

The Southern Gothic Moods of Allison Janae Hamilton

Hamilton's immersive installation allows visitors to wrestle with a mysterious land, its racial realities, and its mythic past.



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Installation view, Allison Janae Hamilton at MoMA PS1 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Before you even enter the room, the sounds of burbling water and flickers of light convey a sense of agitation. Two hanging yard signs covered with silver-painted palm fronds (“Metal Yard Sign with Sabal Palm Fronds I” and “Metal Yard Sign with Sabal Palm Fronds II,” both 2019) lend a portentous feel to the narrow entry hallway that conjures a crypt’s antechamber. Inside the shadowy main room, the menacing burbles grow louder as light flashes and river water rushes in Allison Janae Hamilton’s short film, *Wacissa* (2019). The film is projected onto the far wall and

the adjacent walls' corners. Its turbulent audiovisuals make it hard to discern up from down, water from sky, as if the video is simulating the experience of panicked and confused drowning.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Wacissa* (still), 2019. Single-channel video projection (courtesy the artist)

The Studio Museum's 2018-19 Artists in Residence exhibition is called *Mood*. It also features excellent work by Tschabalala Self and Sable Elyse Smith in separate rooms. However, Hamilton's solo room envelops the visitor in a mood so ominous and constrictive it verges on claustrophobic. Several dimly lit photographs depict young girls incongruously clad in white dresses while ensconced in Florida forest- and swampland. A mysterious wooden yard sign ("Yard Sign with White Feathers," 2019), crowned with feathers and covered with a nest of painted white cross marks, recalls Southern yard art. Two sculptures of fantastic mythical creatures contain touches of dark humor: "Blackwater Creature II" (2019) is a creepily whimsical centipede made from branches, feathers, horse hair, and bronze baby shoes; "Blackwater Creature I" (2019) is a dangling amalgam of horsehair and resin that resembles the Addams' Family's Cousin Itt and casts a shadow evoking a lynched figure.



Allison Janae Hamilton, *Wacissa* (still), 2019. Single-channel video projection (courtesy the artist)

Hamilton's previous, well-regarded multimedia installations, such as her recent *Pitch* at MASS MoCA, also conveyed a haunted, almost animist sense of the rural American South, where the artist was born and raised. Her installations are of a piece with a strand of contemporary African American art and critical thought in which traumatic, less visible histories are imaginatively reconstructed so as to counter-mythologize them. For example, photographer Dawoud Bey's exhibition, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, at the Art Institute of Chicago earlier this year, depicted underground railroad landscapes as if from fugitive slaves' points of view. Similarly, writer Saidiya Hartman incorporates what she calls "critical fabulation" — fictional narratives based on archival research — into her books to give voice to the gaps and silences in transatlantic slavery's historical record.



Installation view, Allison Janae Hamilton at MoMA PS1 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Hamilton’s mythopoetic contribution to *Mood* stands out for how much gloomier it is than her previous installations. *Wacissa*, in particular, is unrelenting: 20-plus minutes of whooshing swampwater, with only brief, sporadic audiovisual respites. Exiting back into the museum hallway’s stillness provides tangible sensory relief. The experience reminded me of artist [Patty Chang’s](#) comparison of art-making to what scientists call free-diving’s “struggle phase,” that is, the point at which the gasping underwater diver must either come up for air or relent and drown. Hamilton’s immersive installation allows visitors to wrestle with a mysterious land, its racial realities, and its mythic past, but also affords many the luxury — unavailable to those who live it — to extricate themselves from that struggle when it becomes too much to bear.

Mood, organized by the Studio Museum, continues at MoMA PS1 (22-25 Jackson Avenue, Long Island City, Queens), through September 9.