton
Waters of a Lower Register, 2020
Five-channel video, Total runtime: 13:42.
Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/491840089/7d817acb33>



INSTALLATION VIEW, *WATERS OF A LOWER REGISTER*
CREATIVE TIME NEW YORK
DECEMBER 16 – 20, 2020

Allison Janae Hamilton
Waters of a Lower Register, 2020
Five-channel video, Total runtime: 13:42.
Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/491840089/7d817acb33>



Allison Janae Hamilton

Wacissa, 2019

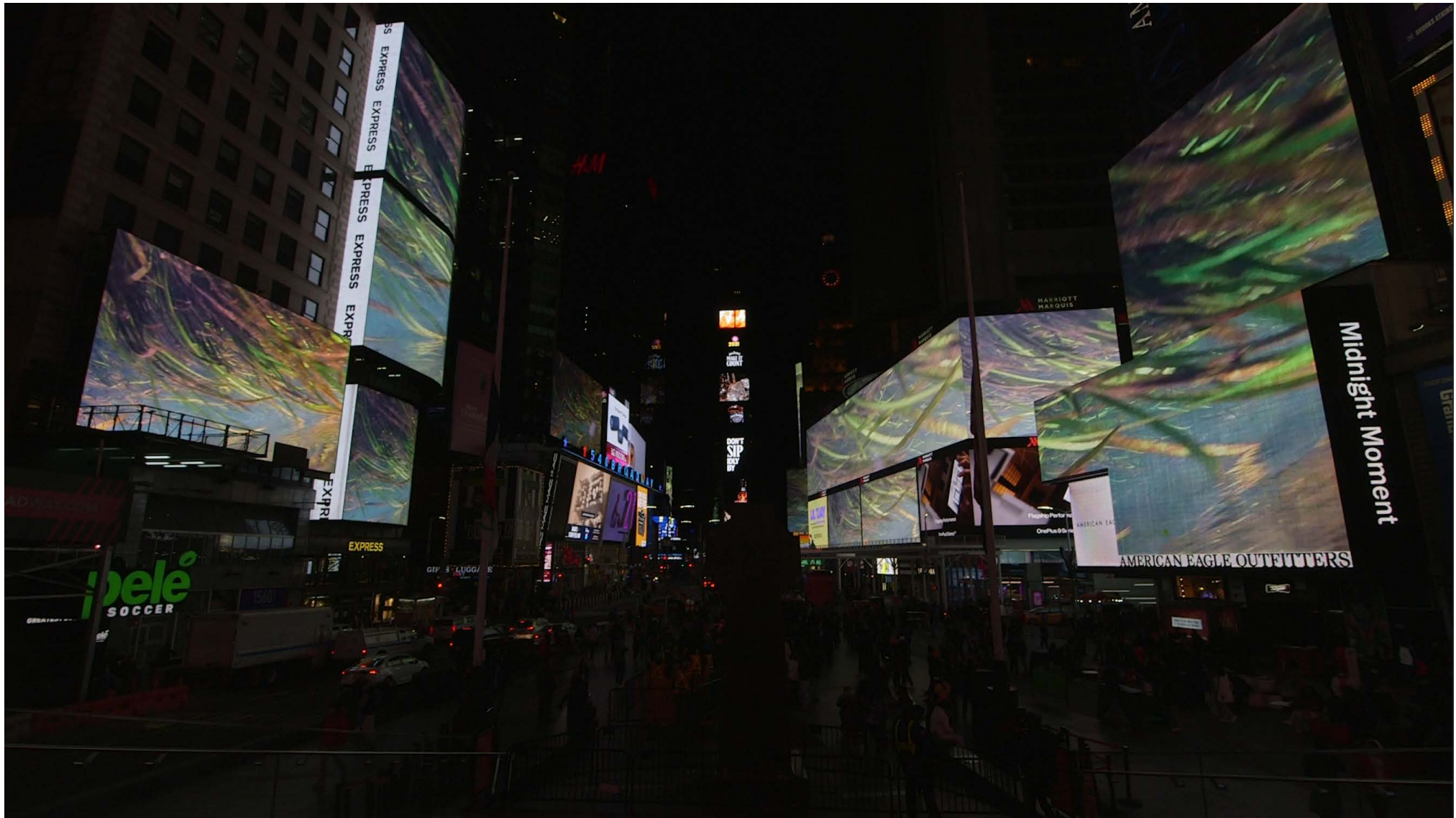
Single-channel video projection, 22:14 min.

Video still

Edition of 5, with 2AP

(AJH.16785)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/525824751/6e12426f61>



INSTALLATION VIEW, WACISSA
MIDNIGHT MOMENT – TIMES SQUARE ARTS, NEW YORK, NY
MARCH 27 – APRIL 24, 2021

Allison Janae Hamilton

Wacissa, 2019

Single-channel video projection, 22:14 min.

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/538868097/2dc8397e4e>



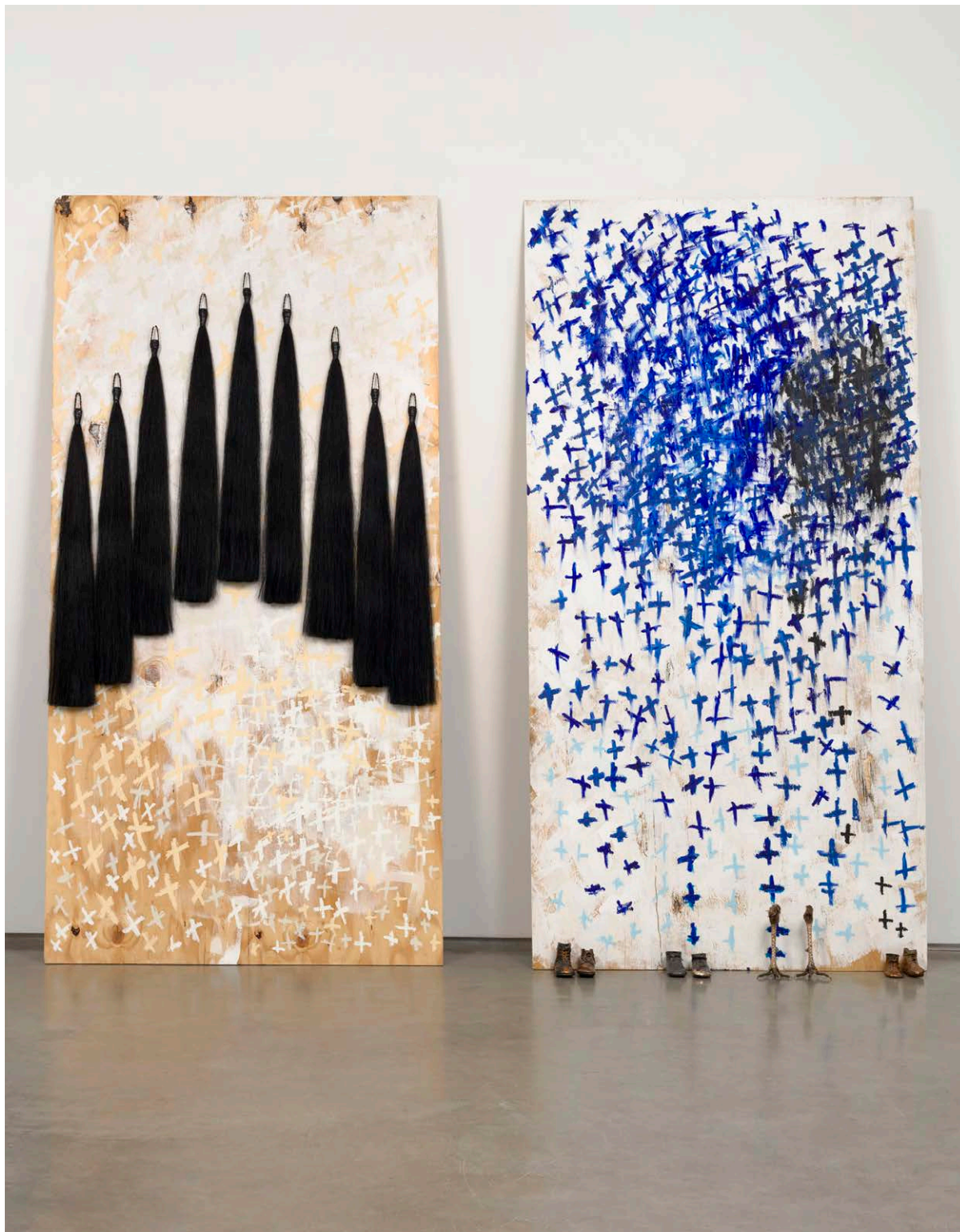
INSTALLATION VIEW, *MORE, MORE, MORE*
TANK SHANGHAI
JULY 16, 2020 – JANUARY 31, 2021

Allison Janae Hamilton

Wacissa, 2019

Single-channel video projection, 22:14 min.

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/525824751/6e12426f61>



Allison Janae Hamilton
Yard Sign with Yellow and White Constellation,
Yard Sign with Blue Constellation, 2019
Mixed media on panel
Overall dimensions: 96 x 104 inches
243.8 x 243.8 cm
(AJH.16787)



Allison Janae Hamilton
Brecencia and Pheasant II, 2015
Archival pigment print
24 x 36 inches
61 x 91.4 cm
Edition of 7, with 2 AP
40 x 60 inches
101.6 x 152.4 cm
Edition of 5, with 2 AP
(AJH.16757)



Allison Janae Hamilton

The Hours., 2015

From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*

Archival Pigment Print

24 x 36 inches

61 x 91.4 cm

Edition of 7 + 2AP

40 x 60 inches

101.6 x 152.4 cm

Edition of 5 + 2AP



Allison Janae Hamilton

Scratching at the wrong side of firmament., 2015

From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*

Archival Pigment Print

24 x 36 inches

61 x 91.4 cm

Edition of 7, with 2AP

40 x 60 inches

101.6 x 152.4 cm

Edition of 5, with 2AP



Allison Janae Hamilton

When the wind has teeth., 2015

From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*

Archival Pigment Print

24 x 36 inches

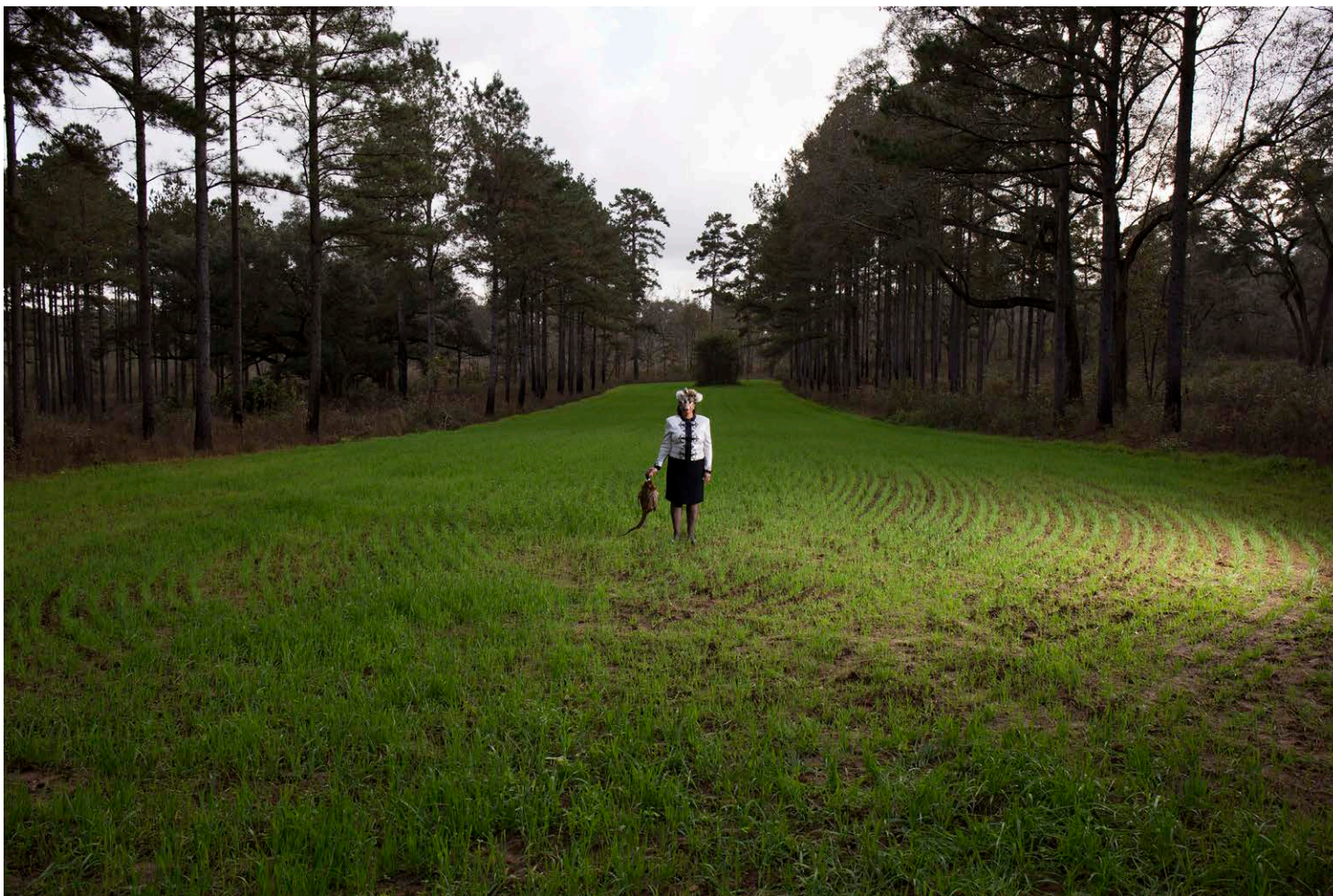
61 x 91.4 cm

Edition of 7, with 2AP

40 x 60 inches

101.6 x 152.4 cm

Edition of 5, with 2AP



Allison Janae Hamilton

Brecencia and Pheasant III., 2018

From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*

Archival Pigment Print

24 x 36 inches

61 x 91.4 cm

Edition of 7, with 2AP

40 x 60 inches

101.6 x 152.4 cm

Edition of 5, with 2AP



Allison Janae Hamilton

Dollbaby standing in the orchard at midday., 2015

From the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*

Archival Pigment Print

24 x 36 inches

61 x 91.4 cm

Edition of 7, with 2AP

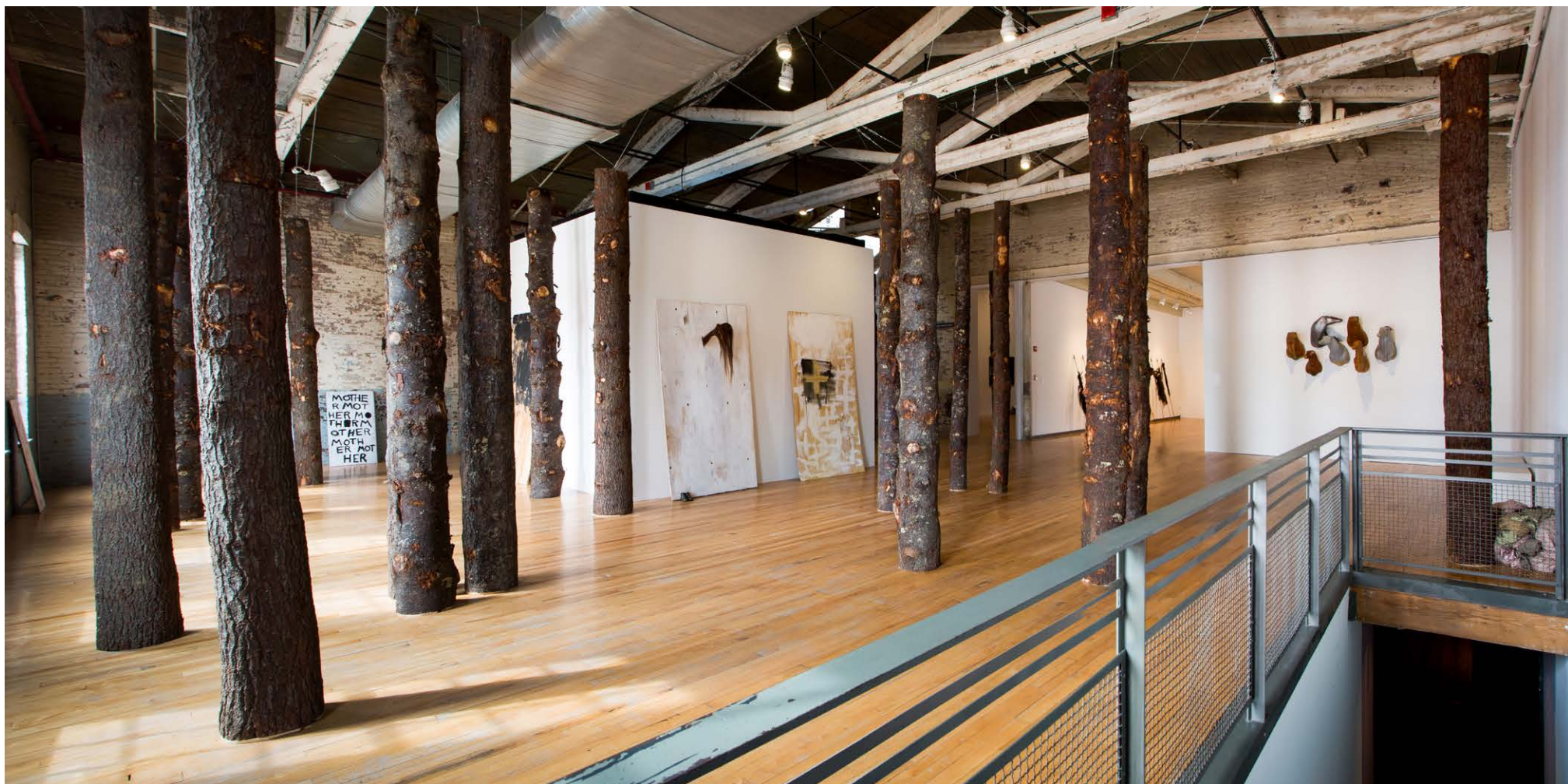
40 x 60 inches

101.6 x 152.4 cm

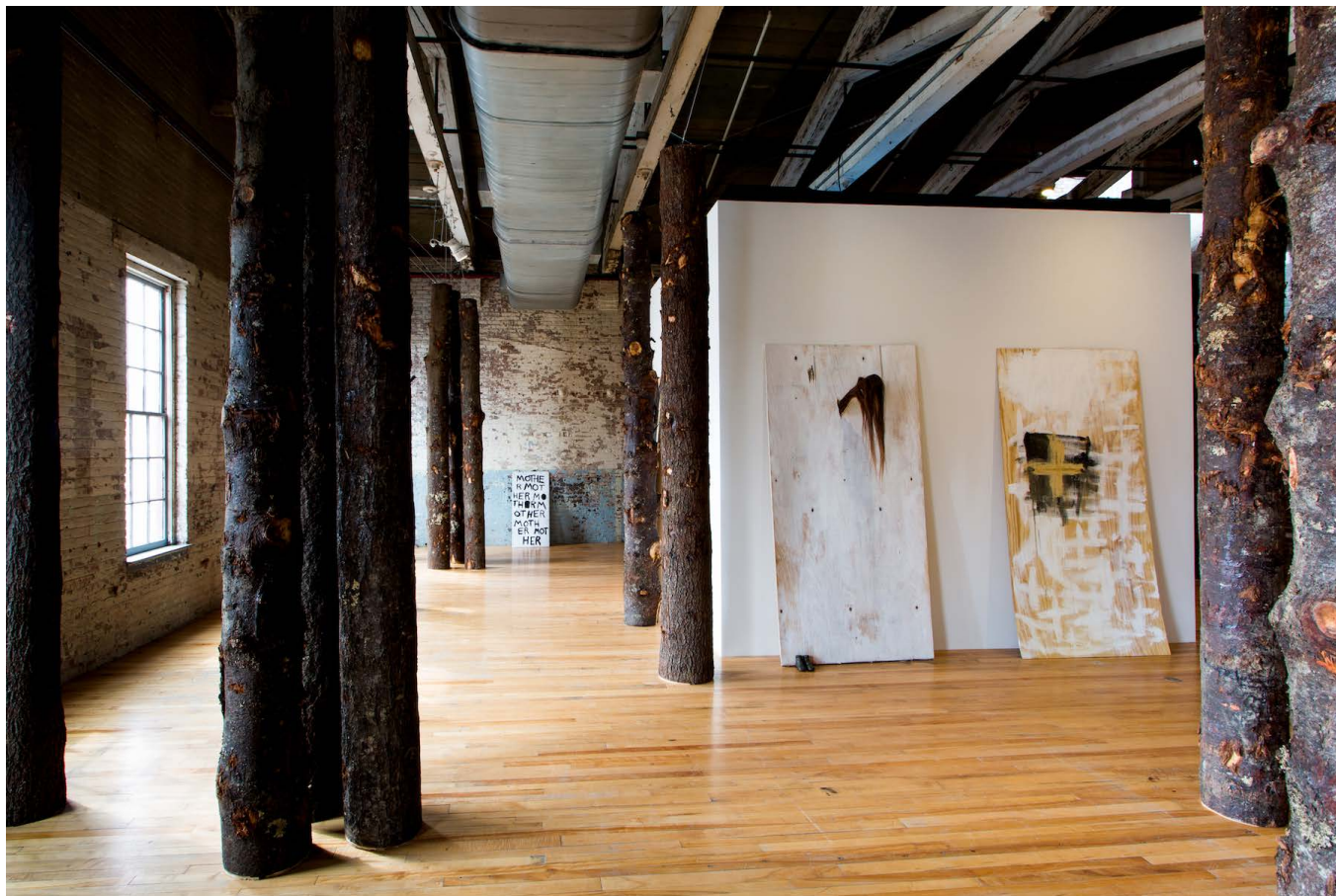
Edition of 5, with 2AP



Allison Janae Hamilton
*Metal Tambourines in churchyard
covered with snakeskins.*, 2015
Archival Pigment Print
40 x 60 inches
101.6 x 152.4 cm
Edition of 5, with 2AP
24 x 36 inches
61 x 91.4 cm
Edition of 7, with 2AP
(AJH.17203)



INSTALLATION VIEW, *ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON: PITCH*
MASS MOCA, NORTH ADAMS, MA
MARCH 25, 2018 – MARCH 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

Yard Sign I, 2018

Yard Sign IV, 2018

Mixed media on wood panel

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton
Yard Sign VII (Mother), 2018
Mixed media on wood panel

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

Pink Creature I, 2018

Pink Creature II, 2018

Fabric, resin, mixed media

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton
Seven Creatures, 2017
Foam, mixed media

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



INSTALLATION VIEW, *ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON: PITCH*
MASS MOCA, NORTH ADAMS, MA
MARCH 25, 2018 – MARCH 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

Untitled (Ouroboros), 2017

Alligators carcasses, foam, mixed media

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

Wrought iron and horse hair spears, 2016

Wrought iron rods, horse hair

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton
Fencing masks, 2018
Fencing masks, mixed media

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

FLORIDALAND, 2017/2018

Multi-channel video

Total runtime: 7:46 minutes

Variable dimensions

Edition of 5, with 2AP

(AJH.17200)

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/504498730/1ec1a80164>



Allison Janae Hamilton

FLORIDALAND, 2017/2018

Multi-channel video

Total runtime: 7:46 minutes

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/504498730/1ec1a80164>

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

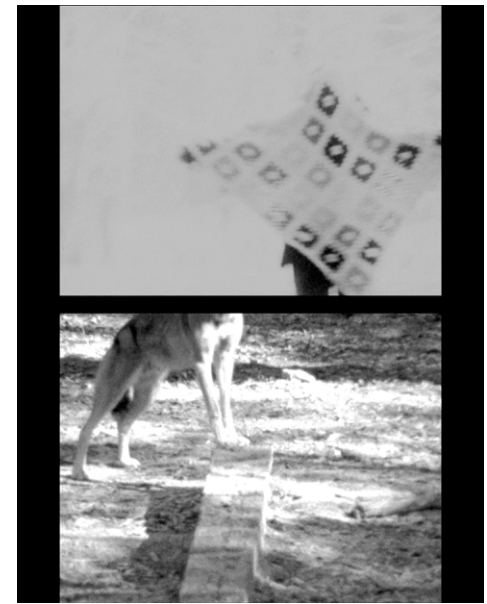
FLORIDALAND, 2017/2018

Multi-channel video

Total runtime: 7:46 minutes

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/504498730/1ec1a80164>

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

Red Wolf, 2018

Two channel video, 1:22 mins

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/525824708/e46f6c8d49>

From the exhibition *Allison Janae Hamilton: Pitch*
On view at MASS MoCA March 25, 2018 – March 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton

The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm, 2018

Tambourines and steel armature

From the exhibition *Indicators: Artists On Climate Change*
On view at Storm King Art Center May 19 – November 11, 2018



Allison Janae Hamilton

The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm, 2018

Tambourines and steel armature

From the exhibition *Indicators: Artists On Climate Change*
On view at Storm King Art Center May 19 – November 11, 2018



Allison Janae Hamilton

Epos: soundscape for thousands, 2018

Live performance activation of *The people cried mer-cy in the storm*

From the exhibition *Indicators: Artists On Climate Change*
On view at Storm King Art Center May 19 – November 11, 2018



Allison Janae Hamilton

Epos: soundscape for thousands, 2018

Live performance activation of *The people cried mer-cy in the storm*

From the exhibition *Indicators: Artists On Climate Change*
On view at Storm King Art Center May 19 – November 11, 2018



Allison Janae Hamilton

Wonder Room, 2017

Participatory Installation featuring sculpture, video, and mixed media
Link to project website: <http://www.recessart.org/allisonjanaehamilton/>
On view at Recess (New York, NY), May 27 – July 9, 2017



Allison Janae Hamilton

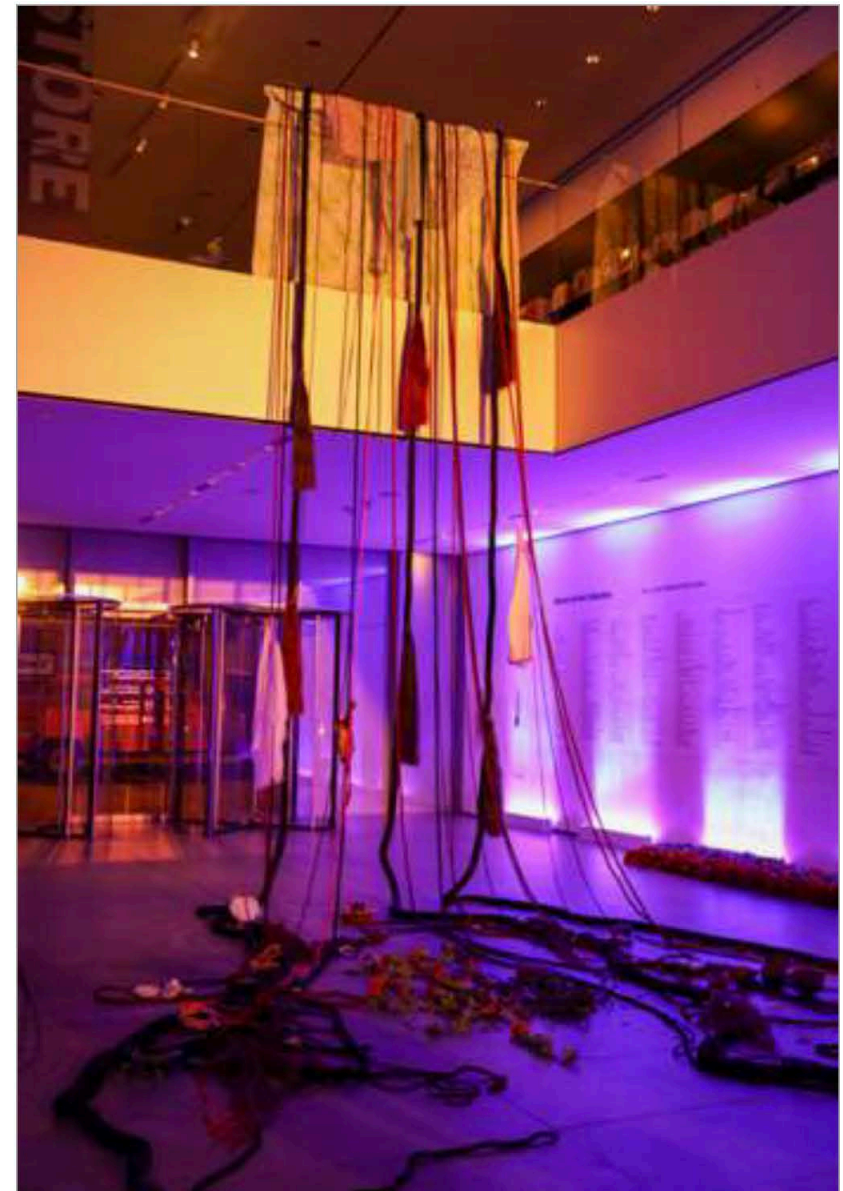
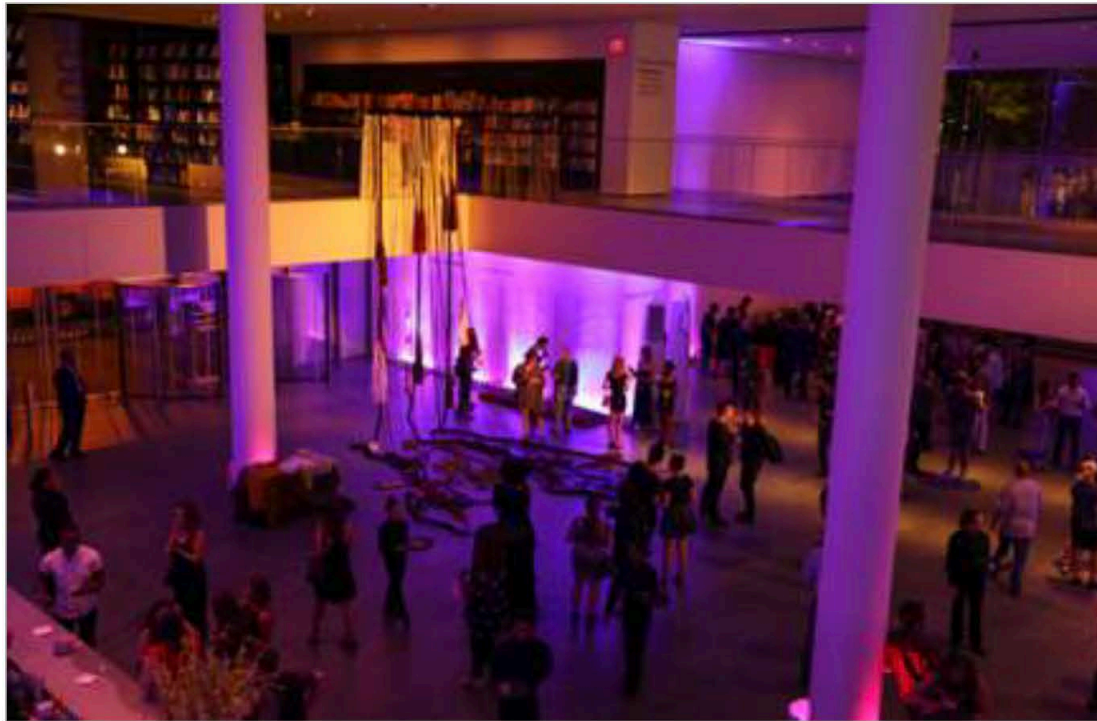
Foresta, 2017

Mixed media installation

Birch logs, wrought iron fence posts, taxidermy forms, horse manes, tambourines, clothing, and regalia

From the exhibition *Fictions*

Installed at the Studio Museum in Harlem, September 14, 2017 – January 15, 2018



Allison Janae Hamilton
Altar/Alter: A Ritual of Mythos, 2016

Participatory mixed media installation
 On view at the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), September 2016

SELECTED PRESS

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ALLISON JANAЕ HAMILTON WITH YASI ALIPOUR

BY YASI ALIPOUR | APRIL 7, 2021

My first encounter with Allison Janae Hamilton was years ago. Allison entered the room with a kind smile and one of her iconic hats. She sat down and spoke slowly and gently. Her words were honest, grounded, and full of wisdom. She had just returned from a residency run by Joan Jonas.

This was my orientation to Columbia's MFA program where we became classmates. Over the years, Allison has continuously moved and inspired me: from her early video-piece *FLORIDALAND* (2017/2018) and the powerful image of her body becoming a mythical figure with a bird mask riding a white horse; to her critical commitment to Climate Change through a lens that faces the entanglement of the crisis with the social inequalities of our past and present.

I met with Allison Janae Hamilton as she was preparing for her inaugural solo exhibition with Marianne Boesky, *A Romance of Paradise*. Traveling through Zoom, I caught up with Allison in her Florida studio. We were surrounded by the pieces of this exhibition and the dense soundscape of the land that is at the heart of Allison's work. In what follows, we journey through "A Romance of Paradise" and Allison's multidisciplinary practice, as she tells us about her family's farm, the rivers, her Black south, violent myths, and "The land as participant, as history, and as culture."

Yasi Alipour (Rail): It is so exciting to catch up as you prepare for your upcoming exhibition at Marianne Boesky, *A Romance of Paradise*. I'm finally having a chance to visit your studio, alas, only through Zoom. To get us started, I want us to focus on a critical aspect of your practice: your relationship with the land. In your work, whether it is your photographs, videos, installations, or even sonic collaborations, the surrounding landscape is not merely a backdrop. It is the main character. The land is the homestead, it becomes a place—instead of empty space. You draw a lot of your inspirations from your lived experience and ancestral relationship with the American South. In your work, the landscape can be as literal as your childhood memories of the family's farm or as philosophical as the rituals, stories, and questions shared among the African diasporic experience.

Allison Janae Hamilton: A lot of it is just part of my biography. I grew up in the South. I was born in Kentucky and raised in Florida. My mom's side of the family has a farm in Tennessee. My mom's family business was the farm. We still have it, and my grandma still lives there. Growing up every planting and harvest season, we were up there helping. As my school friends were going on vacation on their break, we would pick beans. We would go up to Tennessee to help. My paternal side of the family is from the Carolinas. So, I grew up having this interesting hybrid relationship to different types of landscapes. And growing up in Florida, a hurricane



state, you're hyper-aware of environmental pressures and the vulnerability of the landscape. Being at sea level and having canals and swamps everywhere, you are intimately connected to the terrific part of the landscape, and I mean that in both senses of that word. How powerful it is. And then, in Tennessee, I was instilled with an understanding of cultivating the land. The land as participant, as history, and as culture. It just was what it was; I didn't think about it until I moved to New York City after graduating college. I had never been around a critical mass of Black folks from the North before. Many Black families have that great migration story. But on both sides of my family, I'm from the part of the family that stayed in the South. Moving to New York gave me another lens to look at my own experience. And I began to explore in a more observational way what was just very normal to me—and maybe even took for granted.

Rail: It's interesting because I think, at least in New York, we often discuss the Black diaspora and radical aesthetics through the narrative of uprootedness, the great migration, and the fugitive body. That's a very different relationship with the landscape. Sometimes you talk about how alienated you felt by the way the word "urban" was used as synonymous to Black.

Hamilton: My experience is land being very still, constant, and steadfast in a way because for my family, it has been. My mom's side has been in Tennessee since we got into this country; I have the slave schedules with my family name. I know exactly what plantation my family was on. I have the papers with the name of my great, great, great-grandma on it. And we've been in the same county since we've been in America, at least on that side of the family. So, my experience as a southerner—and that of my friends who are from down here—feels different than the one you described. For me, it feels like I can always come home. Even when I talk to my grandma, she's like, "When are you coming home?" For her, that means Tennessee. And in the context of this pandemic, deciding to leave New York City at the beginning of this crisis, I knew that I could come down to Florida temporarily. For me, the land is kind of this place. When I go home, my grandmother's house smells the same as it smelled when I was four years old. The land, all the different barns and sheds, and places I used to run and play hide and seek with my cousins, they're all still there. It's always been that way. My grandma's 90, and then I have old photos of when she was a little girl. So much is the same. Same trees! It's the same land. My great-grandfather bought that farm there in the '30s. So, for me, it's a very familiar and familial relationship. There's this kind of cyclical, circular, seasonal sensibility that is the agrarian lifestyle. Things always are coming back around to the beginning of that again. So really—for better, or for worse, for all these different, interesting, and intricate ways—there's a lot of sameness and a lot of constancy in my particular experience.

Rail: This makes me want to hear more about the word "paradise" in the title of this exhibition.

Hamilton: I was thinking about the denotation of that word as it once was commonly used. Now when we think of paradise, we think of tourism and travel, a drink with an umbrella in it. But I'm really thinking about that original use of the word. Paradise meaning heaven. When early explorers came down here, some of them literally thought that the Garden of Eden was here in America. Growing up as an American kid in school, we all learned about Manifest Destiny, this idea that bolstered and rationalized this violent expansion westward. But different regions in this country also had these myths to justify the violent conquering of different landscapes, and the snatching of people from another landscape, and bringing them to work those particular, conquered landscapes. There are all these myths, ideas, and narratives to market something horrible into something palatable and justifiable. So, early on, there was this idea of the American South as heavenly, as fertile, as rich. There was this idea of this possibility that was wrapped up in this experience

of heaven. Almost like this new afterlife, rich with potential. But that potential was agriculture and forcing people to cultivate this "unruly," swampy place. Those stories are metaphors for this landscape that was ready to be tamed. I'm exploring these myths that allowed the South to be cultivated, for this violent exploitation of people forced to labor on it, and the people for whom, in the aftermath of that, this land is now home. My work is an exploration of what all that means, and what it means today. A lot of people categorize the South as this place stuck in history, but for me, all these myths, all these metaphors, all these historical actions have a bearing on today's lived experience. I'm really thinking about that original idea of paradise but propelling it forward. Dragging the examination of that myth into today so that we can see what the through lines are, particularly in the face of climate change and environmental injustices.

Rail: In thinking about how your work approaches the urgent issue of global warming, my mind goes instantly to your pieces that focus on bodies of water. In your recent video installation—that will be on view in Time Square Arts Midnight Moment this April—the water takes over. *Wacissa* (2019) is so movingly disorienting. One wonders: are we drowning or flying? This water is so beautiful and incredibly powerful. Maybe, as you said, it is terrific in both senses of the word. In this exhibition, you also have the video *A Pale Horse* (2021). We look down at the sky as it is reflected on the surfaces of the water. Insects slowly sit on the water, creating these subtle ripples on the surface. I was really captivated by this fleeting moment. As we were just discussing, in your work you unearth the myths of history, and at the same time you make them meet with the intense urgency of today's happening. Here, the South is not merely the past. In a similar manner, when you discuss climate change and environmental injustice, you refuse to view the crisis as located in the distant future. You face climate change as the disaster that is very much of the here and now.

Hamilton: The thing about *Wacissa* is that there are two things kind of happening at once that I was thinking about. Hurricane Michael had just hit down here a few months before I shot that video. That's why in the video, there are trees that are in the water. It's like, wait, that's a tree, it's on top of the video frame, but it's on the floor of the river. It's this disorienting thing. That hurricane was really late in the season for us. It's interesting to think about what's going to happen when these storms get more and more violent, more and more frequent, longer and longer seasons. Growing up in Florida, it used to be rare to get a category four. And now it's like fours and fives all the time. So *Wacissa* is looking at that. My work resists the idea of climate change being this future thing. It also resists climate change being universal because it's not going to affect everybody the same, and it's not affecting everybody the same. The *Wacissa* River is part of this river system that was cut through by the slave canal. And as the name suggests, the slave canal was dug out by the labor of enslaved Black folks here in Florida. The purpose was to bring cotton from Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico. But as soon as it finished, the railroad came to town, so it never really got used for its intended purpose. I was riding through that particular river system that has this history of violent labor, and I'm showing the aftermath of this hurricane.

These two things are coming together in Wacissa. There's a current reality of people living here, but how it's affecting and will always have the affectation of historical impetus.

Rail: You know, you often talk about the murkiness of that body of water. I can't help but think about Glissant's opacity. Another element that seems so key to your practice is storytelling. You draw your inspiration from myths, lore, superstitions, even mundane conversations among the women in your family. The echo of history that you were discussing in your work is not the kind of history that one finds in textbooks; it's the intense truth that can only be passed down through stories told over generations. In some of your last bodies of work, the main character was these young Black girls—daughter of one of your friends. You and your mother have been in a bunch of your works. Now in *A Romance of Paradise*, you have these recent photographs that focus on older women. That feels so important.

Hamilton: The figures in the new photographs read as middle-aged Black women. I've been quarantining here in the South during much of the past election year. I was in New York during the Democratic primary season. And it was an interesting experience. I consider myself a progressive, but when the South Carolina primary happened, and everyone knew that was probably going to be Biden's comeback, I heard and read a lot of New York progressives referring to South Carolina Democratic voters as "low information voters," or questioning why there was such an early Democratic primary in the South at all. It felt like a code. The South Carolina primary is known for galvanizing that kind of traditional, older, churchgoing Black voter, particularly Black women. It's traditionally more of a moderate vote, generally speaking. Agree or disagree politically, those voters are not low information voters. And so then fast forward, and I'm down here at home in the South—in the Big Bend area of Florida—during the general election season. I'm a 15-minute drive from the Georgia border. So when the senate runoff happened, every commercial break was an ad for the Georgia runoff. It was a really intense few weeks. And then after that election, everyone's like, "Oh my god, thank you, Black women, for saving America. Thank you, Stacey Abrams; Black women saved the day. Thank goodness for Black voters in Georgia ..." And so, I thought, "Wait a minute, a few months ago, the Black Southern voters were low information voters. And now the same people are saying they're saving America? Which one is it?" I keep thinking, these are very high information voters, not to mention lived experience, you know? That was all fascinating to me. I was thinking a lot about that and this erasure of Black women of a particular age, and this dismissal and then adoration based on political convenience.

Rail: So true.

Hamilton: It's my mom and all my aunties and my godmother and my elder cousins, and my grandmother and the women in my family and community that can be thrown away one minute and adored the next minute; I just feel like there's

something to that that I wanted to explore. Also, part of it was practical. We were here in the pandemic in quarantine. So, I also was able to work with family and friends we had already been sort of bubbled up with.

Rail: When I saw the new photos, I instantly thought about generational conversations. I don't know, to me, these days, it feels ever more important to think about these sorts of conversations while thinking about marginality and histories of oppression. To understand the lived experience and the complexity of their survival? And these dialogues can be messy, can be intense; they can be filled with passionate disagreements, and then there's also deep wisdom.

Hamilton: That lived experience gets folded into ideology. You know?

Rail: Yeah, totally. The women in your photographs are so amazing. They are so deeply generous and vulnerable with you.

Hamilton: Yeah. There is a vulnerability and there is an inner power at the same time.

Rail: Yeah.

Hamilton: I love a couple of those facial expressions. It's like really no-nonsense, and a softness.

Rail: This brings me to our earlier discussion about the past. Something that I find really moving about your work is how you allude to different rituals—from the southern Black church to Hoodoo. This feels so key to how your works explore and flirt with storytelling, narratives, and even fragmentation.

Hamilton: I mean a lot of that is bound up with the land and the ways that landscape operates in the context of healing, and of ritual. That is one way that the concept of land in my work connects to other parts of the Black diaspora—through the ritual practice of land, and through intimate connections to nature. The ways that the land operates as a mechanism of agency, not only as a burden. In the US context, Hoodoo is a big part of that. And I draw from those rituals, patterns, and habits I witnessed from my elders growing up. Sometimes I draw from fragments of family lore—like my great grandfather having visions of a headless horseman, or my grandmother's sister killing all of the peach trees when they were forced off of their land prior to settling on their second farm in the '30s that we still have today. Black American nature writing operates as a similar influence for me. Particularly Richard Wright's collection of haiku. I've always been inspired by those poems—they are my favorite collection of poetry. I titled the photographs in *A Romance of Paradise* as an homage to that body of literature. I'm curious about the multiple, complex, and sometimes conflicting meanings that landscape and nature has in the context of my own culture, as well as throughout the world.

Rail: That's so powerful. Sometimes in your talks and interviews, you share a few of these "stories." One that I found incredibly moving was what your grandmother told you about the story of the lost farm, your aunt, and the killing of the peach tree.

Hamilton: Yes, my grandmother's sister.

Rail: Right.

Hamilton: The peach tree is killed out of this defiant act. But it's also a sorrowful act. We think of the peach tree as something sweet, something that represents the height of summer and leisure. A sweet respite in the middle of those dog days of summer. I wanted to capture that conflicting emotional resonance. For a lot of my process, a story of that sort becomes the jumping-off point. Someone might view one of my artworks and think, "this has a heaviness to it," but I never really outlined or explained the full story to the viewer. I have these storylines or narratives within the work that are really just for me, at least for now. They're my organizing system. The viewer really gets the emotional resonance of it, not the cover-to-cover story. I like the audience to feel like they've been just dropped in the middle of something. Maybe something horrific has just happened, or is about to happen. Or, maybe something joyful or ecstatic. I want the viewer to feel dropped into a mid-point, destabilized. I like for the observer to be a bit cut off from the whole storyline and left with an abstraction, and they're forced to orient themselves, whether that happens in linear fashion or not.

Rail: A good friend of mine that is a Latinx anthropologist argued once that you couldn't be merely an observer for a ritual, you are either in it, or you have missed it. This makes me think about how your work drops the viewers in the middle. It's so committed to the effect of history, the act of storytelling, and refusing a Western "linear" retelling. There's something like an "utterance" in your work—utterance as an act that is in language but can never be contained by it.

Hamilton: The work isn't meant to be didactic. It's not a history lesson. It's more like, here's the emotional resonance I'm exploring in my attempt to think through where we are now—and then positioning the landscape as the main thrust of the work. And that's a narrative in and of itself because there is a history of the landscape, and there is a contemporary reality to the landscape. And then I am kind of taking bits and pieces of that and collaging together, hitting you with past, present, and future all at once. It's kind of a choose your own adventure. You know those books from the '90s? You can get really into the storyline, and some of the characters repeat. They have names, habits, and characteristics, but I don't present all that for the viewer. And whatever the viewer gets from it, they get from it. But going back to this idea of paradise, the main thing is that this is a place that has been seen as this rich, beautiful, pleasurable landscape. And yet, there is a foundation to it that is terrific! As in, causing terror. There's a haunting quality to it. And that is all existing at the

same time. The folks that have been people who have been the most vulnerable on this landscape—and who continued to be—also find this place home. They have used the landscape for their own ritual, their own healing practices, modalities, their own medicine, and their own spiritual rituals. So, it's the land. The Southern land is not just this thing to be afraid of; it doesn't only present the obvious.

Rail: This refusal to reduce things to only the obvious! I was watching your recent talk around the immersive video installation you did with Creative Time in Brooklyn Heights, *Waters of a Lower Register* (2020). You said you were eager to see how its sound element would interact with the soundscape of New York, like the honking cabs. It made me think about what is considered as silence in each of these landscapes. Sometimes you discuss that people ignore the kind of knowledge your mom or your aunt has of climate change. It's a knowledge that is lived experience, that is corporeal, that is about hearing the sounds that have been lost, silenced. Sound is such a key element in your work. As someone who grew up and only has lived in metropolitans, the honking you mentioned has been surrounding me my entire life. But I've learned not to hear the cityscape, learned to tune out all of New York. But in this work, you created this intense meeting between the two landscapes, bodies of water, and their sound! It's disorienting and moving. I heard what I had considered as my "silence." Can you talk to us about sound?

Hamilton: It's funny that you say that because we've been doing all these Zoom visits during the pandemic. I jokingly call my hometown "Jurassic Park," especially in the summer, because it is completely overflowing with wildlife. And for everyone here, that's just part of the way of life. We accept it. It's just like this. This is swamp country. And if you choose to live here, you choose to live with the swamp. All year, I have had these Zoom studio visits, and a frog will hop into the studio or a feral rabbit will go by, or some insect will fly in. One time I was showing a video during a Zoom call, and it was about to rain. So, the birds were super loud. Someone said, "Wow, there are a lot of birds in that video." I was like, "Actually, no, that's just the environment I'm in right now ... it is what it is." [Laughter] So sound, that's just what it is. I always remember being a kid, flying into Memphis or Nashville and then driving what felt like forever to get to the farm, when you pull up in my grandma's driveway and get out of the car. When you close the car door, it is like a sound vacuum. It sounds like when you drop a ball in a jar. It is so rural and so spread out that it sounds like you're on the moon. And then when you hear the bird, it's like a piercing sound. But here in North Florida, it's ubiquitous, global, a total orchestra of crickets, frogs, birds, you name it. Now I'm used to hearing New York's sirens, traffic, and other audible signs of city life. It's a soundscape of its own. But when I first moved here, the first night, I cried because the city sounds were so overwhelming, I called my mom and I was like, "I'm never going to fall asleep here!" [Laughs]

Rail: Do you think you would recognize the sound of your home? Like a recording of it?

Hamilton: Yeah, yeah. 100 percent yeah.

Rail: There's something very visceral about that.

Hamilton: I feel like most Floridians will tell you yes, whether they're from the south, central, or north parts of the state.

Rail: It hit me only recently that I can recognize the soundscape of Tehran in a heartbeat. Which is curious cause it is simply another big messy city with a lot of noise, but somehow, it feels like my body just knows it when it's my hometown. I keep thinking about this performance by John Cage and Sun Ra in New York. How they both think so much about silence and how they each related to this city. When they play together, one can almost sense how different silence is for each of them.

Hamilton: That's fascinating. The photographs in *A Romance of Paradise* have some influence from Sun Ra and George Clinton. People associate figures like Sun Ra, or George Clinton, with the North. And they both grew up in the Black Baptist Church in the South, just like I did. Sun Ra is from Birmingham, Alabama and George Clinton was born in Kannapolis, North Carolina. But George Clinton now lives right down the road from here, in North Florida. He's been here since the '90s. My point is that there's an erasure of their Southern-ness in most discourse around their work. When I listen to Sun Ra or any of those types of figures, I hear the South. I hear the Black Church; I hear the sound that I grew up with. That's something that, to me, that really resonates, particularly with Sun Ra.

Rail: And thinking about this relationship between sound and the memory of a place, I wanted to ask you about your relationship to installation, especially your immersive installations.

Hamilton: Sometimes I do a literal installation piece, and you're meant to be immersed in this landscape. You're taken up by it physically. And then other times, like in this show, there are individual works, but there exists an immersive quality to it. I'm from a landscape that is all-encompassing. One that is total. A big moth just flew on to one of my sculptures just now. [Laughter] My experience with the land is immersive, even if it is the immersion into silence like what I experience on my family's farm in Tennessee. And the landscape totally makes up for it in other ways like the immensity of the stars out there; you feel like you can literally touch them. I just remember going to the farm and sitting out on the porch, and the stars feel like they're low, it is like, drama! And the drama of that makes up for any lack of sound. Or down here in Florida, you have this feeling of being just completely turned over to the summer, heat, and humidity that is so oppressive. There is a feeling of being sucked into this swampy, balmy landscape. There are just so many things about the Southern landscape that are so dramatic. The drama of that is something I've tried to bring into the work.

Rail: It's so moving to hear you talk about the landscapes, the nuances, the difference, the intensity. To move towards your sculptural work, I wanted to begin with the "Yard Signs." I know you have deep knowledge, appreciation, and respect for the vernacular of the Black Southern "outsider" artists who have explored this format. Looking at your "Yard Signs," I see that influence but at the same time, you give us these pieces that are so uniquely yours as they float between, sculpture, painting, and poetry. I guess that's what I meant by utterance rather than translation, or story telling rather than history writing.

Hamilton: I don't want to be representative. I have this one experience and I'm literally drawing from what I know. I'm staying in my lane. I don't want to speak for the South; I don't want to speak for any one particular Black American experience. I flesh things out from my own experience. I don't want to translate because I'm not going to translate it the same way my mom or my brother or my grandmother would. I'm not even going to try. I'm threading the historical narratives I've studied, the experiences that I've had, the family histories that I've heard passed down from my elders, the visceral experience, the sonic experiences. I'm threading it through a narrative that is partially tangible, partially archetypal and mythic.

Rail: I think what is so generous about your work is also how willing you are to give us the complexity of things.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Rail: To expand on your relationship with the landscape, history, narratives, and your own lived experience, I want to ask you about the importance of embodiment. I am thinking about some of your most iconic sculptural work, the "Creatures" and the "Masks" series. In the "Creatures," the animal forms become nearly allegorical. And you turn the fencing masks into these beautifully excessive customs.

Hamilton: Yeah, embodiment is a huge part of the work. I think some of that does come from my previous background in costume design. I am very aware of what the body is doing, whether I'm performing in the work or a family member. And it's always really interesting—I'm talking about photos and videos now—because I tell my family, "It's not you, it's a character." And sometimes, they get really into it. And then I'll put myself in work. It really started out of necessity because the first time I asked my mom, my grandma, my god mom to be in one of my early photography series, and only my mom said yes. I'd come all the way down to North Florida from NYC and didn't want to return with only one character in the portraits, so I decided to use my own body in character. This was *Scratching the wrong side of firmament* (2015) and *When the wind has teeth* (2015). Before that, I never intended to put my own body in my work. And then it became more necessary when I wanted to work with horses. I was in Santander, Spain working with Joan Jonas at Fundación Botín. And in Cantabria, they have these beautiful stables along the sea. I wasn't there with any of my friends or family who had typically been characters in the work,

and because I ride horses regularly, I felt able to do it myself. Somehow, I convinced the people at the stable to let me film, in character, while riding one of their horses. So even after I did it the first time in North Florida, I wasn't necessarily planning to continue putting myself in my work. It just happened that way.

So different relationships to one's body ends up appearing throughout the work, in both conceptual and practical ways. In the images in *A Romance of Paradise*, there's almost a casual defiance and vulnerability in the figures' posturing that I love. And then with the fencing masks, there's almost the absence of a body, and you don't know if you're supposed to take these as heads or as figures or as representatives. People have told me that they look like a jury when they're lined up based on their height. I install them a bit higher than the standard gallery height so that they do look somewhat intimidating. Or the "Creatures," they are meant to be these animal-like bodies, populating this ecosystem that anchors the narrative of each body of work. That is part of the mythology. I'm fascinated by epics. The kind of dramatic tales that move from one long episode to the next and to the next. It's almost like one piece, but it's different chapters. The "Creatures" are, in some ways, like the court jesters of the story. They have a playfulness and yet also possess a heavy quality.

Rail: Thinking about their simultaneous playfulness and heaviness, I'm really drawn to what feels like precariousness in your work. I'm thinking about the body and the way you discuss political knowledge, not as abstract thought but as lived experience. I'm also thinking literally about the story, the epic, as the tale to be told and retold. The word "romance" feels so loaded in this exhibition.

Hamilton: Yeah, to me, the word "romance" suggests an examination of the metaphor, the myth, the story, the seductiveness of these violent myths, and narratives used to justify something as horrific as American slavery, and the transatlantic slave trade in general. It's hard to find the words, the mental gymnastics, the psychological acrobatics, to justify an institution such as that. There has to be a great deal of romance to make a population feel that they have the right to control, abuse, and torture another population. In everyday use, you think of romance novels, romance poetry, rom-coms, Valentine's Day. I'm thinking about the romance of a story. The seduction involved in rationalizing something that would otherwise be understood as pure trauma and violence. So, in an attempt to get away from the horrifying quality of the facts, those in power must provide romance.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

IN BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK, ARTWORK CONFRONTS CLIMATE CHANGE

BY JANE MARGOLIES | DECEMBER 6, 2020



Those who wander the circuitous paths of Pier 3 in Brooklyn Bridge Park may be drawn to the western edge of the pier by the lapping of water. But the sounds may not be coming from the East River, which borders the site.

Rather they may be emanating from an installation of videos of lush and swampy Southern landscapes.

It will all be part of "Waters of a Lower Register," a work by the artist Allison Janae Hamilton, which will play on five 70-inch screens, beginning Dec. 16 and continuing until Dec. 20. The screens will be placed in an arc on the northwest corner of Pier 3, offering the intimacy of a screening room and the safety of an open-air setting, with the view of the Lower Manhattan skyline behind them.

Ms. Hamilton, 36, has lived in New York since 2006. "Waters of a Lower Register" focuses on the watery landscape of northern Florida, where she was raised, to explore the human-inflicted forces of climate change. Rising sea levels and violent storms affect both Florida and New York, Ms. Hamilton said. And Brooklyn Bridge Park is in a flood zone, after all.

"It's meant to be immersive," Ms. Hamilton, said by phone from Florida, where she has been holed up for much of the pandemic.

The artist is intentionally juxtaposing the rural areas of her home state with the urban cityscape of New York. But she explained that even seemingly untouched landscapes have been shaped by humans, often to the detriment of people of color. She shot some of her footage from a kayak on the Wacissa River, which was bisected by a canal built by enslaved people.

"Waters of a Lower Register" came about when Creative Time, the public art organization, had to rethink its event calendar in the early days of the pandemic, said Justine Ludwig, its executive director. Ms. Ludwig contacted Ms. Hamilton in July, and the artist seized the opportunity to create a new work that would express the turmoil of a year that has included, in addition to the health crisis, frequent hurricanes and horrific instances of racial injustice in the United States.

The video sequences take the viewer "from drowning to flying," Ms. Hamilton said, adding that it "mimics the roller coaster of this year."

The 13-minute film installation will play on a loop from 4:30 p.m. until the park closes at 1 a.m. An online talk with the artist will take place December 17 at noon.

The new work highlights the potential for Pier 3, which opened in 2018, as a site to showcase complex works of art.

Pier 1, opened in 2010, has been home to multiple temporary art installations, including Anish Kapoor's whirlpool-like "Descension" in 2017 and the giant orange bells of Davina Semo's "Reverberation," currently on view. But Pier 3 has recently proven itself a formidable outdoor gallery as well.

Earlier this year the same paved plaza at the end of the pier that Ms. Hamilton's installation will occupy was the setting for Antony Gormley's gigantic slinky-like "New York Clearing," which proved popular with parkgoers.

Placing a large artwork there "was the aha moment when it hit us that, wow, this is a fantastic place for art," said Eric Landau, president of Brooklyn Bridge Park Corporation, which runs the park.

Ms. Hamilton is curious what sounds the city itself will contribute to the experience of viewing "Waters of a Lower Register," and what will seep in. "I think it could be interesting to hear a taxicab honking" in the background, she said. "It could enhance the work perhaps in a way we don't yet know."

MOMA PS1

MOOD: STUDIO MUSEUM ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE 2018-2019

BY FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN | JUNE 9 – SEPTEMBER 8, 2019



ANCIENT HISTORIES AND NEW WORLDS: ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON

Allison Janae Hamilton creates worlds. Her lush and luscious landscapes invite you to wonder as you wander. It is a world of sound and sight, a world of motion, of tall green pine, of waterrooted cypress, a world where masked women walk, skip, dance, or ride on horseback, where reptilian figures inhabit the swamp and pheasant the forest, and we share it all with them. She at once immerses you in a past both prehistoric and postbellum, while projecting you into a future post-apocalyptic and Afrofuturist. Her work is fully imaginative, ethereal, and beautiful, but also grounded in the realities of race, history, land, economic exploitation, and the impact of climate devastation. The landscape and history that inspire much of Hamilton's work is the dense pine woods of northern Florida. As scholar/artist she is a daughter of this earth, and like her forebear, Zora Neale Hurston, she knows it well. In ethnography and fiction, Hurston was one of the first to document and write about this part of the black South, to offer firsthand accounts of the turpentine workers who lived in and traveled through the pine forests, tapping the trees for the pungent, gummy substance. As one of them told her, "Turpentine woods is kind of lonesome."¹ Hamilton builds upon this history to explore the relationship between the people and the land, between the natural world and generations of black peoples,

and between the exploitation of labor and nature. One senses, if not the "lonesome," then the solitude, the singularity of inhabiting this space. While we often place black workers, enslaved and "free," in the context of plantation slavery or cotton sharecropping, Hamilton expands our sense of the black South, of the types of labor that black people engaged in, and of the myriad cultures they produced. Northern Florida is dense and swampy, populated by a variety of bird and plant species, as well as reptiles-snakes and alligators. In this way it may remind viewers of Louisiana, but it is distinct from that better-known space. Hamilton brings this landscape into the realm of the aesthetic, and allows it to give birth to her imaginings, and in so doing makes it a mythopoetic space, much like Jean Toomer did for the red earth and pine forests of rural Georgia in *Cane*, his genre-bending novel of 1923.

Although she is in dialogue with these literary forms, Hamilton also engages with and builds upon the work of filmmakers, such as Julie Cash's *Daughters of the Oust* (1991) and Kasie Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* (1997). Both films show us the deep, magical beauty of very specific locations in South (the Sea Islands and the Louisiana Bayou), and especially of the black women who inhabit them, while also showing the limits of realism and linear narrative. For Dash, Lemmons, and Hamilton, the land is as much a part of the culture as are the food, music, and spiritual traditions that it gives birth to. Hamilton goes even further. She gives us a story, a deeply immersive one, with characters and narrative threads, but one must work to find and follow them; one cannot be a passive viewer. The more engaged we become, the more the work yields to us over time. Here she also notes the influence of the highly popular *Game of Thrones*. In this way, each exhibition is almost episodic, building upon the last, taking us deeper into the forest and the psyches of those illusive, sometimes masked, figures who dance, walk, canoe, or ride on horseback. We view a canopy of trees but also encounter actual trunks and scents, and make note of the groomed horse tail that hangs on the wall like a series of carefully curated whips. She invites us to participate in the magic-making, to join her in the act of creating.

Walking through an installation, or accompanying the artist downriver on a kayak, as the films allow viewers to do, creates an act of surveying. We may not know what has come before, but we have happened upon a landscape after disaster. There is a quiet that is disquieted. There is stillness that is haunted. A fallen tree suggests something traumatic has occurred: a storm or worse. These are ancestral grounds, one feels their presence, evoked by the ethereal figures who appear and then disappear as we wander past a still photograph or as a filmed figure gallops by. Sometimes we stumble upon the unknown, that for which we have no name, like the pink creatures (2018), flowing and folded ochre blobs, with tufts of horses' hair and pearl-adorned crowns. They are like new life forms that could have emerged from

the ocean's bottom or grown from the earth like fungi. Animal heads seem to emerge from walls, rather than having been mounted upon them, familiar yet like no animal we have ever seen. We bear witness to a new era of evolution.

In this work, Hamilton sets us in the day after the end of the world, and reminds us that all new worlds sit atop the ruins of old ones. She offers us an invitation to join her as she builds anew, ever mindful of the history that precedes us, ever open to the possibility that awaits our making.

STORM KING ART CENTER

INDICATORS: ARTISTS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

MAY 19 – NOVEMBER 11, 2018



Allison Janae Hamilton

American, b. 1984

This monumental stack of tambourines is titled after lyrics from the song “Florida Storm,” a hymn written in 1928 by Judge Jackson in response to the Great Miami Hurricane of 1926 that ravaged the artist’s home state of Florida and southeastern Alabama. The song became popular in the South after more than five thousand black migrant workers were killed when the Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 devastated Florida, an event that would later serve as a backdrop for Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The tambourine, a symbol of celebration, war, storytelling, and spirituality, conjures the various ways that Southern black communities have interfaced with storms both natural and human-caused, linking these two hurricanes of the early twentieth century with contemporary discourse on cultural perseverance.

The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm, 2018

MASS MOCA
ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON: PITCH
MARCH 25, 2018 – MARCH 17, 2019



Allison Janae Hamilton's art abounds with references to boiling swamps and impossibly tall pines, wild horses and waiting alligators, ancestral spirits and old clapboard houses. With her evocative photographs, videos, and sculptures, she draws out the soul of the Southern landscape-particularly the north Florida region that is home to her family. For Hamilton, the south is more than the stereotypes we know; it is rich with epic mythologies and everyday stories waiting to be told. Place, in her words, is made up of "tangible matter," but it is also a state of mind, a continuum that connects the past with the present and forms who we are. The work featured in Pitch highlights the power of the landscape to shape and reflect the character of its inhabitants and to articulate the complexities of lived experience in all its beauty, brutality, and fragility.

The title of both the exhibition and a new installation, Pitch draws on a number of meanings and associations. It suggests the inky black of rural nights and thick forests, as well as the sounds and music that animate the landscape. It also refers to the resin of the conifers tapped in the turpentine camps of northern Florida- an industry that bolstered the southern economy from the Jim Crow era to the 1950s and relied on the grueling labor of African-Americans. Evoking the towering pines characteristic of the area, the artist has installed a grove of trees in the gallery. Ghostlike, they conjure the real and metaphorical scars that the turpentine industry left on the environment.

Nestled within the trees, a small room contains a four-channel video titled FLORIDALAND (2017/2018). The atmospheric work envelops viewers in an intimate, kaleidoscopic experience of the landscape. Images of shimmering ponds, reflected clouds, and swirling canopies provide a backdrop for masked characters – including the artist wearing the skull of a large bird – who dance through marshy fields and roam the coast on horseback. The wild horses that still thrive on the prairies in north Florida are a potent symbol for Hamilton who channels their physical power and historical associations. Sitting tall on a steed in her white cotton housedress, the artist blends images of the domestic with the heroic. Intermingling recordings of church singers with these images of nature, Hamilton highlights both music and the land as sources of strength and transcendence. Indeed, sound is central to Hamilton's evocation of place, from the noises of animals and insects to the traditional "lining hymns," that she grew up with. These songs, which begin with a single caller chanting a line that is then repeated by the congregation, are part of a wealth of musical traditions that grew out of the symbiotic relationship between work and worship from the era of slavery to the re-imagined slavery of the turpentine camps.

Hamilton has also embedded abstract allusions to work songs, blues and funk lyrics, and African-American nature poetry in wooden boards incorporated into the

installation. The boards themselves reference the handpainted vernacular road signs that populate the landscapes that Hamilton calls home. Her repeated marks are a nod to the constellations of the night sky that similarly guide and orient us.

A selection of photographs from her series *"Sweet milk in the badlands ..."* presents images of the artist, along with friends and family performing within the landscape. These masked protagonists are a recurring cast of characters whom Hamilton imagines as haints or ghosts that haunt her enigmatic narratives. Churches, porches, pine forests, lakes, and fields provide the setting for these imaginary tableaux that bring to mind both the dream-like images of Sally Mann and the psychologically tense portraits of Diane Arbus. In *The Hours*. (2015) a girl in a bright yellow dress and green hair ribbons sits on the front stoop of a house, two suitcases packed. On her head she wears the skull and antlers of a stag-merging human and animal as well as a symbol of male prowess and sweet femininity. *Brecencia and Pheasant II*. (2018) depicts a woman dressed in her Sunday best, holding a pheasant and wearing a mask made from a fox head and feathers. She appears, like the bird, to be a natural part of the forest that surrounds her-an integral part of the ecosystem, rooted in place.

Hamilton's use of masks reminds us of their roles as disrupters of social identity and hierarchy as well as protective attire. A group of fencing masks line the gallery wall like a phalanx of helmeted warriors. The artist became interested in fencing masks after finding a vintage photo of two African-American soldiers engaged in a fencing bout. Painted and embellished with feathers and hair, her fantastical armor takes on a mythic character-flights of the imagination rooted in the familiar. Leaning against a nearby wall, decorative wrought-iron rods used in garden fences look like spears. Adorning them with horsehair, Hamilton once again invests the artifacts of daily life with allusions to epic battle.

Two alligators twisted in circles like the ancient Ouroboros symbol articulate a similar conflation of daily reality and grand narrative. The Florida alligator is both predator and food source, and, for Hamilton emblematic of the complex, symbiotic relationships between the various occupants of the land. (The artist grew up in a network of hunters and sourced these skins from a friend.) Visceral signifiers of an eternal eyelet of destruction and renewal, these powerful creatures also function as manifestations of the monsters we confront in our daily lives, or even those within us, lurking in the inner reaches of our consciousness.

-Susan Cross and Larry Ossei-Mensah

HYPERALLERGIC

THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC MOODS OF ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON

BY LOUIS BURY | JUNE 15, 2019



Before you even enter the room, the sounds of burbling water and flickers of light convey a sense of agitation. Two hanging yard signs covered with silver-painted palm fronds ("Metal Yard Sign with Sabal Palm Fronds I" and "Metal Yard Sign with Sabal Palm Fronds II," both 2019) lend a portentous feel to the narrow entry hallway that conjures a crypt's antechamber. Inside the shadowy main room, the menacing burbles grow louder as light flashes and river water rushes in Allison Janae Hamilton's short film, *Wacissa* (2019). The film is projected onto the far wall and the adjacent walls' corners. Its turbulent audiovisuals make it hard to discern up from down, water from sky, as if the video is simulating the experience of panicked and confused drowning.

The Studio Museum's 2018-19 Artists in Residence exhibition is called *Mood*. It also features excellent work by Tschabalala Self and Sable Elyse Smith in separate rooms. However, Hamilton's solo room envelops the visitor in a mood so ominous and constrictive it verges on claustrophobic. Several dimly lit photographs depict young girls incongruously clad in white dresses while ensconced in Florida forest- and swampland. A mysterious wooden yard sign ("Yard Sign with White Feathers," 2019), crowned with feathers and covered with a nest of painted white cross marks, recalls Southern yard art. Two sculptures of fantastic mythical creatures contain touches of dark humor: "Blackwater Creature II" (2019) is a creepily whimsical

centipede made from branches, feathers, horse hair, and bronze baby shoes; "Blackwater Creature I" (2019) is a dangling amalgam of horsehair and resin that resembles the Addams' Family's Cousin Itt and casts a shadow evoking a lynched figure.

Hamilton's previous, well-regarded multimedia installations, such as her recent *Pitch* at MASS MoCA, also conveyed a haunted, almost animist sense of the rural American South, where the artist was born and raised. Her installations are of a piece with a strand of contemporary African American art and critical thought in which traumatic, less visible histories are imaginatively reconstructed so as to counter-mythologize them. For example, photographer Dawoud Bey's exhibition, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, at the Art Institute of Chicago earlier this year, depicted underground railroad landscapes as if from fugitive slaves' points of view. Similarly, writer Saidiya Hartman incorporates what she calls "critical fabulation" — fictional narratives based on archival research — into her books to give voice to the gaps and silences in transatlantic slavery's historical record.

Hamilton's mythopoetic contribution to *Mood* stands out for how much gloomier it is than her previous installations. *Wacissa*, in particular, is unrelenting: 20-plus minutes of whooshing swampwater, with only brief, sporadic audiovisual respites. Exiting back into the museum hallway's stillness provides tangible sensory relief. The experience reminded me of artist Patty Chang's comparison of art-making to what scientists call free-diving's "struggle phase," that is, the point at which the gasping underwater diver must either come up for air or relent and drown. Hamilton's immersive installation allows visitors to wrestle with a mysterious land, its racial realities, and its mythic past, but also affords many the luxury — unavailable to those who live it — to extricate themselves from that struggle when it becomes too much to bear.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

ALLISON JANAE HAMILTON'S SPIRIT SOURCES

BY SIDDARTHA MITTER | OCTOBER 26, 2018

Indoors, for Allison Janae Hamilton, is always a kind of compromise. She grew up in Florida — first in Miami, attuned to the ocean and the Everglades, then in Tallahassee, with its exuberant tree cover, and where she enjoys kayaking in the haunting cypress swamps. Childhood summers were spent in western Tennessee, returning for planting and picking time on her maternal family's farm. Her multimedia art never strays far from her concern with the land, especially the Southern land, and its occupants, especially its black occupants.

"Landscape is this incredibly beautiful plane that we get to live on," Ms. Hamilton said. "But it's also a plane that has been wielded by those in power in a very violent way."

Her work has an unabashed pastoral quality. Yet every rustic setting where she stages her photography, every clip and sound in her video works, every artifact in her installations — the fencing masks, the tambourines, the bundles of horsehair, the taxidermy alligators — is present for a reason. Her aim is to manifest history: that of her family, the black South, and by this method, the nation.

Ms. Hamilton, 34, is based in New York: She arrived here in 2006, fresh out of Florida State University (where her father, Leonard Hamilton, is the head basketball coach), and after a stint in fashion, began earning graduate degrees. Before receiving her M.F.A., from Columbia in 2017, she already had a Ph.D. in American Studies from New York University, where she studied with the photography scholar Deborah Willis and wrote a dissertation on the carnivalesque in black visual culture. In the summer, she goes upstate weekly to ride horses.

This year New York tightened its claim on her when she landed a spot in the Studio Museum in Harlem's artist-in-residence program, a prestigious incubator of black talent, alongside fellow residents Sable Elyse Smith and Tschabalala Self. But even as her star rises in the art world, Ms. Hamilton is determined to invest in her soul base, the South, and eventually buy her own land. "There's just more space," she said. "And in order for me to think about these issues, it's important for me to be there, and in the community."

Recently, she explored the legacy of the turpentine industry that dominated the Southeast well into the 20th century, in which workers in backwoods camps, isolated and kept in debt by company scrip, tapped the pine trees for resins. Her research took her to abandoned camps in the forests of Florida and Georgia. "Pitch," her first museum solo exhibition, currently at Mass MoCA in North Adams, Mass., through March, is titled for the resinous substance that shipbuilders used to make vessels

watertight.

She installed a deconstructed pine forest in a gallery of the old mill complex, with locally sourced 12-foot trunks, imposing and straight, set in twos and threes. The pine fragrance drifts through the gallery, along with the choral track, insistent and incantatory, of a video installation in a small walk-in room. In it Ms. Hamilton, her face concealed by a beaked mask, rides a brown horse. Insects hover across swamp waters. An African-American congregation worships in a country church. Elsewhere, plywood panels lean against walls, roughly painted in the manner of Southern yard art, with splotches, stars or lettering. Photographs place their subjects in vistas of forests, fields, cabins, dressed in vintage apparel. One is Ms. Hamilton's mother, masked and holding a pheasant. In another room, two taxidermy alligators bite their own tails, in the classic ouroboros motif; a silent row of fencing masks looks



on, some adorned in feathers or beads, while spears decorated with horsehair line the wall.

It makes for a visual language that both edges toward Southern Gothic and sets itself apart, with reminders of how different fates unfold in the same landscape, shaped by ancestral custom but also by stark hierarchies of race and class. The mystic references come from hoodoo, the knowledge of rural black healers, for whom hunting or cultivating are inextricably spiritual and economic. The pine trees express the beauty of a grove, but also the exploitation of land and labor.

"It's always interesting when an artist builds a vocabulary, a set of tools, and is able to skillfully utilize it," said Larry Ossei-Mensah, who curated "Pitch" with Susan Cross and who is now senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Ms. Hamilton's method, he said, is so original that he struggles to identify exact precursors. "There's a very clear line of sight," he added. "She has a clear sense of direction, which I think is refreshing."

Hallie Ringle, the curator of contemporary art at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, and until recently assistant curator at the Studio Museum, said Ms. Hamilton's practice reminded her of the Chicago-based painter Kerry James Marshall. "Maybe it's the richness of the composition, or the colors that she's tapping into," said Ms. Ringle, who selected Ms. Hamilton for "Fictions," the Studio Museum's showcase exhibition last year. It's an intriguing connection: the Chicago painter and the rural-South mixed-media artist, yet both invested in the spirit material of African-American life. "Her installations are super smart," Ms. Ringle said. "They're really layered, and they unfold almost as paintings."

In "Fictions," Ms. Hamilton showed "Foresta," a walk-in installation that paired her signature objects — the masks, the taxidermy forms — with shimmering footage of swamp waters. The installation in "Pitch" is both similar and different. "I repeat some footage," she said. "I figure if you can have motifs that repeat in drawings or painting or objects, why can't video have that too? I like having a marker."

On a recent afternoon, Ms. Hamilton's studio in the Studio Museum's temporary work space in Harlem, where it has taken up quarters during construction of its new building, was tidily arrayed with her tools. Alligator heads, agape and toothy, rested on a shelving unit beside antlers and pelts. Women in her family have all hunted, but Ms. Hamilton only shoots targets. "I'm not a good enough shot to give a clean death," she said. Her alligator skins come from friends who hunt for meat. "I try to get things sustainably that way."

The artist, who favors a vintage-casual look, from jeans and boots to fitted jackets and frills, fabricates the costumes that her portraiture subjects wear as she art-directs them in the woods. Next to the sewing machine in the studio were confections-in-progress like a fur collar mounted with cloth roses. With her Mass MoCA exhibition

up — as well as an outdoor sculpture at Storm King, part of a collective show on climate change — she is back in research mode, starting the process toward her residency exhibition in the spring.

On her mind are hurricanes. This month, Ms. Hamilton watched from afar as Hurricane Michael walloped the north Florida coast and her home city. "Every hurricane season you feel more helpless being away," she said. Her attunement to the sting of these storms is partly a rural inheritance: "My grandmother can tell you everything about climate change," she said. But now her research takes her into the history of hurricanes — from the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 to this year's Florence and Michael — and their impact on black communities.

She knows that after the Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928, which appears in Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God," at least 1,600 black migrant laborers were buried in mass graves — archaeologists suspect many more. Katrina, a shaping event for society and politics today, had precedents. "My concern is which communities are more vulnerable," Ms. Hamilton said. "Which ones are given the least care, which ones are always on the wrong side of the levee; and how that relates to the history of power, and of the country."

Ms. Hamilton's sculpture at Storm King Art Center, through Nov. 11, involves stacks of white-painted tambourines, a quintessential storytelling instrument; its title, "The people cried mer-cy in the storm," quotes "Florida Storm," a hymn by Judge Jackson that responded to another devastating hurricane, of 1926. Music, sacred and secular, has participated through history in the self-narration of African-Americans, and their resilience through trauma. In her forthcoming works, Ms. Hamilton envisions adding original sound works into ever more immersive environments.

Despite the gravity, she feels her art growing less heavy as her research advances. "I feel interested in going lighter with color, more ethereal, playing up the water theme," she said. Even in trauma, after all, the land is beautiful. "So I want you to feel that. The lightness and beauty, but wait a minute — there's something amiss, something that's not quite right."

ART IN AMERICA

FIRST LOOK: ALLISON JANAЕ HAMILTON

BY ERIC SUTPHIN | MARCH 1, 2018



"Pitch," which opens this month at MASS MoCA, is Hamilton's first solo museum exhibition. The show's title refers to both the frequency of sound and the resin from which turpentine is derived—the source of the idiom "pitch black." The exhibition brings together past and recent work, including a new version of *Floridaland* that incorporates fragments from *A balm for the living* (2018), an evocative video shot at Hamilton's family farm. In it, Hamilton appears in a bedroom wearing a white lace dress and various animal skull masks. Projections of the surrounding environment flicker against her body and the walls as she moves around the space, restlessly at some moments and tranquilly at others. The soundtrack is a cacophony of tinny percussion and high-pitched bird and insect noises. The sunlit farmstead grounds and quiet interior feel idyllic and timeless, yet a pervasive sense of anxiety recalls the specter of slavery that continues to haunt the architecture and landscapes of the American South.

Since the Great Migration, the narrative of black experience in America has skewed toward urban life, to the point where the word "urban" now functions as racist shorthand for "black." New York-based artist Allison Janae Hamilton uses this association as a conceptual backdrop to her films, photographs, and installations, which explore the historical connections between African American life and nature.

Born in Kentucky, Hamilton grew up in rural Florida and spent much of her childhood at her family's farm in Tennessee. In 2017 she received her MFA from Columbia University. At her thesis exhibition, Hamilton debuted her video *Floridaland* (2017), which depicts several women—including the artist, her mother, and godmother—treading misty forest paths while wearing animal masks. On the soundtrack, voices sing a wordless melody in unison. Footage of a church service and of the artist, in a bird-skull mask, riding a white horse along a coastline is interwoven with panning shots of the gray-green Southern winter landscape. The three-channel video was displayed within an installation that included three taxidermy alligators purchased from hunters in Florida. One of the reptilian bodies hung from the ceiling with strands of beads wrapped around its head; the others were posed as ouroboros, the ancient symbol of a snake swallowing its tail that signifies the cyclical nature of time. Animal imagery is a recurring theme in Hamilton's work. Hides and masks allude to hunting and storytelling—two activities central to her family history.

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