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Artist Jammie Holmes in his Dallas studio in 2020
Photo: Emery Bastable

DALLAS ARTIST JAMMIE HOLMES PAYS HOMAGE TO HIS LOUISIANA HOMETOWN AT THE FORT WORTH MODERN

BY JOSÉ SÁNCHEZ CÓRDOVA

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It's the first solo museum exhibition for the 39-year-old artist from Thibodaux

Jammie Holmes was working in a Carrollton machine shop in 2017 when a colleague saw him sketching at his desk. "Do you like to draw?" he asked Holmes.

Holmes, an avid drawer since childhood, said yes, prompting a suggestion to visit the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The visit inspired him to pursue art professionally.

"If I would have walked into a museum that had Renaissance art, I'm not sure if I would have been the artist that I am today. I don't know if I would have been an artist at all," Holmes says. "But I know for a fact that walking into that museum and seeing the architecture and the paintings there — it was like 'Wow, I want to do this one day.' And I just took a chance."

Now, in a full-circle moment, the Modern is presenting the 39-year-old's first solo museum exhibition, "Jammie Holmes: Make the Revolution Irresistible." The exhibition includes 18 of Holmes' pieces, mainly paintings inspired by his hometown of Thibodaux, La.

Thibodaux, a small city on the banks of the Bayou Lafourche, is haunted by a long history of racial violence. In 1887, armed white men killed dozens of Black plantation workers after a labor strike. The event became known as the Thibodaux Massacre.

"Because of all the blood that was shed over the sugarcane, the place itself has so much negativity," Holmes told *The Dallas Morning News* in 2020. "At times it gets bad, it really gets bad. The city itself is almost cursed because of the history that was there."

Despite growing up about an hour from New Orleans, Holmes' only exposure to art outside school came from magazines and Nickelodeon cartoons.

After high school, he went to work in the bayou oil fields.

'Church in the Wild'

Among the works in the Modern exhibition, Holmes says *Church in the Wild* is the most meaningful to him, representing themes like Christianity, the South and the Black experience that run throughout his art.



Jammie Holmes' 2023 installation "Church in the Wild." The work is currently on display at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Courtesy of the Artist.
Photo: Evie Bishop

The piece is a small wooden church, painted white and carpeted in red. Inside, images of Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy surround a television that plays a short film on loop. The film is meant to evoke Holmes' inner turmoil from growing up in the Christian South, he says.

"It's that feeling of being lost, being confused, but at the same time looking for something that you can hold on to. When it comes to Christianity, I feel like a lot of us go with what we're born into and what they tell us to do. But a lot of times we don't even know if it's the right thing or if it's what we want to do."

María Elena Ortiz, curator at the Modern, says she was drawn to the cultural relevance of Holmes' figurative work, or art derived from the real world. "What I like about Jammie's approach to figuration is that it was uncanny and it was more emotional and subjective."

She also felt drawn to Holmes' art because of his background and perspective, she says. "It's important to show those other stories that come from peripheral places in the U.S. and weave them into the national discourse."

'Let's make this irresistible'

Holmes says he paints for his hometown. He hopes to inspire others who, like him, grew up with a passion for art, but lacked the opportunity to pursue it. He seeks to share understanding, both of himself and others.

"The way I grew up — that's what it was all about. Everybody was looking for understanding," Holmes says. "I feel like understanding saves lives and it helps build relationships. I'm just looking for that, even within myself."

Holmes includes himself in many of his paintings as a symbol of his hometown, he says. In *Blame the Man* two men baptize him in what looks like a river. In *Endurance* Holmes is in a barber shop, cutting his brother's hair.

Many people from his home area have visited an art museum for the first time because of his work, he says.

"And they don't feel intimidated because I'm not Picasso, you're not trying to understand Jackson Pollock. I'm not that. I'm just a common person from Louisiana."

The exhibition's title plays off that idea. Holmes says it was inspired by a quote from Black author and activist Toni Cade Bambara: "As a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible."

"That's how I feel. I feel like I'm working for the culture," Holmes says. "And it's not just Black culture. I grew up in a city where there were poor white people living next to us too."

"When we talk about culture, I'm talking about the culture of the people that are working class, the culture of the people that are oppressed, the culture of the people that are not spoken for."

"It's a moment of rallying everybody to say let's try to do our part to make change. Let's make this irresistible."