

In *Her* Place

Nashville Artists in the Twenty-First Century



Whether or not it was ever their intention, all the artists of *In Her Place* are creating in the American South. The exhibition charts a network of high-caliber artists with deceptively specific criteria—they are all women, and they all work in Nashville, Tennessee. The plurality of styles, subjects, and media they choose is so diverse that grouping them together proves that, if anything, there are as many differences among these artists as there are similarities. But isn't that what it is to be Southern? Hasn't life in the American South been a quagmire of contradictions from the very start? If anything ties these artists together, it is not their gender or their location. It is their shared ingenuity and the comfort with which they subvert.

It is true that being from the South creates a familiarity with outlier status that can serve an artist well. Even when there's nothing markedly Southern—whether in subject or application—about their work, that underdog identity can carry through in various ways. In her large-scale mixed-media works, Arkansas-born artist and longtime Nashvillian Jodi Hays grapples with working-class values and the history of abstract expressionism and *arte povera* (fig. 1). It's a unique combination that forces viewers to accept both rural culture and high-brow art-history references as part of the same conversation. Nashville-born artist Vadis Turner uses media like bedsheets and ribbons in unexpected ways to show how materials can misbehave with extraordinary results. Turner's personal history with Tennessee courses throughout the pieces. Her studio is in the home built by her grandparents in 1968 just outside of Nashville on Old Hickory Lake. It was designed by architect Braxton Dixon, who made a mirror image of the home for Johnny Cash, a close family friend. It's a reminder that there is always room for the avant-garde in the South—you just have to build it on top of everything that came before.

When considering a group of artists as an entity, it can be easy to cast generalizations that narrow, rather than expand, the understanding of the artwork at hand. Karen Seapker, Yanira Vissepó, and Kelly S. Williams all make work that touches on similar themes of botany, home, plants, growth, and decay. But each of them uses those themes in extraordinarily different ways. Seapker sees the garden as the ultimate nonconformist arena; her current artist's statement references Octavia E. Butler, who wrote that "the only lasting truth / Is Change."¹ Vissepó uses

garden imagery to evoke politics and colonial history by showcasing the biodiversity of her native Puerto Rico and her present home in Tennessee. Kelly S. Williams, well-versed in multiple painting styles, brings plants indoors with her photorealistic still lifes, and in works like *Francine*, flowers are the stuff of curtains, chintz wallpaper, and embroidered tablecloths (fig. 2).

Narratives of the South can be conjured by objects, images, and products—quilts and Cracker Barrel restaurants and Mason jars. The reality of the South is complex and steeped in liminality. But there are artists who upend those signifiers of

Southernness and use them to reassert the multiple identities of Southern women. Lauren Gregory, a third-generation Southern woman artist, borrows content and techniques from traditional tapestries and quilts but uses contemporary references, including images culled from Instagram, in her textiles. Tennessee-born artist Briena Harmening sees herself as a collaborator with the women who made the materials she reclaims in her work. She scours secondhand shops for the kinds of bedspreads, afghans, and quilts she grew up around, then augments them with her



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

own deadpan country wisdom, turning a simple phrase like “I reckon so,” into an ominous declaration that recalls text-based works from Jenny Holzer and Wayne White. The quilt becomes a conversation with the past.

In any discussion of art and place, it is important to consider not only the location of an artwork’s production but also the time in which it was created. Cuban-born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons has said that we are all “voyeurs of our times....

Everyone is a participant in the narration of time. No one is excluded.”² Since moving here in 2017, she has incorporated stories and images from her days in Nashville, although the work remains connected to her deeper roots in Cuba, and her ancestry in Nigeria and China. As an artist, Campos-Pons draws lines across countries and through time.

Memory is also explored in the work of Ashley Doggett, a painter whose practice incorporates ideas of Blackness and the history of Nashville as a site of political resistance. Doggett’s paintings of photographs made during the Nashville sit-ins of 1960 express the discontent and violence of that era but also show

how images can carry stories across geographical lines. A pillar of the creative community in North Nashville, (a historically Black neighborhood), Elisheba Israel Mrozik addresses the need to create a history for a diasporic people when it has been erased in the installation piece *Culture Commodity* (fig. 3).



Fig. 3

Jana Harper, who was born in Washington, DC, to a family with roots in the Mackinac Bands of Chippewa and Ottawa Indians, explores the ways ancestries can blend in her multimedia series of works *Blood, Memory, and the Power of Naming*. The artwork *Memorial for Mackinac* charts the names of every Mackinac individual accounted for in a census from 1870 and 1908 (fig. 4). Squares of red, black, and yellow reference the Indigenous tradition of the Medicine Wheel as well as the flattened geometric compositions of Piet Mondrian. Kimia Ferdowsi Kline was born in Nashville to Iranian parents, and her work draws from two visual traditions: a flat,



Fig. 3

customary in my home to find a toaster in the freezer or the Holy Bible in the dishwasher.”⁴ Tehran-born artist and ceramicist Raheleh Filsoofi was a toddler during the 1979 revolution and came of age during the wars between Iran and Iraq. She moved to the US in 2002 and has taught ceramics at Vanderbilt University since 2020. In that time, she began a new body of work that incorporates earth she’s collected from multiple sites in and around Nashville.⁵

When you look at the work the artists of *In Her Place* are making, the differences

decorative style inspired by Persian miniatures and carpets, and an approach to the body derived from European figurative painting. She speaks of this blending as a mirror of her own dual identity as a Persian American.³

The surreal situations in the stirring paintings of Nashville-born artist Shannon Cartier Lucy reflect a desire to recapture the feelings of her childhood. In her artist’s statement, Lucy says that her father’s advancing schizophrenia is a major influence in the uncanny combinations she paints: “It was

stand out just as much as the similarities. The same is true for the artists themselves—aside from making work in the same location at the same time, there are few direct correlations among them. Does that mean that place no longer functions as a reliable marker of work? Perhaps it means that place is more expansive than it was before everyone was connected online, airfare was relatively cheap, and art centers began moving away from major coastal cities. Place is additive, not subtractive.

Perhaps place means more, not less, than it used to. It is where you are from and also where you choose to be. It is a setting for human behavior. Place—that particular point of view that can ground an artist—is more important than it has ever been. It just looks different now.

Laura Hutson Hunter
Writer, editor, and independent curator

Adapted from the author’s essay “Southern Artists and Their Discontents: Why Place Still Matters” in this exhibition’s catalogue

Notes

- Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Open Road Media, 2012), chap. 1.
- Laura Hutson Hunter, “Fall Guide 2024: María Magdalena Campos-Pons Talks ‘Behold,’” *Nashville Scene*, September 19, 2024, https://www.nashvillescene.com/arts_culture/coverstory/mara-magdalena-campos-pons-behold/article_9d587d02-7524-11ef-baf0-cb0aa3ec4854.html.
- Kimia Ferdowsi Kline, email message to author, January 3, 2025.
- Shannon Cartier Lucy, “Artist Statement,” 2019, <https://www.shannonlucy.com/artist-statement>.
- Laura Hutson Hunter, “Raheleh Filsoofi Talks Memory, Ceramics and Winning the Joan Mitchell Fellowship,” *Nashville Scene*, November 16, 2023, https://www.nashvillescene.com/arts_culture/visualart/raheleh-filsoofi/article_a5239e22-8326-11ee-87de-230508c40be9.html.

Cover: Emily Weiner. *Glass Ceilings*, 2024. Oil on linen in painted wood frame; 50 1/2 x 37 1/2 x 2 in. Collection of Sasha and Charlie Sealy. © 2026 Emily Weiner. Photo: John Schweikert

Fig. 1: Jodi Hays. *Elaine*, 2022. Dye and cardboard collage on custom strainer; 76 x 52 in. Courtesy of the artist and David Lusk Gallery. © 2026 Jodi Hays. Photo: Nik Massey

Fig. 2: Kelly S. Williams. *Francine*, 2021. Oil on canvas; 6 x 6 in. Collection of Melanie and Chris Moran. © Kelly S. Williams

Fig. 3: Elisheba Israel Mrozik. *Culture Commodity* (detail), 2023. Mixed-media installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist, in memory of her late mother. © Elisheba Israel Mrozik. Installation view, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, 2023

Fig. 4: Jana Harper. *Memorial for Mackinac III*, 2025. Sumi ink and gouache on rag paper; 110 x 73 in. Courtesy of the artist. © 2026 Jana Harper. Photo: John Schweikert.

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