ELEPHANT



Allison Janae Hamilton's 'Venus of Ossabaw,' 2026

ALLISON JANAE HAMILTON FINDS HISTORY IN THE LAND

By Melissa Lyde
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In Allison Janae Hamilton's films, the landscape is never passive. Forests, swamps and coastlines become active participants in the lives of her characters. Rooted in the American South, her work reflects on overlooked narratives of Black life to create films that feel mythic. Ahead of the screening of Venus of Ossabaw with BAM, Melissa Lyde speaks with Hamilton about the stories embedded in the land, the possibilities of cinema and the Florida that have shaped her imagination.

Melissa Lyde (ML): What struck me first about your work was a still from Venus of Ossabaw. I don't even know how it found me, but I remember seeing this image of water and immediately feeling something like freedom. Around the same time I was putting together Tidal Memory, and before I'd even seen the film, I knew I wanted to include it. I'd love to begin there. Can you talk about your personal relationship with the earth and the role it plays throughout your practice?

Allison Janae Hamilton (AJH): As a writer-director, my filmmaking is directly informed by my personal influences growing up in the American south. My relationship with the earth—with nature and the landscape around us—is a huge part of my life. My experience of Black womanhood, and before that Black girlhood, has always been underscored by the natural world.

Most of my family is from rural Tennessee, where our family farm has passed down through six generations, and I was raised in Florida. Both of those places exist heavily throughout the visual register of my work, which in part is an amalgam of the landscapes that shaped me culturally and personally. I grew up surrounded by my grandmother, great-aunts, cousins, who were all farmers. We'd go fishing together, they hunted, and they were incredibly outdoorsy women. Most of what we ate came from the land our family worked. Growing up in Florida also meant living with a constant awareness of the changing environment. Hurricane season, the dry season, the vulnerability of the landscape, and the realities of climate change were simply part of everyday life. That awareness has stayed with me.



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ML: Your new film, Venus of Ossabaw, will screen with Alfreda's Cinema this July. It feels like one of the first films in recent years to revisit the history of chattel slavery in America, but it does so in a very different way. At a moment when so much history is being erased, can you talk about the importance of preserving these stories?

AJH: Storytelling is storytelling. As a director, I believe there isn't a story that's off limits. I'm not afraid to enter difficult historical territory. With Venus, though, the film is really about one teenager's personal relationship with the landscape of the wilderness, both physical and psychological.

In my work, landscape is always a living, breathing force. It aids Venus in her journey while simultaneously making it more difficult. That's really the heart of the film. What I hope Venus contributes to is a broader lineage of films exploring Black relationships to land and what those relationships have meant throughout history.

I'm writing a feature-length version of Venus, which will be set later, around the 1920s. Again, it centers on a woman's spiritual journey through the wilderness and the ancestral presences that guide her along the way. Those spirits, I believe, have always accompanied us throughout our history in this country.

ML: I also found myself thinking about young Black girls. We don't often see their experiences during this time period explored with this kind of emotional depth. Could you talk about why it was important to center a young protagonist and to explore her relationship with the wilderness?

AJH: The wilderness exists on several levels. It's literal, but it's also psychological, spiritual, and supernatural. Across storytelling traditions, even biblical ones, the wilderness is often an in-between space. It's rarely presented as friendly. It's a place of uncertainty, of testing, of transformation. For Venus, it's both a refuge and obstacle. It's where she finds safety, but it's also what she must survive.

Historically, that's true as well. The landscape has always held multiple meanings for Black communities. It was the site of labor, and also of refuge. It was where hush harbors existed, where Hoodoo traditions drew from plants and natural materials, where survival strategies were developed. The film tries to hold all of those meanings simultaneously. More broadly, that's something I strive to do throughout my practice; to explore the many ways landscape intersects with culture, history, and Black life in America.



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ML: Before encountering your work, I wasn't familiar with the history of Spanish Florida as a refuge for escaped people. Like many Americans, I'd learned about the Underground Railroad leading north, but I hadn't known about this movement further south into Florida. Can you talk about discovering that history and how it became the foundation for Venus?

AJH: It really is a lesser-known chapter of American history. When Telfair Museums commissioned the project, they invited me to create a work responding to the history of Ossabaw Island. During my research I came across the work of historian Dr. Paul Pressly, who was writing about people escaping enslavement into Spanish Florida. I reached out to him, and he generously shared chapters of his book before it was published. That's how I learned about Titus, a man who had been enslaved on Ossabaw Island and aided others in escaping into Florida. Discovering Titus's story was incredibly moving. Eventually I found myself asking: What if Titus were imagined as a young girl? What might that journey have looked like? That's where Venus's story began.



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ML: Spirituality feels deeply embedded throughout your work. Can you share your approach to capturing that presence on screen?

AJH: Spirituality is simply part of my life. Like the landscape, it's part of what I grew up with. Both as a director and as a screenwriter, I draw from memory, things I've seen, things I've heard, stories my grandmother told me, traditions that were simply part of everyday life. My grandmother is ninety-six now, and I'm actually down here visiting her. Those experiences continue to shape me.

The spiritual elements in my work come from that lived experience. Sometimes they're very explicit; sometimes they're much subtler. They might emerge through superstition, ritual, or even an emotional atmosphere. Film gives me many ways to communicate that. Sound and music are especially important. I've been fortunate to collaborate with extraordinary musicians. For Venus, I worked with Candice Hoyes, whose voice brings an entirely different emotional register to the film. Beyond music, it's also about color, lighting, mood, and collaboration with cinematographers, production designers, and everyone involved in shaping the visual world. All of those elements work

together to create an experience that reaches beyond the intellectual and into something emotional and spiritual.

ML: Cinema is a sanctuary for me. I've often described Alfreda's Cinema as my gospel. Could you talk about the theater itself as a spiritual place?

AJH: There's something profoundly communal about gathering in a theater. Everyone sits together, watching the same images, hearing the same sounds, experiencing the same story. There's something about that shared attention that reminds me of a spiritual service. People often say museums are their church. I think art, in many forms, creates similar experiences. Whether you're in a cinema or a gallery, you're entering a space that asks for presence.

As a film director, my hope is always that people experience the work not only intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually. Especially when I'm inviting audiences into places or histories they may not know, emotion becomes a shared point of entry.

ML: When I think about Black women artists whose work engages landscape and memory, I immediately think of Zora Neale Hurston, and I also see echoes of artists like Betye Saar in your practice. Can you reflect on your t relationship to the work of Black women artists and scholars who came before you?

AJH: Absolutely. Zora Neale Hurston is certainly one of those foundational figures for me, and there are so many others. Deb Willis has been an important mentor. I draw from artists, photographers, writers, scholars, people like Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, Farah Jasmine Griffin. At the same time, I draw just as much from everyday people and vernacular culture. The stories I grew up hearing, the rhythms of daily life, family traditions... they're every bit as influential as canonical works.

Hurston remains one of my strongest touchstones. Their Eyes Were Watching God has inspired several artworks over the years. The song Candice Hoyes performs in Celestine, Florida Storm, was written in 1928 about the Great Miami Hurricane. That same year came the Okeechobee Hurricane, which would inspire Their Eyes Were Watching God. Those works continue to speak to one another across my own practice.

ML: For a long time, the phrase "Black Americana" was associated with caricature—with minstrel imagery, blackface, and racist memorabilia. Artists like Betye Saar reclaimed those histories. Looking at your work, I feel like you've offered a reframing of Black Americana entirely. Has reclaiming that language been intentional?

AJH: When I think of Americana, I'm responding to our own traditions, our rituals, spirituality, food, music-making, storytelling, and relationships to land. I'm not particularly interested in how others have represented us. I'm interested in how we have understood ourselves.

ML: Your upcoming feature Floridaland is set in northern Florida, a place that has become both culturally iconic and politically charged. I'd love to hear how you've developed this portrait of Florida in your upcoming feature..

AJH: Floridaland is really my film baby right now. I'm developing it through the Sundance Feature Film Program, and I'm incredibly excited about it. The film is set in the early 2000s and follows a college student navigating life between her university campus and her family's casino business. She carries a supernatural gift of sight that is both a blessing and a burden, so she's trying to balance that spiritual inheritance with the ordinary experience of being a college student.

One thing the film does is present a version of Florida that isn't necessarily the one people expect. It brings together many of the communities that make up the state—Caribbean communities, Native communities, Black American communities—and explores the intersections between them. Florida is an incredibly complex place, and Floridaland embraces that complexity. It's ultimately told through the protagonist's perspective as she tries to navigate this rich, layered world that is simply home to her.



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ML: What are you most excited about as you continue developing the film?

AJH: Many things, but most recently, the soundtrack. The film is set in northern Florida in the early 2000s and the music of that time and place is a major throughline in the film. I'm excited to bring together that casino nightlife culture, the hip-hop of that period, and the beauty of North Florida's swamp landscape. Together they create the world that shaped me, and I'm excited to finally share it.

ML: Your work consistently presents a Florida that feels very different from the one many people imagine. There is so much cultural richness there that often gets overshadowed.

AJH: I wouldn't want to be from anywhere else. I love Florida, and I love the culture that shaped me. It's one of the reasons I make the work that I do.

When I think about Florida, I think about the Marching 100. I think about FAMU vs Bethune football games. I think about Goombay festivals, people going to Martin Luther King parades with iguanas and pythons, Miami bass music, conch salad, barbecue. I think about the culture that made so many of us who we are. Works like Barry Jenkins's Moonlight or Zora Neale Hurston's writing show the richness of these places in ways that only art really can. They allow people to encounter a place through someone's lived experience rather than through assumptions. I hope my work does something similar. It opens another understanding of Florida through the perspective of the people who actually live there.

ML: Climate and the environment have become increasingly urgent realities, especially in the South. Your work doesn't simply depict environmental change, it seems to understand environmental issues as inseparable from Black life. How do you think about that relationship?

AJH: One thing I try to do throughout my work is show how our lived experiences are inseparable from the changing landscape. That commitment also extends to how I make work. Sustainability is an important part of my practice. My first exhibition with Marianne Boesky Gallery was their first carbon-neutral exhibition. That was something that mattered to me, not only conceptually but practically.

ML: There's such a profound sense of respect for the land throughout your work. Would you describe yourself as a caretaker?

AJH: I come from farmers, so it's difficult for me to separate my identity from the land. It wasn't something I consciously chose, it was just the environment I was raised in. Even today, spending time with my grandmother, she's reminding me how to prepare polk salad, which grows wild where we're from. Today people might call that foraging, but growing up it was everyday life. It wasn't until I moved to New York in my twenties that I truly realized a land-centered existence wasn't everyone's norm. Even today, as we're speaking, there's a thunderstorm outside my window here in Florida, where I'm currently visiting my family. After this conversation I'll probably sit on the porch and watch it roll through. That's a part of my life, and it inevitably becomes part of my work.

ML: Your practice moves fluidly between contemporary art and cinema. Artists like Arthur Jafa and Cauleen Smith have shown how those worlds can inform one another without being constrained by either. Has working within the art world given you a different kind of freedom as a filmmaker?

AJH: As a writer-director who started her career in the art world, my visual language definitely informs both my screenwriting and my approach to directing. People want to experience a good story, whether it's presented in a gallery, on multiple screens, in an independent film, or in a theater. That said, the art world does encourage experimentation in a way that's been very freeing for me. I feel like I have one foot in both worlds now – art and film. When people from the film industry read my scripts, they often comment on how visual they are. I think that's because I came to filmmaking through visual art.

ML: Before we finish, I'd love to ask about one final element in Venus. Without giving too much away, the animated sequence arrives almost unexpectedly. It also reminds us that Venus is still a child. Why did animation feel like the right language for that moment?

AJH: It goes back to experimentation and letting the story determine its form. Animation allowed me to approach part of the film through a different emotional register. I also loved that animation carries a childlike quality. It evokes drawing, imagination and memory. Throughout the film there are subtle moments of childhood whimsy existing alongside extremely difficult circumstances. Those contrasts felt important.

ML: It also made me think about the games the girls play together, the coded language they develop, the quiet strategies they use to communicate.

AJH: Exactly. Those moments become little breadcrumbs throughout the film. I'm really glad you noticed that.

ML: I admire the courage it takes to revisit these histories in ways that feel so deeply human. Rather than simply recounting the past, your films invite us to inhabit it.

AJH: Thank you. That means a great deal to hear.