

Jammie Holmes, *Carrying Caskets #3*, 2021. Acrylic and oil pastel on canvas, 79 3/4 x 130 inches. Courtesy Library Street Collective, Detroit.

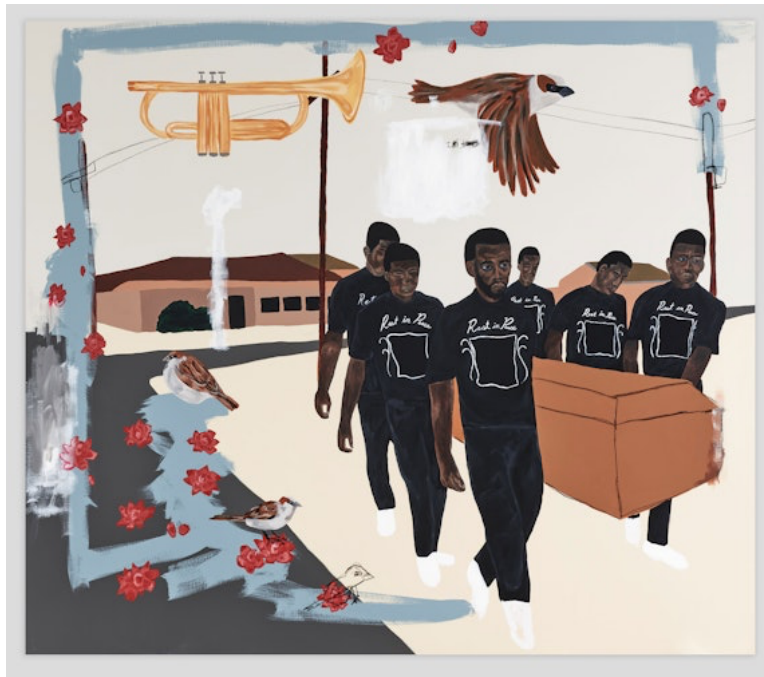
JAMMIE HOLMES: PIECES OF A MAN

BY MATTHEW BIRO
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Pieces of a Man, Jammie Holmes's latest project with Library Street Collective in Detroit, is a compact and powerful exhibition confronting Black trauma and healing. Consisting of seven large-scale acrylic and oil pastel paintings, all from 2021, it confirms Holmes's promise as a compelling and lyrical new voice in contemporary painting.

Holmes is often presented as a "self-taught" painter, and his art is linked to his biography. Born in Thibodaux, Louisiana, in 1984, he grew up poor under adverse conditions in the Deep South in an environment that was laden with the history of slavery and Jim Crow. He credits the women in his life (his mother, his grandmother, his aunt), his extended family, and his family's Christian community, with helping him persevere in the face of such circumstances. Although he was always artistic—drawing as a child and young adult—Holmes only began pursuing painting full time in his early 30s, after spending more than a decade working (first in the oil fields around Thibodaux and then at a machine shop in Dallas).

As he tells it, painting was at first a therapeutic method for him, a way to express his emotions and release his anxiety and depression. To be in the studio was healing: it helped him to overcome the post-traumatic stress of his childhood and adolescence. "Then I reached a point where I started putting a figure behind that emotion and that's how my style has evolved."¹ That figure was the Black body, which Holmes has consistently treated as a shifting signifier—a dialectical image encompassing opposites like interiority and exteriority, past and future, life and death.



Jammie Holmes, *Carrying Caskets #1*, 2021. Acrylic and oil pastels on canvas, 79 1/8 x 90 1/4 inches. Courtesy Library Street Collective, Detroit.

Early paintings from 2019 reveal a dialogue with the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat—whose groundbreaking amalgam of Expressionism, American modernism, graffiti, comic book illustration, and Pop art Holmes deployed to represent child soldiers: avatars allegorizing anti-Black violence and connections between the United States and Africa. In later 2019 and 2020, Holmes shifted to a more self-assured and monumental style, which expanded the formal dialogue to include Henry Taylor and Kerry James Marshall, but which also seemed uniquely his own. He began to focus on memories of family life in Thibodaux. Citing the Louisiana folk artist Clementine Hunter, whose work he admires, Holmes places himself in a tradition of painting that tries to authentically represent Southern Black existence. He creates haunting allegories composed of memories from the past, filtered or screened through his contemporary experience.

Self-portraits abound in *Pieces of a Man*. In his most frequent role, Holmes depicts himself carrying the casket of his cousin, part of a group of young Black mourners, identically dressed in white sneakers, black pants, and a black memorial T-shirt with the portrait of the deceased removed. In *Carrying Caskets #1*, Holmes, in the center, strides towards the viewer's right, surrounded by pallbearers in a predominantly cream and gray abstract space. Low-slung houses and electric poles appear in the background, and the tableau of figures is attended by a floating array of symbolic elements conveying quasi-public, quasi-private meanings: a trumpet, brown swallows, red roses. A jagged blue-gray gestural line, which contrasts with the dark-gray road, forms a frame through which the young men carry their absent family member and friend. Holmes says that he uses flowers around men to humanize them—to make them less “hard” or masculine—thereby rejecting racist stereotypes attributed to Black men by white-dominated society. In addition, the brown sparrows are there to evoke his grandmother's backyard in Thibodaux, where he and his friends could relax and play.

But beyond the artist's personal symbolism, what makes *Carrying Caskets #1*—and its exquisite brethren, *Carrying Caskets #2* and *#3*—so powerful is Holmes's assured mixture of representation and abstraction. Like Marshall and Taylor, Holmes is a master of simultaneous observation and abstraction in service of Black identity. People and settings emerge with authentic detail; although they are treated in an expressive and allegorical way, they also seem taken from life, real. At the same time, as is the case with the older painters, representation is constantly dissolving in Holmes's work. Large, sometimes-undulating fields of color alternate with autonomous lines of varying widths, as well as handwriting, drawing, and (sometimes) scribbled patches of overpainted “erasures.” These formal constituents pull apart the visible elements delineating Black bodies and lives, poetically connecting them to a shifting order of meaning and historical reference that conveys a sense of dialogue and endless creation. Beauty emerges from the midst of trauma, not as a denial or obfuscation of the latter, but rather as a revelation of sources of sustenance and identity-building. Of particular note is Holmes's considered and more detailed modeling of Black faces and skin tones amidst the abstract passages; by creating a push-pull oscillation between representation and the materiality of color, he insists through intense scrutiny and observation that all Black lives matter.

In *Blame The Man* (2021), Holmes appears as his other main avatar: a figure of Black rebirth or regeneration. Here, Holmes regards the viewer while being baptized. Against a black sky, the two black-and-brown figures immerse the artist in greenish-gray water; two birds, one a two-dimensional ghost and the other a three-dimensional living creature, move in opposite directions; and a bent and jagged white line, partially composed of obscured scribbled words, frames the scene on the bottom and the right. Holmes paints intuitively and improvisationally, working and reworking the canvas until it seems finished to him. Rebirth, the painting suggests, is still connected to death, and it emerges from a constantly shifting flow between representation and abstract materiality: the movement from line to form, for example, or from line to writing.



Jammie Holmes, *Blame The Man*, 2021. Acrylic and oil pastels on canvas 70 1/8 x 90 inches. Courtesy Library Street Collective, Detroit.

Just like “self-taught,” the terms “folk,” and “vernacular” do not really capture Holmes as an artist. And the very Instagrammable dimensions of *Blame the Man #2*—as well as the way it evokes a world of images within images—perhaps suggests why. Today, computers and the internet, not to mention cellphones and social media, have radically changed the nature of education—a transformation that shows no sign of slowing down. As a result, more and more people are able to educate themselves deeply about art and other matters, while bypassing the academy altogether. Jammie Holmes had something to say. And despite not having visited an art gallery or museum before 2016, it is clear that once he realized he wanted to express his situation (and those of millions like him), he taught himself the artistic languages and motifs that seemed to matter most. What makes Holmes’s paintings so unique is their powerful combination of sincerity and formal sophistication: they seem to come directly from the heart, but they also appear to be highly aware of how Black people have been painted—and represented more generally—in the past.

On Saturday, May 30, 2020, five days after George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis police, Holmes’s first public artwork, *They’re Going to Kill Me*, took flight. Five planes circled over five cities dragging banners spelling out Floyd’s final words for most of the day. Part memorial and part indictment, Holmes’s transitory skywriting project strikingly articulated the horrors of systemic racism during coronavirus lockdown, addressing itself to a socially-distanced audience longing for community. A year later, Holmes’s emergence as an important painter of Black experience still seems connected to the aftermath of this crucial moment when Black Americans—but also Americans of all colors—emerged from their quarantines, seemingly united in their rejection of police brutality and the devastating caste system that has permeated the United States since its very beginnings. No one voice, of course, can speak for this time in which we find ourselves—the United States after George Floyd’s murder. But what is so important about the current show at Library Street is that in a series of spare and powerful paintings, Holmes proves himself to be up to the challenge of showing what the unflinching combination of pain, knowledge, resilience, and hope looks like.