

# SURFACE



Jammie Holmes in his Dallas studio. Photography by Daisy Avalos/Courtesy Library Street Collective

## Jammie Holmes Will Always Look You in the Eye

By: Ryan Waddoups  
May 21, 2021

A radical empathy ripples through “Pieces of a Man,” an evocative new series of portraits by Jammie Holmes at Detroit’s Library Street Collective. With a disarming gaze, the ascendant artist depicts the overwhelming grief spurred by the ceaseless killings of Black Americans at the hands of police—and reassures viewers that they aren’t alone in experiencing loss.

### Would you describe these works as self-portraits?

Yes, definitely. But they’re not always a reflection of myself. The self-portrait is my way of connecting with viewers. I wanted to include a person the viewer can relate to, and because of social media and the way I put myself out there, more people can recognize me and feel like they can connect with me. I’m hoping that the people who know me, or know of me, can connect with the work a little deeper by recognizing the person behind the story being communicated in these works.

**Your eyes are usually fixed on the viewer. What are you communicating?**

Growing up, I was taught to always look a person in the eye. I'm particularly passionate about the subjects I'm speaking about: loss and grief. I want these subjects to be taken seriously, and for people to pay attention to what I'm presenting.

**There's a radical empathy that unites "Pieces of a Man," from the faceless "Rest In Peace" T-shirts to the inclusion of religious themes. What do you want people to see and feel when they look at your work?**

I want people to be able to connect and remember the person they've lost. That's why I left a space on the T-shirt blank. It provides an opportunity for the viewer to reflect on their own loss, and place their own memories within that negative space. I think of this as a more interactive way of introducing my art to the viewer—to engage with them and connect with their own experiences.



"Blame the man #2" (2021). Photography by Jammie Holmes/Courtesy Library Street Collective

**Letting doves fly is a tradition to commemorate someone who recently passed away. The small birds in these paintings—on the coffins and on your shoulder, for example—aren't doves. What do they represent?**

These are brown sparrows. I include them in my work because they symbolize peace and love for me. They remind me of my grandmother's backyard in Thibodaux, which was always a lush place filled with roses and brown sparrows. It was the only place in Thibodaux I remember seeing brown sparrows. That backyard was a sacred and peaceful place for me, my family, and my community, and a place where there was no fighting. Hardships could be left at the door.

**Thibodaux, Louisiana, where you were raised, has a deeply fraught racial history. How does your upbringing factor into these paintings?**

I mostly think of how I was able to break free of a specific way of life and become an artist. I want to show younger generations from my hometown that there are other options for success in life than what they might be

familiar with now as Black youth. I try depicting what life is like in Thibodaux so others from my home can recognize themselves in the work, and feel validation in the representation of their lives.

**How do your experiences with loss shape your sensibilities as an image maker?**

I admire abstract artists and how they put their emotion into their painting, but I want to put a figure behind the emotions that come with loss. It's also a way for me personally to commemorate a loved one and also have the memory of lost ones live on.



**Left:** "Carrying Caskets#3" (2021). Photography by Jammie Holmes/Courtesy Library Street Collective

**Right:** Photography by Jammie Holmes/Courtesy Library Street Collective

**Black masculinity is a recurring theme in your oeuvre.**

I want to show that all people feel emotions, that men do cry, that men do pray, and that men can be vulnerable. I also think of the phrase "You've never seen a man cry until you've seen a man die," and how people have intense emotions associated with loss. We see so many images of men in hyper-masculine roles—having to work, drive fast cars, and be tough—but I want to show that these emotions are everyday, normal occurrences for men. I want to give people an opportunity to see and reflect on that.

**These new paintings often evoke snippets of memories collaged together. How do you know when a painting is finished?**

I never really know when they are finished. I always feel like my canvas is never big enough. I can never include everything that I would like to. It's only finished when the time to ship them comes.

**Last year was a heavy time for everyone, but particularly for Black people in the United States. Did you find it difficult to stay creative during times of such immense grief and loss?**

No, because I felt like as a creative person I needed to find an outlet to express all of the emotions I was feeling and I did that through painting. If I were a rapper I would rap. If I were a writer I would write. I sit and paint, and that's how I grieve. It's never hard for me to paint—it's always expression. If I'm happy I can paint. If I'm sad I can paint. If I'm angry I can paint. When I first started painting, it was just me expressing myself, and



it was more abstract as it was raw emotion. Then I reached a point where I started putting a figure behind that emotion and that's how my style has evolved



Jammie Holmes. Photography by Daisy Avalos/Courtesy Library Street Collective

**Can you describe the backstory behind one particularly important piece?**

*Carrying Caskets #1* expresses happiness and loss simultaneously. It was my opportunity to show how one can experience loss in a beautiful way. The trumpet symbolizes music and celebration, the roses relate to beauty and the fragile. When you lose someone you can also celebrate the person and their life. It was the first painting I did for the show and it really set the mood for the rest of the exhibition.

**You've been painting for five years—a relatively short amount of time. Where do you foresee your practice going from here?**

There are so many different types of media I'd like to try, and that my practice will evolve into being able to create in a variety of ways. I'd love to create a video art piece so I could control both the visuals and the sound, and affect more of the viewer's senses. I've had ideas for etching too, and I've dabbled in stained glass. Exploring different mediums, like I did for *They're Going to Kill Me*, will always be of interest.