

# YOSSI MILO

## ALLISON JANAЕ HAMILTON



Through her use of organic materials, **Allison Janae Hamilton** (American, b. 1984) creates immersive and poetic installations that evoke a sense of place and foster a deeper understanding of the ever-evolving landscapes that shape our lives. Influenced by her upbringing in Florida and rural western Tennessee, Hamilton reflects on the complexities of the natural environment, positioning it as the central protagonist in both historical and contemporary narratives. The artist weaves together land-focused folklore and personal family stories to create haunting yet grand mythologies that address the social and political concerns of the American south, including land loss, environmental justice, climate change, and sustainability.

Hamilton's series of fencing masks draw inspiration from a found vintage photograph depicting Black soldiers engaged in fencing. This poignant imagery encapsulates a profound irony—a depiction of individuals sacrificing their lives in war for a country that perpetuated racial violence and apartheid against its Black citizens. The artist not only incorporates organic elements such as feathers, hides, stones, but also

utilizes inorganic materials like darts, beads, and crystals, evoking the landscapes that enveloped her during her upbringing. By utilizing these materials, Hamilton forges a powerful connection between her personal experiences and the broader context of environmental and social histories.

Allison Janae Hamilton has mounted solo exhibitions at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA; the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE; and the Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, GA; among others. Hamilton has participated in group exhibitions, including at the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; Baltimore Museum of Art, MD; Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, NY; and the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. In 2023, the artist presented work in the Poydras Corridor Sculpture Exhibition Program with the Helis Foundation. Works by Hamilton are held in the permanent collections of institutions such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY; the Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, NH; and the International African American Museum, Charleston, SC, among others. Allison Janae Hamilton received an MFA from Columbia University, New York, NY and a PhD in American Studies from New York University, NY. The artist was born in Lexington, KY, and lives and works in New York, NY.

# artillery

## The Activism of Allison Janae Hamilton

Land as Witness of History

by Annabel Keenan | Jan 4, 2022



Allison Janae Hamilton, "Floridawater II," 2019, archival pigment print, 24 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton.

Land has been a constant throughout history. We bring to land our personal experiences, and land in turn acts as a witness to the people and events that come and go. For artist Allison Janae Hamilton, land is her most enduring subject. She describes land as a participant in and reflection of histories from the beautiful to the traumatic. Her works are haunting and inspiring, unnerving and captivating as she examines issues of social and environmental justice and unpacks narratives both personal and collective.

Hamilton's work centers on imagery and folklore of the American rural South. She grew up in Florida, also spending time working on her family's farm in Tennessee. Her upbringing instilled in her an understanding of issues involved with land. She explained as we connected recently over the phone: "Growing up, I was surrounded by family members, especially elders in my family, who were deeply involved in conversations around land from a political and policy perspective, as well as from an environmental perspective, in particular the changing environment." From her personal connections and family experiences, land became a "main character" in her work. She continued, "I'm always mining my own experiences and referencing normal conversations from within my family and community."

Hamilton addresses these topics through photography, film, sculpture and installation. In a photographic series from 2019 titled "Floridawater," the artist appears, in character, in the Wacissa River. In the hauntingly beautiful images, Hamilton is in a white dress with her body partially submerged in dark water clouded by plants and algae. The viewer sees her from the shoulders down with her head above the water, lending a sense of control as she always retains the ability to breathe.

The Wacissa is part of a river system laden with history. In the first half of the 1800s, enslaved Black people were forced to dig a canal in the dense, swampy system to provide the cotton trade with a path for barges to reach the Gulf of Mexico. Called the Slave Canal, it was never put into use. By the time digging was complete, new railroads filled the transportation needs.



*Floridawater I*, 2019, archival pigment print, 24 x 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton.

As a subject for this series and other works in Hamilton's practice, the Wacissa carries this traumatic history. The series begins with *Floridawater I*, in which the artist floats calmly, hardly disturbing the river as small bubbles rise and little fish swim by. In *Floridawater II*, she kicks one leg forward with her toe pointed straight ahead. Her dress, shining in a bright light that penetrates the dark water, appears to slowly descend. The colors and orientation of her body recall Jean Honoré-Fragonard's Rococo masterpiece *The Swing* (1767). Hamilton's photograph is both beautiful and troubling.

The final works in the series are further unsettling as Hamilton stands impossibly still with her feet on a submerged metal grate. Was this space once above water? Is this Florida after a devastating flood? There is a heightened tension between the softly rippling water and the complete stillness of the artist's body, as if the entire scene is about to burst into motion.

*Floridawater* builds upon ideas that Hamilton explored in earlier works. "At the time, I was interested in these entities or figures as witnesses who watch over the landscapes," she explained, "I imagined that they were haints, which is another word for ghosts down South that took the form of animals or human-like creatures." The figures connect the past with the present and act as witnesses to the people and events that used the land. Part of this witnessing, Hamilton noted in our conversation, includes events both good and bad. She elaborated, "The history of land is intertwined with so many other histories, like the history of brutal labor practices. Land can reflect traumatic histories while also representing something liberatory, such as healing and ritual practices involving nature. For me, this touches on a relationship between Black cultural practice and Black experiences."



Installation view, *Blackwater Creature II*, 2019, mixed media, 13 x 24 x 90 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo credit: Lance

Brewer

In her sculptures, Hamilton takes this idea of entities witnessing history further with figures like *Blackwater Creature II*, an otherworldly being that resembles a giant eight-legged, spindly reptile lying on the ground. The creature has metal feet and limbs, a long hairy tail, a thick band of feathers in place of a head and a torso of jagged sticks. The work feels both contemporary and ancient, existing in the present day, but appearing to be made up of materials from different generations. Hamilton explained that in creating these sculptures, she was interested in exploring the idea of history as something constructed by the powerful. The strange woodland creatures are what she describes as “neutral watchers” that are “in part spiritual, almost like ancestral apparitions or mythological beings.” Indeed, the disparate assortment of materials and objects make it feel as if the sculpture has just climbed out of a swamp with evidence of all the histories it has witnessed sticking to its body over time.

Hamilton brings these spiritual beings into her photography through masks and props. Her latest works, exhibited in the spring of 2021 at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, are part portraiture, part landscape photography. They feature Black women standing on the edge of a forest or marsh, perhaps along the Wacissa. The settings are lush and calm, but also eerie and even haunting. The women wear white dresses and adornments like wigs and headdresses. They face the viewer with dark sunglasses covering their eyes and expressions that seem at once stony and soft. In *All the Stars Appointed to Their Places* (2021), Hamilton’s subject holds two large broom-like palm fronds. Her bright white dress and white wig shine in a mythical, supernatural way.



*All the Stars Appointed to Their Places*, 2021, archival pigment print, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton.

Hamilton made these works in response to the political climate of the presidential election in 2020. From her home in New York, she watched the news leading up to the South Carolina primary and was alarmed by the way in which New York progressives referred to voters in the southern state as “low information voters.” Hamilton explained, “This didn’t sit with me. These were not low information voters. It felt like an attempt at erasure.” A few months later during the general election and at the height of the pandemic, she was back in northern Florida in an area right across the Georgia border. Being so close to the state, Hamilton saw the outpouring of ads during the Georgia Senate runoff. After the Democratic candidates won, the tone of the messaging suddenly changed away from “low information voters” to celebrating the Black women who were seen as having saved the day.

For Hamilton, the flip-flopping of messaging and unfair generalization of Black women was personal: “These constituents who were being tossed around, dismissed as low information and then celebrated as saviors, they’re like my aunts, my elder cousins, my community, and my family members,” she exclaimed, adding that her new photographs put Black middle-aged women at the center as a “jab at that dismissal” and a way to introduce other important conversations. She said, “When I go home, everyone is talking about issues related to sustainability and the environment because it’s a part of life there. I want the face and the voice of the movement to be closer to reality. The way we’ve come to talk about climate activism, Black women are not the face we are commonly encouraged to think of when we picture an ‘environmentalist’.”



Video still from *Waters of a Lower Register*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Allison Janae Hamilton’s “Waters of a Lower Register” was commissioned and presented by Creative Time.

Through art and climate activism, Hamilton is claiming space as a Black female environmentalist. Her show at Boesky included a thorough Climate Impact Report and was the gallery's first carbon-conscious exhibition, in which they tracked the carbon output and donated to permanent, old-growth forest conservation. Hamilton's works include a monetary climate contribution, a practice Boesky is now implementing with all of its artists. Hamilton often speaks on panels discussing sustainability in the arts and is a member of groups like Artists Commit that share resources on sustainable practices and tips on how to keep galleries accountable, including through the aforementioned Climate Impact Reports.

In December 2020, Hamilton's immersive five-channel film installation *Waters of a Lower Register* (2020) was presented in Brooklyn Bridge Park along the East River. The film shows powerful, mesmerizing images of landscapes in northern Florida in the aftermath of a tropical storm and acts as a metaphor for the tumultuous events of 2020. The imagery, personal to Hamilton and her native Florida, presents a stark contrast to the urban environment of New York. And yet, as with all of Hamilton's work, there is no one way to approach the film. It speaks to countless issues—climate change, social justice, politics—and the viewers bring to the work their own histories. Images of flooded landscapes might have seemed foreign in New York then, but as the climate crisis worsens, storms like Hurricane Ida that hit the city 10 months later are redefining how we see our infrastructure. Hamilton constantly reminds us that our personal experiences and histories are more intertwined than we may think.



# C&10

EXHIBITION

## Allison Janae Hamilton: A Romance of Paradise

Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, United States

27 Mar 2021 - 24 Apr 2021



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Once Again Amid the Pine Trees*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 40 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. ©Allison Janae Hamilton

**Marianne Boesky Gallery presents *A Romance of Paradise*, Allison Janae Hamilton's inaugural solo exhibition with the gallery. *A Romance of Paradise* will be on view March 27 – April 24, 2021 at the gallery's 507 West 24th Street location in New York.**

For *A Romance of Paradise*, Hamilton will present new photographs, videos, and sculptural works that highlight the artist's ongoing exploration of interwoven themes such as environmental justice, folklore and mythologies, and the traditions of communities living in vulnerable landscapes within the rural American South. The title of the exhibition takes the original denotation of the word paradise, meaning "heaven," underscoring the myths of an Edenic southern landscape formed during the exploitative and violent southward expansion of the United States.

*A Romance of Paradise* is centered around the undeniable verity that the development of the United States was an expansion squarely rooted in the creation of narratives. In contrast to the West, which was viewed as an open range to be conquered and settled, the South was surrounded by optimistic legends of a rich, fertile landscape primed for cultivation. Some early explorers to southeast America maintained the view that the biblical Garden of Eden was literally located on the 35th parallel north, the length of which runs from New Bern, North Carolina, to Memphis, Tennessee. Within the works on view, Hamilton looks at the formation of these mythologies and the way in which brutal colonization of land and people have molded contemporary beliefs and current realities, such as the continued exploitation of land and resulting climate change crisis that often disproportionately impacts communities in the rural Black South. The artist deftly explores the often less visible yet resilient histories of the region, driven by her own connections to Kentucky, where she was born, to Florida, where she grew up, to rural Tennessee, the location of her maternal family's homestead. Hamilton weaves in these personal narratives with pressing contemporary issues, through her photography that combines the lush landscapes shot in rural Northern Florida with the complex lived experiences of its inhabitants, and sculptural works that evoke a land that is simultaneously idyllic, fragile, and haunted by its own history.

*A Romance of Paradise* will include recognized elements to the artist's work and new interpretations of recurring items and motifs. Hamilton's familiar fencing masks, adorned with gathered materials such as feathers and botanical designs, will be presented in a lighter color palette, contrasting the warriorlike appearance of the masks, as well as mixed media works from the artist's Yard Signs series. Additionally, new sculptures from Hamilton's Creatures series will be on view. The sculptures, taking forms of an alligator, white-tailed deer, and a rattlesnake – all found in her home region of North Florida, present visions of predator and prey in a delicate, white finish reminiscent of porcelain. Taken as a whole, the ethereal colors and textures create, at first glance, a heavenly, immersive landscape. However, upon closer examination, the snarling creatures and warlike masks interspersed in the space speak to an underlying violent depth.

"The works in *A Romance of Paradise* comprise a narrative ecosystem that is both tangible and mythic. The photographs, videos, and sculptures explore how historical myths used to justify violent expansion have contemporary implications affecting present-day landscapes and those living therein, not only in the American South but throughout the world at large." said Allison Janae Hamilton.

Many of the artworks in *A Romance of Paradise* draw from early African American nature writing, rituals of hoodoo and traditional healing modalities, botanical drawings, and contemporary lived experiences of communities navigating the distinct impacts of climate change within the South. By drawing together elements from these sources in her deeply personal, interdisciplinary practice, Hamilton interrogates how these histories and myths can give clues to present day experiences and the precarious implications of environmental exploitation on the future. In Hamilton's photography, for instance, the artist imbeds friends, family, and herself as actors against the backdrop of Northern Florida, bringing together elements of landscape and portrait photography. Adorning her subjects with objects gathered from the environment and combining them with both timeless and contemporary symbolic gestures, Hamilton creates narrative portraits of the actors who are inextricably linked to and disruptors of an environment that collapses history, present, and future.

Shown together, the works in *A Romance of Paradise* explore how human intervention on the landscape over time has impacted the communities that inhabit it today, presenting an image that is contemporary yet ancient, captivating yet disturbing. Each element of the exhibition brings forth the rituals that work within and around these landscapes, demonstrating the continuation and precariousness of the notion of the American Eden.

[marianneboeskygallery.com](http://marianneboeskygallery.com)

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## ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON

b. 1984, Lexington, KY, Lives and works in New York, NY

### EDUCATION

- 2017 MFA, School of the Arts, Columbia University, New York, NY
- 2015 PhD, New York University, New York, NY
- 2014 Whitney Independent Study Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA
- 2010 MA, Columbia University, New York, NY
- 2006 BS, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 Allison Janae Hamilton: *Between Life and Landscape*, Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, GA  
Allison Janae Hamilton: *Recent Works*, Joslyn Art Museum Omaha, NE
- 2021 *Wacissa*, Times Square Arts New York, NY  
*A Romance of Paradise* Marianne Boesky Gallery New York, NY
- 2020 *Waters of a Lower Register*, Creative Time New York, NY  
*Hush*, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, NY
- 2018 *Passage*, Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA  
Allison Janae Hamilton: *Pitch*, The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA
- 2017 Allison Janae Hamilton: *Wonder Room, Recess*, New York, NY
- 2014 *Kingdom of the Marvelous*, Rush Arts Gallery, New York, NY

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Crusading The Specter*, Yossi Milo, New York, NY  
*DISordered System*, Center for the Arts Gallery, Towson University Towson, MD
- 2022 *Downstream*, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, MA  
Aaron Douglas: *Sermons*, organized by DJ Hellerman, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA  
*A Picture Gallery of the Soul*, Katherine E. Nash Gallery, Minneapolis, MN  
*Uncanny: Contemporary Photography*, curated by Maria Kelly, Illges Gallery, Columbus State University, Columbus, GA  
*Boundless Terrain*, curated by Meredith Lynn, Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts Tallahassee, FL  
*When the well is dry*, The Current, Stowe, VT  
*The Supernatural in Art*, Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, NY  
*Material Alchemy: Part I*, Marianne Boesky Gallery x Carpenters Workshop Gallery, Aspen, CO  
*Fragile Crossings*, Marianne Boesky Gallery x Goodman Gallery, New York, NY  
*A Midnight Thing*, curated by Lia Rose Newman, Southern Comfort Gallery, Charlotte, NC  
*Remixing the Hall: WCMA's Collection in Perpetual Transition*, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA  
*A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration*, Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS; *Travels to Baltimore* Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD  
*Fault Lines: Art and the Environment*, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC  
*Picturing Black Girlhood: Moments of Possibility*, Express Newark, Newark, NJ  
*An Archive of Loose Leaves*, Lee Gallery at Clemson University, Clemson, SC
- 2021 *there is this We*, Sculpture Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI  
*Eco-Urgency: Now or Never*, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY  
*DLECTRICITY 2021*, Detroit, MI,

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- Young, Gifted and Black: The Lumpkin - Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art, curated by Antwaun Sargent and Matt Wycoff, Gallery 400, Chicago, IL; and Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, Davis, CA
- The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, CO
- Shifting Horizons, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV
- Being Human Part II, Syracuse University Art Museum, Syracuse, NY
- 2020 For Real This Time, The John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Florida State University, Sarasota, FL
- Heroines of Abstract Expressionism and FEM, Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, NY
- Enunciated Life, California African Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA
- it's your world for the moment, Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, GA
- More, More, More, TANK Shanghai, Shanghai, China
- A Perfect Storm, curated by Natasha Becker, Faction Art Projects, New York, NY
- Young Gifted and Black, curated by Antwaun Sargent and Matt Wycoff, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY
- Photography and the Surreal Imagination, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX
- All of Them Witches, Jeffery Deitch, Los Angeles, CA
- Transitional Nature, Frost Art Museum, Miami, FL
- Abortion is Normal (Part I), curated by Jasmine Wahi and Rebecca Pauline Jampol, Eva Presenhuber, New York, NY
- Abortion is Normal (Part II), Arsenal Contemporary, New York, NY
- 2019 Tricknology: ektor garcia and Allison Janae Hamilton, curated by Sanford Biggers, Marianne Boesky Gallery, Aspen, CO
- MOOD, organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem, MoMA PS1, New York, NY
- 2.7 °, Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2017 Mother's House, Yours Mine and Ours Gallery, New York, NY
- Fictions, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
- American Hoodoo, Rush Arts Gallery, New York, NY
- Lilith, The Light Factory, Charlotte, NC
- 2016 Are We Human?: Video Section, Istanbul Design Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey
- Finished Goods Warehouse, Former Pfizer Factory, Brooklyn, NY
- Lattice Work, Black and White Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- Do You Hear What I Hear?, curated by Anthony Elms, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- The Outwin: American Portraiture Today, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; travelled to The Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, TX; The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO; The Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA; Ackland Museum of Art UNC, Chapel Hill, NC
- Resultados, Fundación Botín, Santander, Spain
- 2015 Badass Art Man, The African American Museum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA
- Dandy Lion, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, IL; travelled to Silver Eye Center for Photography, Pittsburgh, PA; Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA; Brighton Photo Biennial, Brighton, England; Lowe Art Museum, Miami, FL
- 2014 RE•AL•ZED Carol Jazzar Contemporary Miami, FL

## GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2019 Creative Capital Award, The Creative Capital Foundation, New York, NY.
- 2018 Artist-in-Residence, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY.
- 2017 Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant, New York, NY. Session, Recess, New York, NY.
- 2016 Villa Iris Residency, Fundación Botín, Santander, Spain
- Finalist, Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.

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- 2015 Visual Arts Fellowship, Columbia University, New York, NY.  
2014 Artist-in-Residence, Rush Arts Foundation, New York, NY.

## **SELECTED COLLECTIONS**

Hessel Foundation Collection at Bard, Annandale-On-Hudson, NY  
Hood Museum of Art, Hanover, NH  
International African American Museum, Charleston, SC  
JP Morgan Chase Collection  
Petrucci Family Foundation, Asbury, NJ  
Menil Collection, Houston, TX  
Nasher Museum of Art, Durham, NC  
Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV  
Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY  
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY  
Syracuse University Art Museum, Syracuse, NY  
Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA