Allison Janae Hamilton, Seven Champions of Peculiar Engagement

During her graduate studies, Allison Janae Hamilton (American, born 1984) came across a photograph (since lost) of Black American soldiers fencing. The artist was struck that these individuals risked their lives to defend their country, yet upon returning home, they found that their station in society had not improved. Hamilton began purchasing vintage metal and leather fencing masks at thrift stores, yard sales, and online. These relics sat in her studio for many months as the artist tried to determine how she might use them. Over time, Hamilton noted that the masks took on lives of their own and she began to see them as witnesses, both to the present moment and to historical narratives that she could never fully access. Adorning the masks with an array of natural and manufactured materials, Hamilton creates fierce, mythic characters that grow from the bounty of the earth.

Seven Champions of Peculiar Engagement is Hamilton’s first work to incorporate multiple fencing masks. She began making this installation in her New York City studio in 2019. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Hamilton relocated to North Florida, where she was raised and still has family. In the intervening period, the artist noted a shift in her material interests. Having left the concrete environs of the city, she reintroduced herself to a place that had been so familiar to her during her youth by spending time exploring the landscape. The colors and textures of her surroundings began to seep into her work, exemplified by this playful and unexpected grouping.

Grafton Tyler Brown, Lower Falls and Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, from Hayden Point

Grafton Tyler Brown (American, 1841–1918) was the first African American artist to professionally depict landscapes of the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest in the nineteenth century. Lower Falls and Grand Canyon of Yellowstone, from Hayden Point, an oil on canvas painted around 1890, is the first work by this trailblazing artist of color to enter Joslyn’s collection. This important picture illustrates the significant, yet overlooked, role of Black artists in producing imagery that defined the American West. It will join the Museum’s renowned collection of nineteenth-century landscape pictures and be displayed alongside the likes of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt.

Here, Brown emphasizes the grandeur of the space. His loose brushstrokes highlight the striking colors and ruggedness of the terrain. The blue, green, and white tones of the waterfall contrast with the ochre and pink of the rocky formations. The picture reflects Brown’s familiarity with the site of Yellowstone, Wyoming, which he visited twice in 1886 and 1889. There, he catered to a booming tourist market. The paintings he produced could be purchased by visitors as souvenirs of their memorable trip to the country’s first national park. Over his long career, Brown depicted an array of regions less familiar to his mostly urban patrons. In the 1880s, after twenty years in the printing business in San Francisco, he became an itinerant painter through British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and Montana. His views of sublime peaks, cascades, lakes, and geysers were especially sought after by enraptured customers back on the East Coast.

Allison Janae Hamilton (American, born 1984), Seven Champions of Peculiar Engagement, 2020, vintage metal and leather fencing masks, rooster feathers, pheasant feathers, guinea fowl feathers, vintage marble grapes, sola wood, horse hair, metal, and resin, dimensions variable, Museum purchase with funds from the Rose Marie Baumgarten Art Endowment Fund, 2022.8.a–g. Photo: Colin Conces