

FRIEZE



Allison Janae Hamilton, *A House Called Florida*, 2022, film still.
Courtesy: © Allison Janae Hamilton and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

ALLISON JANAЕ HAMILTON: 'MY BLACKNESS IS A LAND-BASED EXPERIENCE'

BY BRYN EVANS

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Before my call with Allison Janae Hamilton, I put on a Valerie June record. The singer-songwriter's Tennessee whine curls like a shawl around my shoulders, a familiar voice easing in the subtle sounds of kinfolk memory. In a 2021 interview with Anjanue Ellis-Taylor for *The Bitter Southerner*, Hamilton mused: 'Everyone in my family talks with a Tennessee-specific twang. When I go to their church, when I'm home, the music is more Tennessee [... Valerie's] music and her voice is just so Tennessee to me. That Western flatlands style.'

In her artistic practice, spanning sculpture, installation, photography and film, Hamilton similarly sounds out a constellated landscape – articulating the distinct pitches of ancestral relation across time-space. Born in Kentucky, raised in Florida, with maternal roots in Tennessee's rural flatlands, Hamilton treats each site of memory like a beloved family member, shaped by collective recollection and kindred myth. She tells me she 'centres a Black experience *of land* / a Black feminist experience *in land*', a perspective conceived through a matrilineage who fished the rivers, hunted the forests and worked the soil. Her survived kin continue to live in tune with the Earth's rhythms, and Hamilton was raised with that same measure of closeness – the sanctity of care for an environment you cannot control, only surrender to. 'My Blackness, my Black Americanness, my Black womanhood', she tells me, 'is a land-based experience.'

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raised with that same measure of closeness – the sanctity of care for an environment you cannot control, only surrender to. ‘My Blackness, my Black Americanness, my Black womanhood’, she tells me, ‘is a land-based experience.’ When I speak with the artist, I find comfort in the steady thoughtfulness of her responses, a sincerity that translates into a natural attention to spiritual and material life. We read a quote from Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick’s ‘On Plantations, Prisons and a Black Sense of Place’ (2011), which aligns with Hamilton’s own conception of landscape: ‘A Black sense of place draws attention to the longstanding links between Blackness and geography,’ she writes. ‘It brings into focus the ways in which racial violences (concrete and epistemic actions and structural patterns intended to harm, kill or coerce a particular grouping of people) shape, but do not wholly define, Black worlds.’

‘The violence doesn’t wholly define Black worlds because of [the complex nature of] geography and landscape,’ Hamilton responds. ‘It’s also a spiritual space. It’s a place of refuge. The hush harbour. It’s the cutaway places that are sites of beauty and culture-making and world-building as well. In my work, I try to show how it’s both/and. You have a sense of haunting, but there’s also pleasure. There’s sort of an ethereal, spiritual quality to the land because it’s been many things – a healing modality, a container. I think a Black sense of place would be just as complex as Black people are.’



Allison Janae Hamilton, *A House Called Florida*, 2022, film still.
Courtesy: © Allison Janae Hamilton and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.

Hamilton’s creative process reflects this very complexity – her understanding of homeplace is nuanced, simultaneous, multi-channelled. Oftentimes, she enlists family members to feature in her photo and film installations, imbuing each project with a distinctive character and reciprocity. The landscape holds the family – their memories, their language, their labour – within it. Photographs such as *Brecencia and Pheasant II* (2015), *III* (2018) and *Black River Under a Blue Sky* (2021) present the artist’s mother as a wondrous persona of her own making. These images exemplify how Hamilton illustrates the inextricable relationship between Black ingenuity and the environment. As the eponymous 19th-century spiritual proclaims: ‘Just like a tree planted by the water / I shall not be moved.’

While viewing the artist’s three-channel film installation *A House Called Florida* (2022), I recognize an intimacy embedded in Hamilton’s immersive depiction of the Southern environment, what she calls on her website ‘the intertwined fates of life and land’. In one section, the audio of a biker gang cruising down the interstate layers over the Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers’s 1993 recording of Judge Jackson’s ‘Florida Storm’ and swampland’s cicada song. Hamilton’s deep, multi-generational care for community transforms her art into a meeting ground for each player, ushering in conversations around larger issues like climate degradation, communal space and vulnerable landscapes: ‘I’m using what I know to talk about them, to think about them, to create action around them.’

I'm drawn to Hamilton's *Rooster Wire Mask* (2020), part of an ongoing meditation on environmental portraiture that she tells me 'has taken on a life of its own – they're their own language'. The work features a vintage fencing mask covered in a tail-full of iridescent, black-green sickle feathers. They cascade elegantly over the mask's mesh netting in couture fashion, reminding me of one of my Grandmama's church hats, of how her first lady feathers shook as she shouted down the aisle of our sanctuary in East Point during one of Papa's messages.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Brecencia and Pheasant II*, 2015, archival pigment print, 1 x 1.5 m.
Courtesy: © Allison Janae Hamilton and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

That word, 'sanctuary', is an honest description of Hamilton's New York studio – a quiet refuge filled with relics of the Southern terrain, photos of her maternal kin and the family farm on her desk, the wall behind showcasing a selection of embellished, vintage found masks. Cast bronze versions of these types of masks will be exhibited for the first time at Marianne Boesky in January 2025. In her upcoming show, Hamilton will explore the idea of 'a vertical landscape' and the political implications of mining in a literal and metaphorical sense. At the end of our call, I ask her about the future, following the work's natural progression: 'Where are we going?'

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'I want a world where my kid can have clean water and clean air, as well as any generations that come after her,' she tells me. 'So, of course, my hope is that we get ourselves together to leave a better world behind than what we inherited. And part of what I'm trying to do in my work is to show that, in terms of what's at stake for Black folks, a lot of that does have to do with our land, *with land*, in ways that are not always discussed'.