

ARTnews



Jammie Holmes, *Still at the Wrong Table*, 2022.
Courtesy Various Small Fires.

Painter Jammie Holmes Wrestles with What It Means to Belong

By: Angelica Villa
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The people in Jammie Holmes's paintings are ones he knows well. They come from his inner circle, and are pictured in settings that shift between safe havens and sites for grieving. In some scenes, Holmes may depict friends convening. In others, his figures may appear in darker contexts—carrying the weight of a casket, for instance.

In a recent interview, Holmes, 38, said his work draws on his coming of age in Thibodaux, Louisiana. The town is haunted by history: it was the site of a Black-led workers' strike in 1887 that turned violent as white vigilantes descended on the protestors, killing 60 people. The details around the dark incident have, until recently, existed outside the country's official public record.

In that way, Holmes's work often stems from his own life and the conditions in his native city. During a phone call, he described feeling indebted to the South. He's been processing a recurring question: "Where do I belong?"

The Dallas-based artist's newest show, "SomewhereinAmerica" at Various Small Fires in Los Angeles, marks one attempt to answer that question by looking at where he's landed, while also holding onto roots still planted

in Thibodaux. The show comes following a series of acclaimed outings, including one at New York’s Marianne Boesky Gallery last year. Meanwhile, in January, Holmes was awarded a fellowship from the Gordon Parks Foundation, a merit given to artists dealing with social issues similar to the ones addressed by its namesake.

Before he committed to painting as a full-time career in 2019, he spent a decade working in a Louisiana oil field. Racism was rampant among workers, he recalled. He described one disturbing episode from before he left the job. He’d spent some time negotiating with one of his subordinates, a formerly incarcerated man tattooed with a hate symbol, on getting the marking removed from his body. The father of two has spoken openly about being institutionalized as an adolescent and the effects that played out during his adulthood.

He said he has continued to face pangs of unease since then. Recently, while visiting the home of a white art collector, he encountered a disturbing image—one he won’t describe—with racist undertones. Yet Holmes has not turned away from images like that one, and in Texas, he’s begun to frequent thrift shops, where he’s started to collect Jim Crow–era memorabilia, like mammy figurines, that now fill a part of his studio. These objects appear in his most recent works. “I’d rather take them out of circulation, give them new life,” he said. “I’m going to take it and I’m going to repurpose it.”

In *Still at the Wrong Table* (2022), bundles of grapes, dead fish, and hunting game are splayed out on a dinner table. Two blue-suited Black men raise empty glasses in an off-putting toast. Celebrating reluctantly, the work’s subjects are interrupted by racist imagery: one man’s hand holds out a mammy figurine, while in the background, minstrel caricatures with gold-plated teeth bloom from flowers.

Beside it is a self-portrait, *Huey’s Rug* (2022), in which the artist sits on a staircase with his hands clasped. The proximity between the two works implies that Holmes can’t be separated from the disturbing images in *Still at the Wrong Table*.

“I’m eating good, but there’s a self-portrait of me sitting on the stairwell, not at that table,” Holmes said. He checked himself, taking stock of all that he has. “Why do I still feel comfortable eating among those that don’t have anything? I realized I’m not crazy, I’m not on an island. I’m painting what I understand.” Referring to those in his closest corners, he says, “I don’t want to leave them out of the picture.”



Installation view of “Somewhereinamerica” at Various Small Fires in Los Angeles.

While much of Holmes's work is closely related to the Thibodaux of the present, he reaches far back in art history for his references. Holmes described looking at the work of artists like Caravaggio, whose, in 16th-century Italy, painted models whose bodies he left non-idealized. "I love the idea of him painting the part of Europe that was the underground, and I love that he didn't leave people out," Holmes said.

A range of artists of color working right now, from Kerry James Marshall to Salman Toor, have also looked to the Old Masters. Partly, these artists are working in a way that questions who really gets to be considered a master and why. Holmes is doing this too, dealing with how the canon has long excluded artists like himself. The word "master," Holmes explained, has an association too loaded to give it a pass in the context of art history. Where he's from, a city that once thrived on the labor of enslaved people working in sugar plantations, the word sounds like a slur. "Coming from Louisiana, it's hard for me to accept the word 'master,'" Holmes said. "I avoided that work for a long time."

Written into the political fabric of states like Louisiana, and hubs in it like Thibodaux, are divisions that remain ever present. "There's not a lot of gray area, when you're talking about a group of armed whites who are shooting African Americans with impunity," Calvin Schermerhorn, an historian of American slavery at Arizona State University, said in an interview about the city's past. In Thibodaux and other locales along the Mississippi River, industries have been "deliberately white-owned, Black-worked," in Schermerhorn's words—social violence underpins them.

Some conservative forces in politics would today prefer to forget episodes like the one that happened in Thibodaux in 1887, Schermerhorn said. Drawing out the reality of the incident and its injustices is difficult, he explained, when they are cloaked by "an historical alibi."

"Recovering this memory" has become the work of historians, and among them, artists like Holmes, according to Schermerhorn. "This is the American problem."

For Holmes, painting memories and family members takes its toll. Holmes said creating paintings induces a "serotonin burnout" because of how much he labors over them. He describes his paintings as extensions of his own body: like field work, they take affect over his senses as he develops them. "I feel them different, I hear them different."

It is for this reason that Holmes has developed a strategy in his work that allows him some mental reprieve. In *Peace of Mind* (2022), Holmes repeatedly depicts a sparrow that is left partially hidden beneath a layer of textured paint. Sparrows recur in his paintings—they draw on birds he saw in his family's garden, which Holmes considered a place of escape as a child. They act like metaphors for the difficulty of total liberation—and also connote safety.

"When I started creating those paintings, that was like my peace of mind. I was using them in the middle of making figurative paintings," he said. "When you see that, it's like a sanctuary."

As he has continued to render these sparrows, Holmes has made a discovery: these animals can also be seen beyond his hometown. "I swear I thought those birds were only in Thibodaux," he said. "The world is bigger than I thought."