

ALLISON JANA E HAMILTON'S

KINGDOM OF THE

Marvelous

BY MICHELLE WEIDMAN

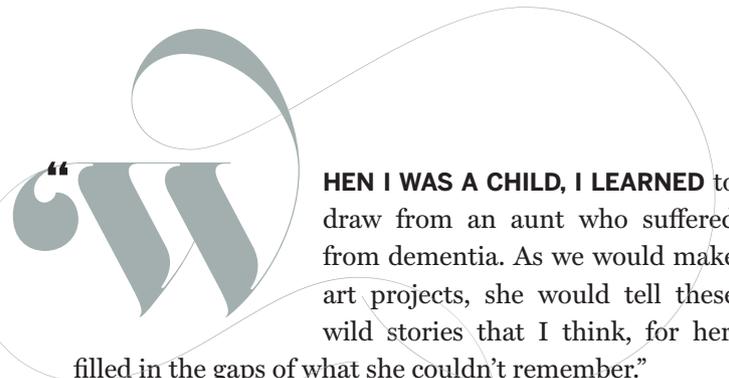




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“WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I LEARNED to draw from an aunt who suffered from dementia. As we would make art projects, she would tell these wild stories that I think, for her, filled in the gaps of what she couldn’t remember.”

Stories are a necessary mortar to fill the gap in knowledge and memory. They are also the place where myths are born and the permeability of the real versus the imagined is allowed its contingency. For Allison Janae Hamilton, these processes were the origin and now the focus of her visual arts career.

Hamilton conceived of the series *Kingdom of the Marvelous*, which shifted her work to her own cultural identity and family history, after looking through a memento book made by her mother for a family reunion. The book contained information about their elder relatives.

“There were little tidbits about their favorite colors, foods, and bible scriptures, but not much more—and certainly nothing about their personal lives, desires, fears, passions, secrets, etc.” These lost details developed into a series of reinterpreted images and imagined realities. “I took this idea and applied it to my desire to know more about these figures whom I am related to, but know very little about.”

The results are mythic and phantasmagoric, existing in a past that was never quite there, but whose truth has shaped aspects of Hamilton’s present moment.

Drawing on her cultural identity as a rural black southerner, Hamilton combines familiar aspects of portraiture with quixotic props and costuming. Her subjects pose in various states of leisure amid the textures of dense Southern foliage. Many of the poses are from old photographs of her family or modifications of early twentieth-century African American portraiture. She uses a combination of digital and medium-format film cameras with strobes to create her more spectral images.

Carrying on aspects of a familial tradition of hunting, Hamilton made or adapted the costumes for *Kingdom of the Marvelous* and incorporated animal hides and taxidermied props. When the images are exhibited, Hamilton

often displays them in an installation format.

“My artwork takes the form of environmental portraiture and photographic-based installation,” she said. “Additional icons, such as lace, flowers, veils, church fans, tambourines, curiosities, and food items animate my play on cultural history and memory, and toy with expectations of identity and culture against the rural landscape.”

Although the series consists of images of black men and women, the photographs of the men in particular have received recent attention in part due to their inclusion in *Dandy Lion: (Re)Articulating Black Masculine Identity* at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago (covered in *TPP* issue 2015.1, pg. 10). That exhibition focuses on representations of men in cityscapes whose sartorial sensibilities (a combination of Victorian and more traditionally African styles) and self-presentation complicate pervasive and lethal stereotypes of “urban” black men.

“I think the photographs of men do show another representation of black masculinity that is different from representations that typically appear in our visual culture landscape,” Hamilton explains, but she’s quick to point out she didn’t grow up with these stereotypes.

“Spending so much time on our farm, I always saw my male cousins and uncles out in the gardens among lovely flowers, full of color, texture, and beauty,” she says. “In our popular culture today, ‘urban’ seems to be another word for ‘black.’ Rural concepts of blackness I think are often left out of visual discourse completely or depicted as archaic, anti-contemporary, and part of a painful past.”

So on a broader level, *Kingdom of the Marvelous* is performing the work of filling in the gaps in Hamilton’s ancestral memory as well as the dangerous void in cultural memory of black identity in the United States.

Hamilton will be giving an artist talk about *Kingdom of the Marvelous* at the Black Portraits Conference in Florence, Italy at the end of May. In addition to the *Dandy Lion* exhibition in Chicago, she’s included in the show *Badass Art Man* at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, which features the artwork and collection of Danny Simmons. ●





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