



Amy Sherald's "Precious Jewels by the Sea" (2019). Credit...© Amy Sherald. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

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“If you’re silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it,” wrote Zora Neale Hurston in her 1937 novel [“Their Eyes Were Watching God.”](#) Throughout this country’s history, black Americans have been reminded near daily that this remains true — both literally and more obliquely. In creative fields, for instance, from the visual arts to theater, the white gaze has long determined whose stories are told — what gets to be seen, what’s given value and what’s deemed worthy enough to be recorded and remembered — enforcing a seemingly immovable standard by which black artists and other artists of color are nearly always cast in supporting roles to the mostly white stars of the Western canon.

Today, though, many black artists are actively resisting that idea, creating work that speaks directly to a black audience, a black gaze, in order to reform the often whitewashed realms in which they practice. We talked with nine of them — each a voice of this moment, as the nation reckons with the deaths of [George Floyd](#), [Breonna Taylor](#) and others, and beyond — about making work that captures the richness and variety of black life. Whether it’s the artist [Tschabalala Self](#) discussing the fraught experience of seeing her paintings be sold, like her ancestors, at auction or the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright [Michael R. Jackson](#) searching for his characters’ interiority, their perspectives distill what it means (and what it has meant) to be black in America. — NOOR BRARA

These interviews have been edited and condensed.



Wardell Milan's "Amerika: Klansman, Theophilus" (2019). Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery



Milan's "Amerika: Klansman, Pulaski" (2019). Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery

‘I am extending an invitation to the viewer to discuss issues that are troubling, prescient and fraught.’

By [Wardell Milan](#), 42, a New York-based visual artist

Some of my most recent collages deal with Klansmen, in the hopes of producing conversations about race relations, both contemporary and historical, here in America, especially given the rise of white nationalism from 2016 on. I am captivated by the people behind these masks. I think about their level of humanity. I think about how they exist in the world as people with souls, morals, jobs and families. We don't share the same beliefs in those ethics, but people have these roles within the Klan as individuals.

I am interested in having straightforward conversations, and I am extending an invitation to the viewer to discuss issues that are troubling, prescient and fraught — issues that some may deem inconsequential. I'm trying to communicate these conceptual narratives in a way that allows audiences from a number of different backgrounds to engage: I want to shift the focus of the conversation around predominantly white institutions so that the institutions that have grown around these hegemonic ideals can be restructured. I am not considering one specific audience when making the work. I am just focusing on the work itself, and how it relates to a white viewer, a black viewer and a transgender viewer depends on the viewer themselves. I cease to have a sense of ownership over my work once it leaves the studio, but I want the work to have life outside of *me* — to have agency — and for the audience to consider what I'm trying to say. The goal is to create pieces that will be relevant long after I am here on this earth. They are my own personal pyramids. — *As told to Tiana Reid*