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Allison Janae Hamilton in her studio in Chelsea, Manhattan, with her collection of family photographs.
Credit...DeSean McClinton-Holland

THE ARTIST WHO TURNED HER STUDIO INTO A FAMILY ARCHIVE

BY JULIA HALPERIN
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More than a thousand ancestral records and photographs surround Allison Janae Hamilton while she works.

[Allison Janae Hamilton](#) is greeted by seven generations of women in her family every time she enters her Chelsea, Manhattan, studio. The 40-year-old artist, who worked in the fashion industry before she began to make paintings, films and installations inspired by landscapes in the American South, grew up in Florida and visited her family's farm in Carroll County, Tenn., every summer. A few years ago, she began digitizing copies of ancestral records — letters, yearbooks, handwritten recipes — all stored in boxes and albums on the property. She also found family records online, including her grandfather's World War I draft card and an 1860 "slave schedule," an official government record of enslaved people that was part of the U.S. census. Most prized are the photographs that show relatives on the farm as they feed animals and raise children. When "everyone has been born and passed away" on the same land, "you have just a massive amount of artifacts," she says.

About four dozen photos, many in vintage frames, look down on Hamilton as she works at her wooden desk. Even seemingly unrelated projects, like [her exhibition featuring celestial paintings](#) that opened in January at the New York

gallery Marianne Boesky, are imbued with the spirit of the collection. (The shape of clouds in one painting, for example, echoes the silhouette of a group photo of her family in the studio.) “There’s a frequency I’m able to tap into just by being surrounded by them while I’m working,” Hamilton says of the images.

The collection: “Family photographs and artifacts from rural western Tennessee that date from the 1800s to the present.”

Number of pieces in the collection: More than 1,000 original documents and photographs are stored on the farm and in relatives’ homes. Hamilton has copies of several dozen in her studio.

First acquisition: “My mom’s high school yearbook photo. On the back, she [wrote that] she wanted to be a fashion buyer and live in a big city. She stayed in the South, but ... I took on that lifestyle in a way, moving to [New York] and having a career in fashion and then in art.”

Latest acquisition: “When I was pregnant with my daughter — the seventh girl in the line — I was on a mission to find a picture of my great-great-great-grandmother Piney. My mom found one at my grandmother’s house while building her a storm shelter.”

Weirdest: “I have a love note from my dad to my mom when they were in college. [It’s written in] the language of the ’70s. It says something like, ‘Do I knock you out?’”

Most sought after: “There’s a rumor that we have Grandma Piney’s midwifery papers in some closet. She delivered most of my grandmother’s siblings.”

Most precious: “I have all four portraits of my great-grandmothers. Really strong portraits in a similar format — the same orientation [and] composition. They are totems to me.”

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Photo assistant: Storm Harper