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Allison Janae Hamilton, *Once Again Amid the Pine Trees*, 2021 Archival pigment print 40 x 60 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery

Interrogating myths around landscape and stories of paradise.

By: Katy Donoghue
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Allison Janae Hamilton's "A Romance of Paradise" was on view at Marianne Boesky in New York this spring. It was the artist's first solo show with the gallery and showcased her multidisciplinary practice and ongoing investigation of themes around environmental justice, folklore, and tradition. An ethereal palette of white, cream, blush pink, and pale yellow contrasted with the darker, sometimes haunted undertones of works like a series of fencing helmets adorned in feathers, beads, and hair or sculptures of animals of prey rendered in white and covered in flowers and eggs.

Using sound from her films as a way to immerse, Hamilton is able to transport her viewer to the fertile, storied landscape of the American South, once believed to be the actual Garden of Eden. She addresses how the myth of southward expansion has justified and covered up the atrocities of the land, as well as the current climate change crisis impacting vulnerable rural communities.

Whitewall spoke with Hamilton around the opening of "A Romance of Paradise," when she had just gotten back to New York after spending all of the last year in her hometown due to the pandemic.

WHITEWALL: *What was the starting point for the show?*

ALLISON JANAE HAMILTON: The content and the concept is something I've been curious about for a while, which is this idea of mythology and landscape. As a kid growing up in school, we all learn about manifest destiny and western expansion. But the South also had myths that helped to justify this American expansion southward.

Allison Janae Hamilton*, Twin Mask I*, 2021, vintage metal and leather fencing mask, feathers, 13 x 8 1/2 x 10 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery.

Early explorers in the region thought the literal Garden of Eden was in the American South—the 35th parallel line, which ran from eastern North Carolina to Memphis. I was reading all of this material and primary sources that described the South as lush, fertile, and rich for cultivation. A lot of the language was very feminine, "lush, fertile land." Whereas the West had this "home on the range," let's conquer the open space. The South was swampy, even more so hundreds of years ago—more subtropical.

In order to justify something horrific, there has to be a story. That's the effect of the narrative; you're creating a storyline that excuses or makes it okay. Exploring that was interesting to me. That's something you see all over the world. What are the stories and what are the myths that become entrenched and ingrained that were originally meant to justify something? How are those myths operating now? What does that mean for the future?

WW: *While your home in Florida has always served as inspiration, you spent close to a year back in your hometown as a result of the pandemic. How do you think that impacted this new work?*

AJH: I'm from the northern part of Florida, like a 15-minute drive from the Georgia border. Culturally, it's the American South—gumbo and grits, and whatever. It's got that low country culture, that Gulf South culture. I call my region Jurassic Park, especially in the summertime. Being there for the spring and summer for the first time since college, it was overwhelming, oppressive . . . the humidity, the lush trees. It's like a jungle.
I always try to have a bit of immersion in what I'm doing, so I think that even though the show has a little bit of restraint—I wanted there to be space and I wanted there to be this ethereal, heavenly vibe— it definitely still

was important for me to have some kind of immersion. The soundscape was important. I did want the viewer to feel somewhat surrounded.

WW: *There's something about nature in that part of the country—you can't ignore it.*

AJH: It's different. And everyone lives with it. There's an idea of the person who appreciates nature as an environmentalist or conservation-minded folks. But in the South, everyone is really into nature. So part of what the environment does in the work for me is present a different location than what people are used to talking about and thinking about when it comes to climate change. It's all-encompassing. It's a total landscape, and you just really have to learn to live with it. Like you said, you can't escape it. With hurricane season, too, it's just part of it.

Installation view of Allison Janae Hamilton's "A Romance of Paradise" at Marianne Boesky. Photo by Lance Brewer.

The effects of climate change are happening now. You look at the way cities were designed, and you look at the aftermath of American slavery during the reconstruction era, how certain communities were placed in certain areas—all of that was deliberately thought of. There were conversations about this, like where are we going to put these formerly enslaved people?

And when you think about something like a hurricane, well, who tends to be on the wrong side of the levy or which community tends to be in the most vulnerable parts of the city or community? What's going to happen to those folks as climate change makes the storms more intense, more frequent? That means that climate change is not really an equal thing.

WW: *In the show, there are two new videos,* Lemon Tree *and* A Pale Horse*. Can you tell us about them?*

AJH: I'm always playing around with what is tangible, what is real, what is fictitious, what is mythic. Playing into the allegorical, epic forms I like to explore, the *Lemon Tree* is part of an 8-millimeter series that allows me to kind of push and pull the viewer a little bit and kind of question reality. It's almost scientific or archaeological, and then there's things that are happening in the video that seem not real or seem ritualistic, or seem like a different part of your brain has to absorb what's happening.

And the other video, *A Pale Horse*, was part of another video of mine, *Florida Land*. I wanted to have something of mine anchoring the show that was emblematic of the work but in an abstract way. There's something disturbing with the bugs skimming the surface of the water. There's always kind of an element of the work that doesn't let you fully sink in or fully get comfortable. I want to allude to the precariousness of the environment—especially coming from Florida. I do think it's stunning but there's a horrific history and there's a lot of complicated present things going on.

WW: *How did you approach the new series of photographs?*

AJH: In general, with the environmental portraits, the figures are almost ghostlike or apparitions. It's always friends and family that's in the work, which was partly conceptual and partly practical. My mom is in the work, my godmother, another close family friend. Also, I thought that politically this was a moment where I could give Black woman of a certain age a prominent place in the show.

There's something a little ritualistic and a little mystic about the photos as well. It's not so direct, but there was something about that. I wanted to have them in the show in this moment—and on their own terms. The body language is very matter of fact. They're taking ownership of their space. I liked presenting them with a lot of autonomy.

Portrait by Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich.