

# THE SHAPESHIFTING ALCHEMIST

Curator **Gia Hamilton** returns to her community-driven roots with a new role at the New Orleans African American Museum.

**BY MARQUITA K. HARRIS  
PORTRAIT BY ELLIOTT JEROME BROWN JR.**

**“We have to examine our current** institutions,” says New Orleans-born and based curator, Gia Hamilton. “We also have the pressure to build new models.” Hamilton may have spent the past decade building a name for herself as a curator, but make no mistake, she is a social alchemist. During the course of her career, she’s successfully fused her talents as a community organizer and grassroots activist with her work as a curator and it’s the combination of these experiences that continuously informs her work. “I’m a shapeshifter for liberation,” she says.

After five years as a director of the Joan Mitchell Center in New Orleans, Hamilton stepped down from her role at the organization. As for the what’s next? She’s a free agent again. In November, Hamilton accepted a consulting director role at the New Orleans African American Museum and she couldn’t be more thrilled. “African-American history is everyone’s history, and this is an opportunity to really create an engagement strategy that asks young people, ‘What is a museum to you? What would you want to see in a museum?’”

Prior to serving as the director of the Joan Mitchell Center, Hamilton created and led the organization’s artist residency program, situated on the city’s historic Bayou Road. From the property’s design to the actual program, Hamilton poured her heart into the sprawling 7th Ward complex, building it into a holistic, nature-friendly gathering space that prides itself on innovation and transformation. Cognizant of the strained, icy relationship large institutions tend to have with the locals, Hamilton approached her new director role as an organizer: for 18 months she canvassed the center’s neighborhood, introducing herself and occasionally other staff members.

“Gia empowers you with a warm and comprehensive welcome not only to the residency but to the city, specifically the neighborhood, as well,” says artist and former 2017 resident, Stacy Lynn Waddell. Hamilton also encouraged

residents under her tutelage to familiarize themselves with the city. “She made certain that we met and interacted with cultural leaders of New Orleans and the surrounding community. Her mantra of “building community” resonated throughout every aspect of the residency and helped make for a wonderful live/work experience,” Waddell continues.

This type of engagement is a tactic Hamilton no doubt perfected after she founded the creative incubator, Gris Gris Lab in 2009. After spending 15 years working in New York, Hamilton moved back to her native city, which was still in recovery mode four years after Hurricane Katrina, and launched the residency program. “We housed creatives,” she explains of GGL. “The goal was for them to produce interesting projects in the city over the course of time. They could really engage and get to know New Orleans, and that we would help produce those projects.”

Hamilton also tapped into her love of plants—residents of the program were also part of a foraging festival. “We had a small micro-farm where we grew medicinal herbs and microgreens and sold them. I think a lot of people, especially now, don’t necessarily know about my food-based work, but I used to farm,” she says.

This is where her signature radical curation comes into play. In a world replete with white-glove care, she’s unafraid to get her hands dirty. Sure, there may be a white glove or two, but for the most part, Hamilton applies her grassroots nature to her practice. It’s work she refers to as “Social Magic.”

“What we believe is that these four pillars, arts and culture, healing, food, and sort of radicalized education, would give people the opportunity to basically engage in Social Magic,” she says.

“In order to really have a clear vision, you have to let go of certain things. You have to have a paradigm shift. Part of this whole methodology is about how do we collectively let go of the things that aren’t working so that we can make space for the things that might work.”



Gia Hamilton at the New Orleans  
Museum of Art and Sculpture Garden