

*RETRACING, RETELLING:
Portraits by Jamillah Jennings*

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eric firestone gallery

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By Jennifer Samet

Jamillah Jennings's works on paper are a project that communicates urgency, necessity, a burst of prolific activity. Jennings was known as an abstract sculptor - a welder in steel. Her work was selected by April Kingsley for the important Afro-American Abstraction exhibition at P.S.1, New York, in 1980.

The suite of paintings on paper she made in the 1990s was an intuitive body of work, responding to found family photographs. The black and white photographs, two of which are collaged onto the actual sheet, were faded and grayed by time. Jennings turns her source material into compositions with vivid color planes and rich patterning, using a combination of acrylic paint and graphite on thick cotton paper. This gives them a dense materiality and tactility - the sheen and plasticity of the acrylic paint mixing with the softness of the paper.

The work has a potent combination of intimacy and distance. Hers is a world seen through the eyes of a child. The paintings represent African American military men and Jennings' family. The depictions of the children - some of whom are Jennings herself as a young girl - feel the most direct, and loaded with emotion. When the children are posed on their own, they fill the majority of the sheet, pressing forward into our space, meeting our gaze directly. We feel the girl's attachment to her belongings: a bunny stuffed animal, a red sack and painted wood stool, a puffed-sleeve white dress, Mary Jane shoes and white booties.

The adults often seem further off: occupying their own mental or emotional world, occasionally stern-faced. Jennings, who studied at the School of Visual Arts and Pratt Institute in the 1970s, harnesses a simplicity in her painterly style and the occasional awkwardness of the subject's pose, which suggests a young person's vision. In this, her work calls to mind folk or "outsider" work like that of William H. Johnson and Horace Pippin. It also connects to the work of contemporary painter Karen Kilimnik, whose painterly approach is both sophisticated and deliberately amateurish.

The images of the military men often have a faraway look in their eyes. Jennings cultivates this sense of distance, not only between herself and this recent past, but also the space between posing in uniform, and the reality of serving in a war. When her father was moving from his Brooklyn home, Jennings came across the photographs of her father's military colleagues. Her father, Andrew Jennings, served in World War II, and her brother served in Vietnam. What Jennings does, in this work, is illuminate how parts of African American histories are too often missing and indeterminate. These are her hazy memories, but they are about our society's desire to ignore or forget.

Jennings demonstrates an attachment to the original source photograph: its intimacy and naturalness. The faded, vintage quality of the photographs served as inspiration. This connects her work to celebrated Malian photographers such as Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta, whose original photographs were small in size and low contrast. Like these photographers Jennings incorporates exuberant pattern and beloved personal subjects.

Jennings populates her portraits with emphatic color and patterning, as if to suggest that the world of abstract painting is something of a salve. Jennings was conscious of the tradition of color and patterning rooted in African art. Her style, of broadly articulated color planes and silhouetted figures on either monochromatic grounds or patterned landscapes, can be connected to both Amy Sherald and Kehinde Wiley, and how they treated the presidential portrait commissions of the Obamas.

Jennings stated, in discussing her work and that of her husband, Ellsworth Ausby, "[People] should know we are coming out of an African base and we as African people are masters in abstractions. Go to the Metropolitan Museum and look at the walls and see that we created geometric shapes and patterns." In this suite of paintings on paper, Jennings brings this world together with faded black-and-white photographs. She merges deeply flawed societal realities, and its pieces of memory, with a rich cultural and aesthetic heritage. She brings the past into the present and future.



Untitled (Self-Portrait on Collins Ave, Miami Beach), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Army and Navy), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 22 x 30"



Untitled (Formal Wear with Red Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 22 x 30"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Orange Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Laura in Uniform), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Floral Portrait on Purple Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Self-Portrait in White with Bunny), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Self-Portrait with Brother) 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Blue Suits with Orange Dress), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Orange and Red Bathers) 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



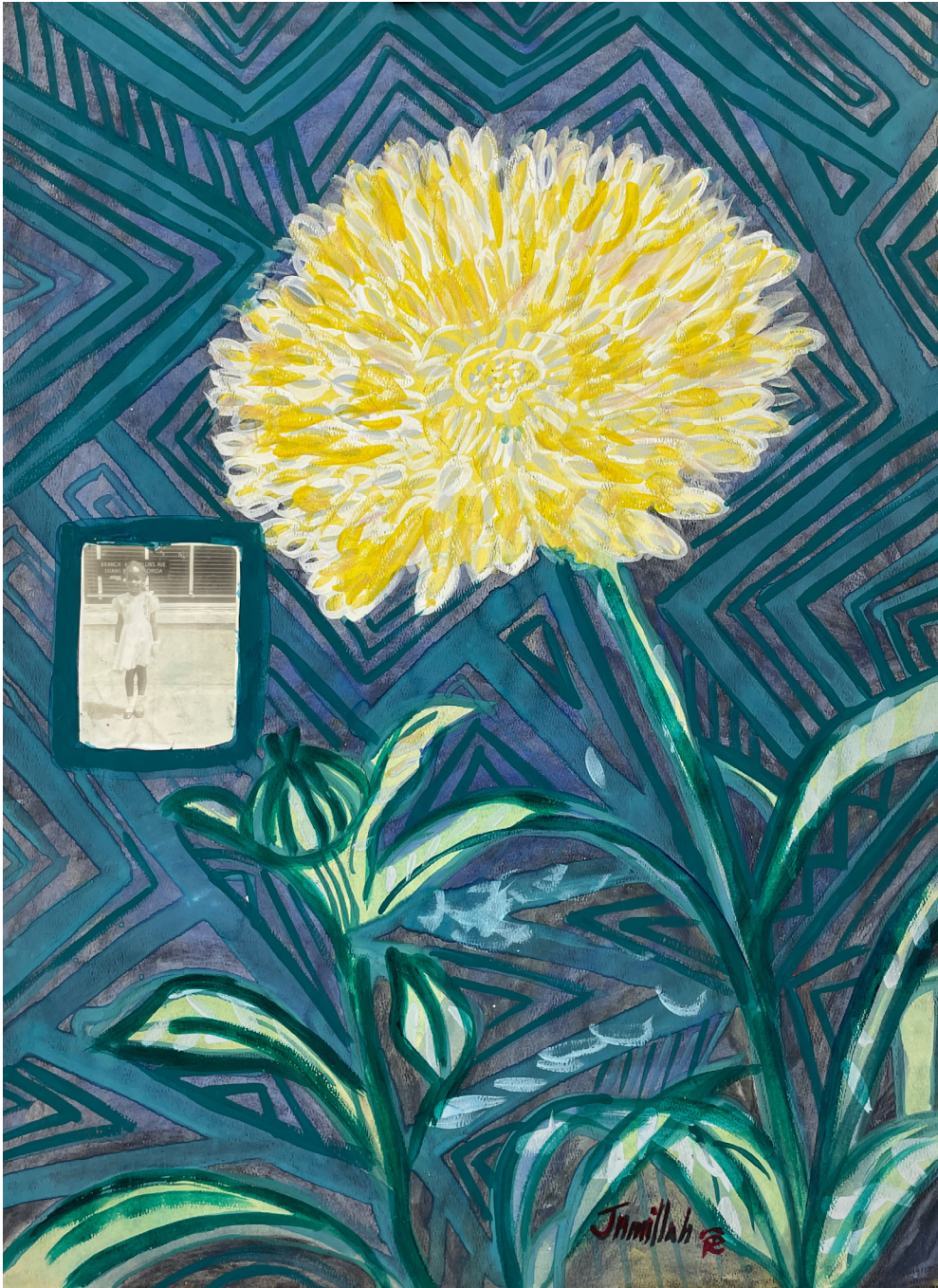
Untitled (Green Uniform with Flowers), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Dapper Couple on Green Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Gathered on Red Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic, graphite and collage on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990 | Acrylic on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Couple in the Garden), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Sunday's Best with Palms), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Red Blouse), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



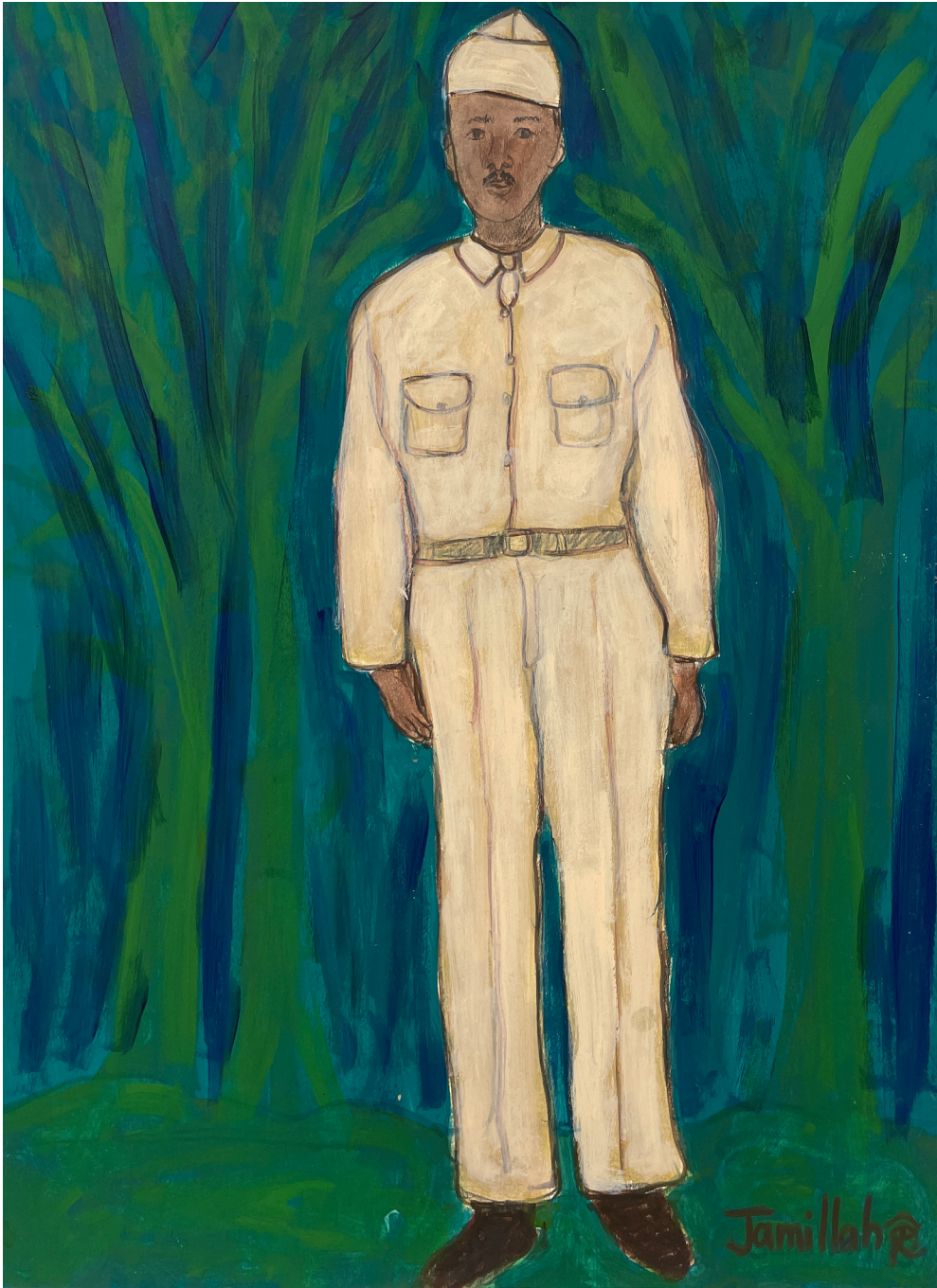
Untitled (Black and Yellow Dress), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Garden Portrait with Easel), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22”



Untitled (Military Portrait on Black and Blue), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait in Trees), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Seated Portrait on Purple Florals), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Red Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Seated Children on Red Sofa), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Purple Ground), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



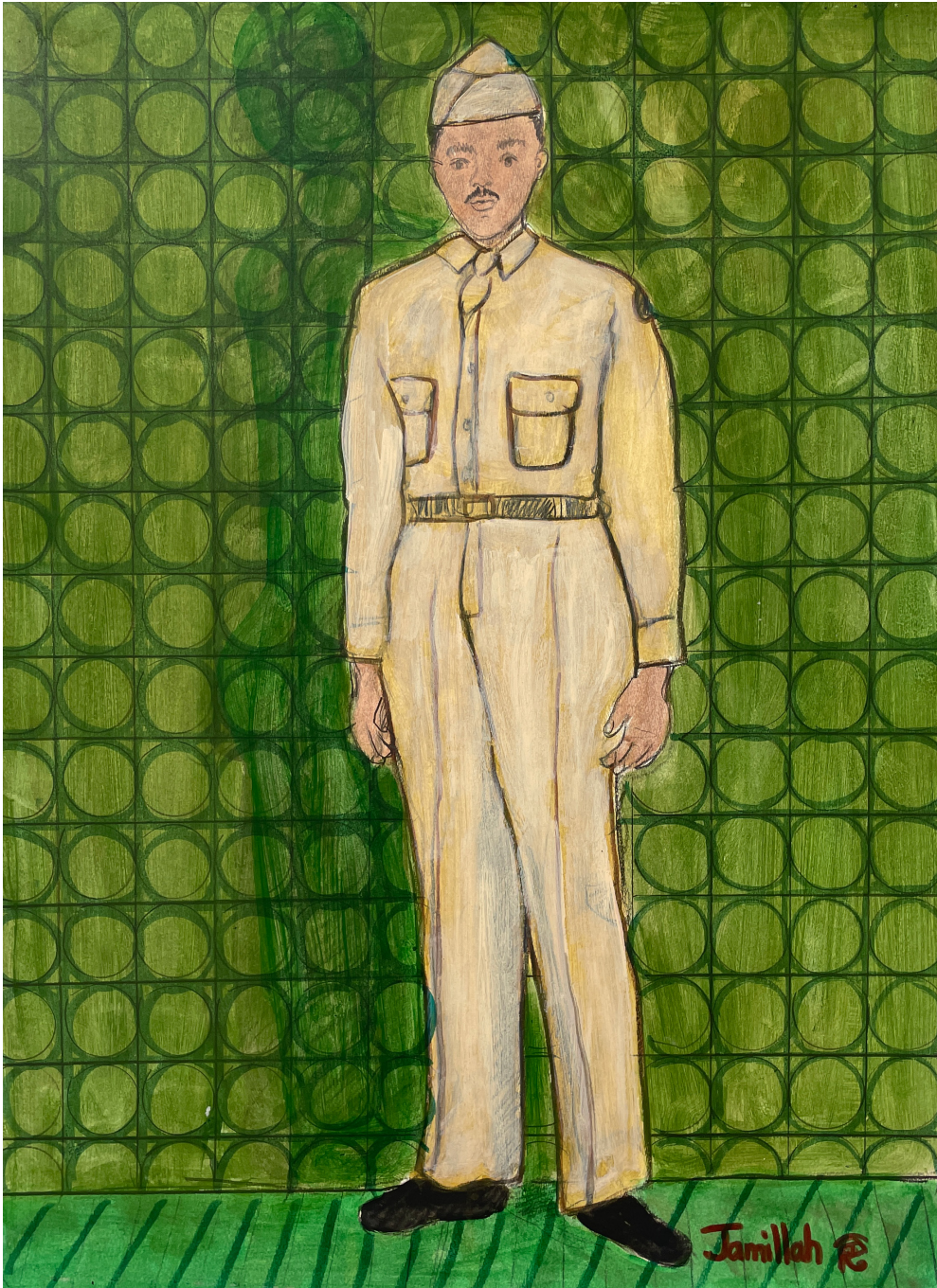
Untitled (Military Portrait on Yellow Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (White and Red Coats), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait in Tiled Room), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Seated Portrait in Tiled Room), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait Through Window), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on the Balcony), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Seated on Wagon), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Cerulean Ground), 1989
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait in Green and Gold), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Green Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Gold Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



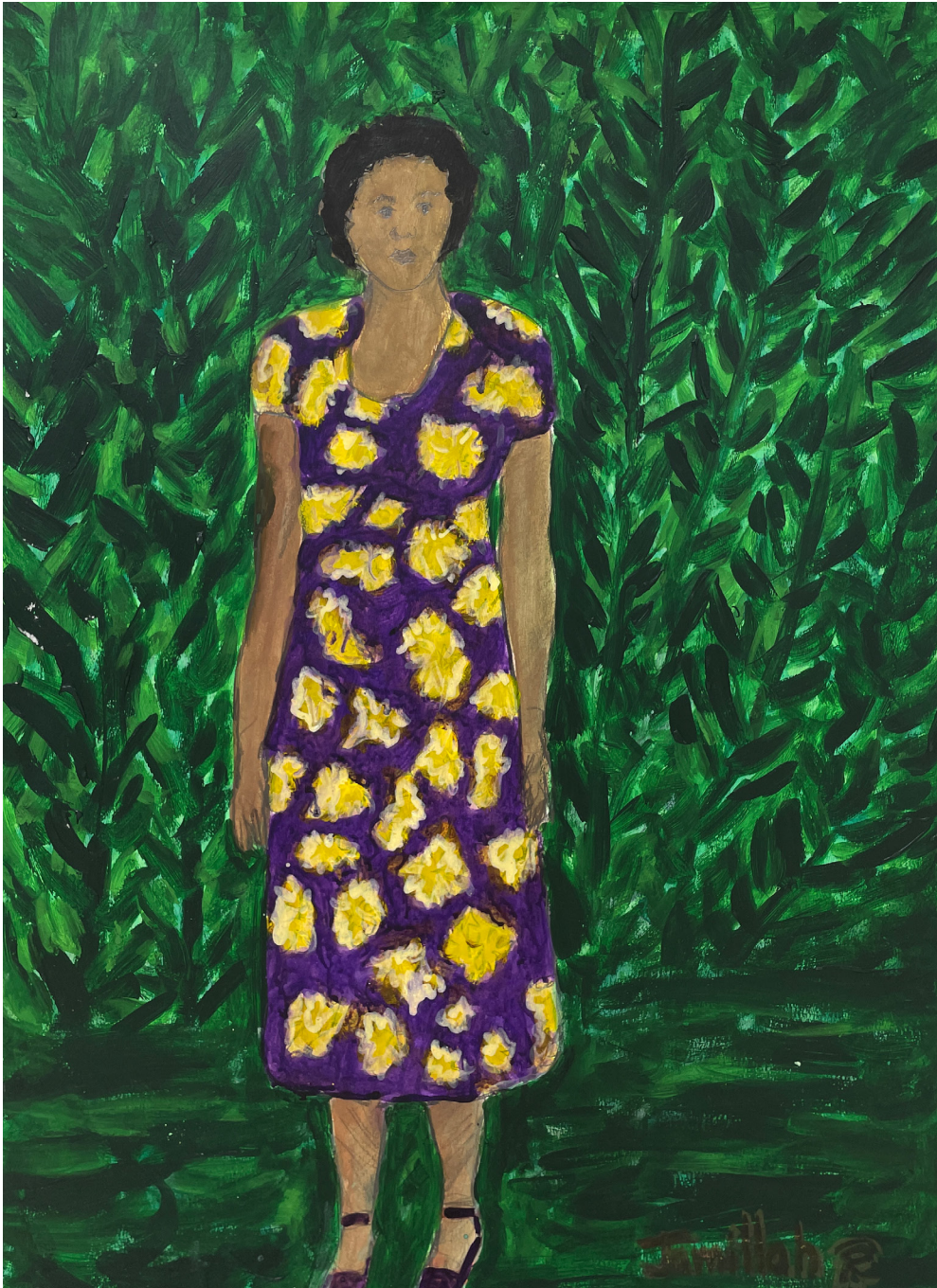
Untitled (Seated Portrait with Roses), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Long Coat by the Barn), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Uniform at Cabin), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Purple and Gold Dress in the Garden), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Dark Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Two White Sweaters), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Split Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Purple Dress in Garden), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Self-Portrait in Coat with Bunny), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait by the Barn), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Self-Portrait as Baby in White), 1990 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Military Portrait on Dark Green), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic, graphite and collage on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Family Portrait on Blue Ground), 1990
Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"



Untitled (Laura in Uniform on Red Ground), 1989 | Acrylic and graphite on paper | 30 x 22"

Jamillah Jennings (b. 1946, Anniston, Alabama), grew up in Brooklyn, NY and received her BFA from the School of Visual Arts in 1976 and her MFA from Pratt Institute in 1979. She was influenced by seeing steel and aluminum parts that her father, who worked in construction, would bring home. While studying at SVA, she saw a student welding steel into sculpture and realized that would become her primary medium. Her abstract sculpture was included in the significant 1980 exhibition, Afro-American Abstraction, curated by April Kingsley for P.S. 1, New York. Alongside the sculpture, Jennings also worked as a painter, creating work inspired by her longtime study of African art and its geometries. This investigation of an antecedent heritage informed her path, and that of her husband, artist Ellsworth Ausby.

Jennings was an activist artist who co-founded, with Ausby, the Nefer International Gallery, in their Brooklyn home, to show the work of Black artists in their community and encourage more people of means to collect Black artists. Her series of works on paper, "Retracing, Retelling," examines found family photographs to reconstruct pieces of history that might otherwise be lost. Jennings has served as an educator and mentor to the less-privileged, teaching at the Ravenswood and Hammel housing projects. In addition to P.S.1, her work has been exhibited at Aljira Arts, Newark, NJ; PDG Gallery, New York; the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Queens, NY; and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

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Cover: Untitled (Military Portrait on Dark Ground), see page 47

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