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Allison Janae Hamilton, *Floridawater I*, 2019. Archival pigment print. 24 × 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

AT THE RIVER'S EDGE: ALLISON JANAЕ HAMILTON

Interview by Stephanie E. Goodalle
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Born in Kentucky and raised in Florida and western Tennessee, Allison Janae Hamilton creates imaginative installations, sculptures, videos, and photographs that immerse viewers into mythic scenarios that weave historical and personal accounts anchored in the rural Southern landscape. In her work, Hamilton draws attention to lesser-shared histories of the rural South where the landscape is a storyteller and a witness highlighting issues such as ownership and loss, sustainability, and climate change.

When I spoke with Hamilton in her studio, her love for her ancestral lands shined as we discussed her work in *MOOD*, the Studio Museum in Harlem's 2019 Artist-in-Residence exhibition. With this recent project, Hamilton directs her attention to America's Gulf Coast and more specifically to North Florida's local waterways, their surrounding landscape, and the histories tied to water and land.

—Stephanie E. Goodalle

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MOOD is about American identity, but in a certain way it's also about space and place.

Allison Janae Hamilton

That's right. There is definitely an American quality to all three of the individual artists' rooms in *MOOD*, and the shared space is rooted in a shared location, even if it's a psychic space.

SG

I felt place in your room. The facet of the American South is not as widely discussed or seen.

AJH

Place is the center of my practice, particularly the land itself. I'm always thinking about the actual materials of land as a storyteller. For me, the work is not about the South; it's about looking at the land as a way to try to understand where we are now. If you look at the story of landscape anywhere around the world, you can see which people are always on the wrong side of the levee or in the area of environmental runoff or air pollution. I'm using the landscapes I know most intimately to focus on the specifics of that landscape and consider the histories and narratives of displacement, land loss, bodies, ownership of space, and migration around that space. I'm using the natural materials out of that space to then think about the relationships between landscape and lived experience in a broader sense. When you see the work, you see the aesthetics, the objects, the types of plants, the types of animals, and the types of imagery in the locations home to my family, especially in the photographs. Those items are from where I'm from, but I'm thinking about landscape on a larger scale. In the same way that we might look at music or food as culture, I'm bringing in landscape as a central element in the makings of culture. For me, blackness is tied up in my experience with the land. When I moved to New York City, I began to see in person for the first time the ways that blackness and space relate to one another in a post-Great Migration context. Coming from the South, I knew about this in an intellectual sense but hadn't experienced the ways that blackness and space are connected in multiple contexts outside of the landscapes that are home to me. So, even though my work centers on the rural, there are connections made to the post-Great Migration experience as well. There is an assumption that the tie between landscape, the earth, and blackness is rooted solely in the past, that it's not a contemporary lived experience. But that's not true. I'm interested in all of these contemporary relationships between life and landscape.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Three girls in sabal palm forest*, 2019. Archival pigment print. 24 × 36 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

SG

Every time I've seen your work, I think back to Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies Of Struggle* (2006), where the landscape is not just physical; it's psychic and material, and our black bodies inform the landscape.

AJH

That's why in a lot of the work that I do I'm not trying to do a one-to-one replication of the space. I'm trying to draw upon what I'm looking at, my memories, the stories of family and friends, and what I know. You can't

replicate perfectly anything you've seen from the past even if the past was last week. It's dreamlike, so I try to present it in that way. There are layers, apparition-type figures, and things that float in and out because I don't want to be didactic.

For example, my video installation *FLORIDALAND* (2017–18) uses Florida as a point of departure but doesn't represent Florida in an exact sense. Hence, *FLORIDALAND*. In the same way that my presentation in *MOOD* does, whether that's the Sabal palm fronds or the Wacissa River video, I'm trying to piece everything together in a psychic or an emotional way that maybe resonates and recalls this experience. It's not this perfect, buttoned-up presentation. It's layered, and it's messy, and it's fraught.

SG

I got that with *Wakulla Cathedral* (2019). There were the two girls, then it's the wolf, and we're bouncing back and forth.

AJH

I try to use the land as a witness and as a storyteller. If landscape is a witness, though you can't talk to the tree, and you can't talk to the birds, you can still imagine the things that this forest or that this river has witnessed. For my large-scale video piece *Wacissa* (2019), I position the viewer within a series of rivers from my home region of North Florida that are all connected via our area's Slave Canal. It's called that because it was dug out via slave labor in the 1850s to bring cotton from Georgia through the Florida Panhandle to ships waiting in the Gulf of Mexico. As soon as the canal was finished, it was already defunct because the railroads came in, so it was never used for its intended purpose.

I made that video in a kayak, and I have the camera down in the water, and I'm going through these rivers. You can see that the landscape is very beautiful, but it's suffocating because the intention is to make the viewer feel like they're drowning in this beautiful water.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Wacissa*, 2019. Video still. Single-channel video projection. Courtesy of the artist.

SG

This show has a very heavy water focus. What caused this shift?

AJH

For this project I was interested in thinking about the coastal South, labor, and myths of paradise. I've heard people say, "Oh, Florida isn't the South," and that's not the case. Our area in North Florida has a landscape

and culture more similar to parts of Louisiana, Georgia, or coastal Alabama. I didn't realize that people weren't familiar with our part of Florida until I started making work using the aesthetics of the region.

In another related sense, I think a lot of times when people link the experiences of black folks to water, it's the transatlantic slave trade, it's the ocean, it's the Black Atlantic, which connects us as a diaspora to the Caribbean, to South America, to Europe. For this project I wanted to think about a different type of water, which are the rivers, the canals—these slower-moving systems—and to relate that experience in a very localized, local to me, way. When you present the river on this large wall, it feels like you could be drowning in the ocean; but it's a local river, so the violence of what exists there too is part of a continuum of that violence that is mostly attributed to the experience of black folks and water.

SG

Can you talk about how you replicated an aqueous environment without literally bringing the water?

AJH

The sound is a texture in the room just like some of the other elements you see. I try to use sound in a way that is imposing and becomes almost an object in the room. From the hallway, it sounds like there is some kind of monster trapped in there, and then you walk into the space and see that it's water. That was intentional. I played around with sound and image, the scale of the video, and the darkness of the room. That impacted the way the colors fell, the way that we chose to illuminate the photographs which made it seem like they were in shadow boxes. Those choices helped to animate the water in a tangible sense.



MOOD: Studio Museum Artists in Residence 2018–19. Allison Janae Hamilton installation view. Photo by Matthew Septimus.

SG

I recall from an email that you are planning your summer travel schedule. What's that experience like with gathering the materials for the installations?

AJH

A lot of that happens in the winter when I go home. That means physically gathering objects for potential sculptures, but also making the raw footage of video material or photographs. The winter is better because the weather is a little bit more forgiving, the light is more dramatic, and the animals out in the swamps and bayous I

shoot in are more dormant. I jokingly call our area of Florida Jurassic Park because the landscape is very imposing. So I shoot a lot in the winter, and in the summer I'm usually figuring out some initial ideas and scouting.

For this project I scouted in the winter where I wanted to do a lot of the shoots, and I did shoot Wacissa in the winter; but the images where I'm in the water, I waited until April to make those. It was just a little bit more forgiving, but by that time there were more gators. Everything is a tradeoff in Florida.