

BROOKLYN RAIL



Allison Janae Hamilton, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Allison Janae Hamilton with Yasi Alipour

By: Yasi Alipour
April 2021

“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.”

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.

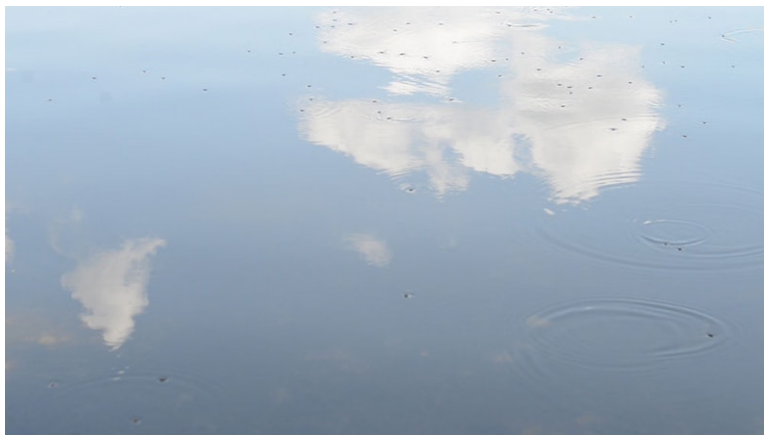
Rail: It's interesting because I think, at least in New York, we often discuss the Black diaspora and radical aesthetics through the narrative of uprootedness, the great migration, and the fugitive body. That's a very different relationship with the landscape. Sometimes you talk about how alienated you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



Allison Janae Hamilton, *A Pale Horse*, 2021 Single-channel video projection Total runtime: 3:02 minutes. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo credit: Lance Brewer.

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.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Once Again Amid the Pine Trees*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 40 × 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo credit: Lance Brewer.

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.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Behind Magnolias, Faint Sheets of Lightning*, 2021. Archival pigment print, 40 × 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo credit: Lance Brewer.

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.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Mask with Braids and Table Grapes*, 2021. Vintage metal and leather fencing mask, marble, horse hair, 15 × 12 × 11 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo credit: Lance Brewer.

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.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Alligator Creature*, 2021. Foam, sola wood, marble, bracken fern, resin, paint, 30 × 33 × 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY and Aspen. © Allison Janae Hamilton. Photo credit: Lance Brewer.

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.