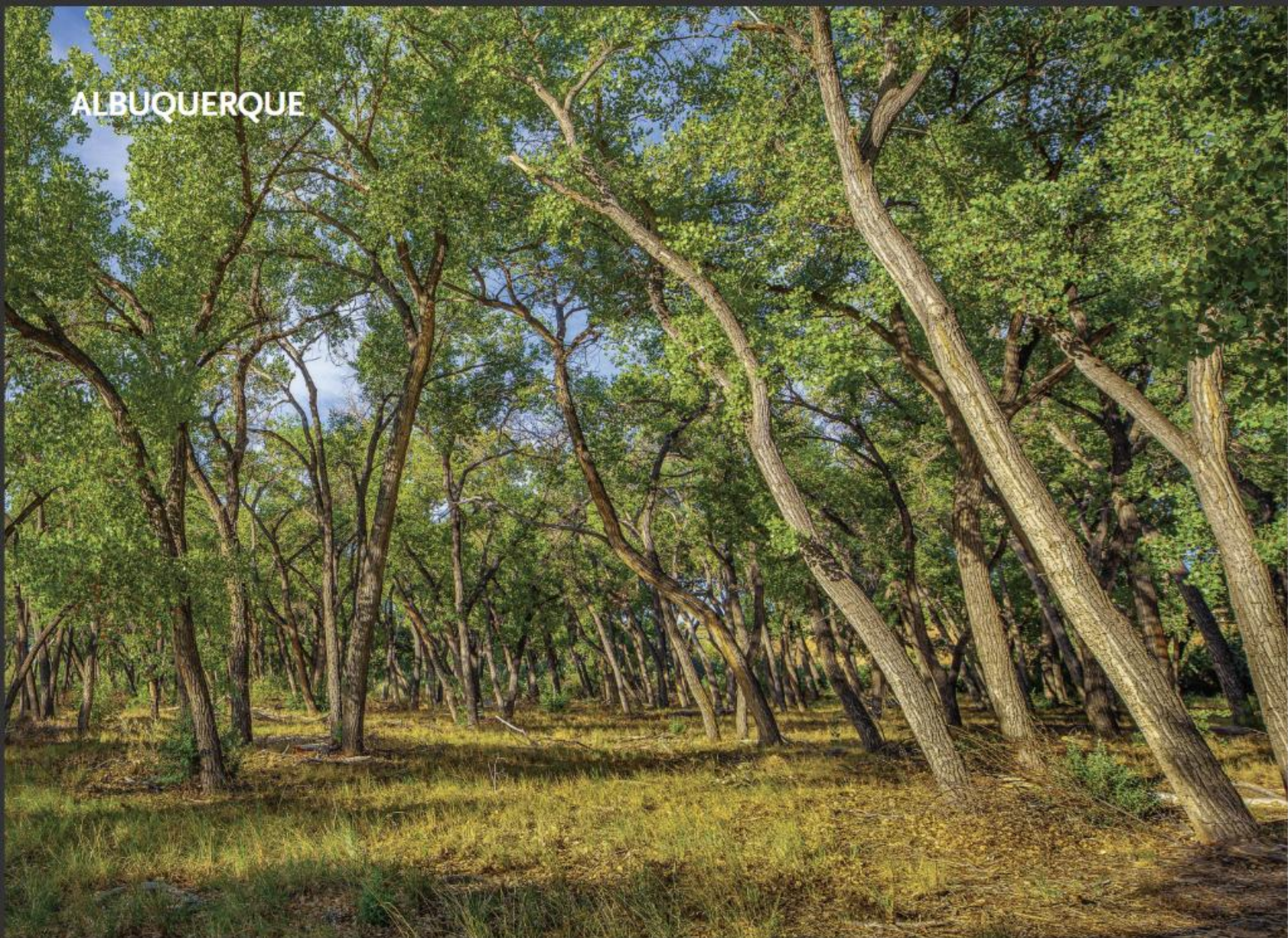




Into the Woods

Black artists explore nature and belonging in Albuquerque Museum show

BY LOGAN ROYCE BEITMEN

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “the woods before sunrise”? Outdoor-oriented individuals may recall sensations of damp soil, brisk air, and the delicate sounds of life awakening. For others, the dark woods are a place of danger best avoided.

Who belongs in that liminal space between darkness and light? Who feels at home there, and who feels exposed? And what histories shape that sense of belonging or exclusion?

A new exhibition at the Albuquerque Museum, *The Woods Before Sunrise: Environment and Place in New Mexico's Black Contemporary*, features work by nine New Mexico-based artists with differing relationships to nature. The title comes from George Washington Carver, who was born enslaved but became one of the most prominent agricultural scientists of his generation.

“Nothing is more beautiful than the loveliness of the woods before sunrise,” Carver once wrote. “At no other time have I so sharp an understanding of what God wants to do with me as in those hours of dawn.”

Carver’s spiritual connection to nature is well documented, yet it remains striking that he felt comfortable in the woods at night, given the fraught histories of slave patrols, post-Civil War lynchings, and

sundown towns, all of which he lived through. Even today, racial violence in wilderness areas persists. People have had guns pointed at them and police called on them simply for hiking, camping, or birdwatching while Black. Experiences of surveillance, discrimination, and outright violence shape how and whether Black individuals move through natural environments.

In recent years, scholars and activists have also pointed to the so-called “nature gap,” a persistent disparity in access to green space and outdoor recreation for Black Americans. Studies have shown that predominantly Black communities are significantly less likely to have access to nearby parks or wilderness areas—largely because of past segregationist policies, such as redlining.

Albuquerque Museum Curator William T. Gassaway says he and co-curator Nikesha Breeze, who is also a participating artist, chose Carver’s quote as a conceptual foundation for the exhibition, in part for its poetic resonance, but also to ground the show in history. Gassaway considers Carver an early environmentalist, as well as “a great advocate for the upliftment and self-empowerment of African Americans.” Considering the many ways Black Americans have been, and continue to be, excluded from natural spaces, Carver provides a counterexample of radical belonging.

Breeze is an internationally known artist who was widely praised for their contribution to Australia’s 2026 Biennale of Sydney. Their sculptural installation, *The Arc of Return*, is one of the show’s most striking works. A life-sized rowboat encased in scalloped copper armor reminiscent of pangolin scales, *The Arc of Return* is a mythopoeic object of desire and yearning. “The boat is both a symbol of eternal return for African diasporic bodies and an active site of Black perpetuity,” Breeze says. Each copper scale is hand-etched with Afrofuturist symbols and writing codes, including mediumistic “spirit writing,” representative of attempts to communicate mys-

tically with long-departed ancestors.

The “arc” of Breeze’s title suggests the path a boat would travel from North America to Africa, following the curvature of the earth. It also suggests an arc of time—the journey from past to future, from captivity to liberation. Inside the boat is a 72-inch copper plate etched with a three-headed figure that Breeze calls “The Black Goddexe of Time” and likens to an “Afrofuturist ‘Harriet Tubman,’ ferrying us across the treacherous and potent waters of our histories.”

Gassaway acknowledges the “complicated, complex, and difficult histories” encoded in Breeze’s work, saying, “Museums need to be venues for these kinds of conversations.”

One of the exhibition’s quiet anchors is the work of Rein Whitt-Pritchette, a Colorado-born artist who, after serving as a radio operator in the Vietnam War, settled in Albuquerque and was a respected figure in the local arts com-

munity until his death in 2024. His prints are deceptively simple: grayscale cactuses framed by Roman arches and trimmed in gold. Yet the restrained elegance of his compositions is undercut by a subtle visual joke. The gilded borders do not hold; they sag, slip, and collapse into ribbon-like strands that fall across the image plane. In one print, the gold ribbon snags on a cactus spine, as if the frame itself has entered the scene and suffered the consequences.

What begins as wit opens into something more philosophical. By foregrounding the frame—making it visible, unstable, even ridiculous—Whitt-Pritchette reminds us that no frame is ever neutral. The act of framing is always an act of interpretation, of containment, of control. The philosopher Jacques Derrida famously argued that the frame is not external to the artwork but constitutive of it; once introduced, the frame becomes inseparable from the image it



Paula Wilson’s *Remodeled*, 2007, a woodcut, offset lithograph, and serigraph with collage and hand coloring in the artist’s collection. Opposite: Trees grow toward the light in an Albuquerque *bosque*, or woodland.

KIRK GITTINGS

MINDY MCDANIEL, COURTESY OF THE FRANCIS YOUNG TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE



The Arc of Return sculptural installation is centered on a life-sized rowboat encased in scalloped copper armor reminiscent of pangolin scales and enclosed by *The Sanctuary of Wound*, a 20-foot vertical partial enclosure made of 108 yards of loose weave cotton—the equivalent to a single day’s work for an enslaved Black ancestor.

BYRON FLESHER, COURTESY OF FORM & AMP; CONCEPT, AND KATE RUSSELL



encloses.” Whitt-Pritchette’s drooping, failing frames stage this insight in visual terms. They do not simply surround nature; they interfere with it, collapse into it, and ultimately fail to contain it.

If we imagine these ribbon-like frames as literal objects strewn across a desert landscape, they become waste or litter. They might make us think of police tape and the visual language of restriction: cactuses as crime scenes. Nature is not only framed but violated, marked off, and surveilled. The failure of the frame becomes an allegory for the failure of any system that attempts to neatly separate the human and natural worlds.

Whitt-Pritchette’s art may seem superficially pretty, but it poses troubling questions, as does that of Albuquerque-based artist and sustainable designer Jakia Fuller. Though there is no evidence that Fuller was directly influenced by



Detail from *The Arc of Return*. Top: A performance component featuring the artist and exhibit co-curator, Nikesha Breeze, brings *The Arc of Return* to life.

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Whitt-Pritchette, her black-and-white cactus drawings bear an obvious visual resemblance. Both artists juxtapose organic forms against sharply defined geometric backdrops rendered in bright colors. In both cases, the geometric precision makes the viewer aware that the image is a constructed vision, rather than an unmediated encounter with nature.

Fuller extends this inquiry in her ambitious project *Migratory Cartographies*, which she developed during a 2025 virtual residency with Moku Art Studio, an environmental arts organization. Drawing on two decades of data on the disrupted migratory patterns of whales and other marine species, Fuller trans-

lates information into form through hand-embroidered dotted lines stitched across a Cubist-inspired assemblage of blank canvases. The soft, rhythmic flow of the stitched lines denotes the graceful movement of marine life, while the rigid, intersecting planes of the canvases interrupt that flow with jarring force. Even without parsing the underlying data, the viewer experiences the piece as a total gestalt, and the meaning is clear. Straight lines rarely occur in nature but are everywhere in the human-built environment, so the hard-edged canvases become a poignant metaphor for the human-driven environmental destruction wrought by people.

If Whitt-Pritchette and Fuller interrogate the frame as a boundary between human perception and the natural world, Paula Wilson complicates that boundary further by multiplying it. Born in Chicago and trained in New York City before relocating to the remote desert town Carrizozo, New Mexico, Wilson has long explored the intersections of identity, environment, and representation. In her work, frames proliferate. Images are nested within images, surfaces layered upon surfaces. The effect is not simply visual complexity but a kind of recursive looking, in which the act of viewing becomes inseparable from the structures that shape it. Figures merge into land-



scapes, and landscapes are swallowed up within concentric frames, such that we don't ever know where reality ends and representation begins. That's an exciting, if somewhat disorienting, place to be.

Karsten Creightney's large-scale 2018 mixed-media work, *Black Hills*, brings together mountains and hills from many disparate locales into a single fantastical meta-landscape. Using collage, watercolor, acrylic, oil, and wax, Creightney builds up a surface of gorgeous blues, greens, and tans, which, nevertheless, feels deliberately unsettled and unsettling.

"Karsten, who's from here originally, is really interested in issues of sovereignty and marginalization across the U.S., not just here in New Mexico," Gassaway says. "So, he incorporates mountain ranges from a wide array of locations around the world, including Mount Everest but also the Black Hills and other ranges across the U.S., into this amalgam of stony landscape, in which you can see, just emerging from out of frame, some tourists who are having fun in lands that have been,



Rein Whitt-Pritchette's *Black Cactus Against a Yellow Sky*, ca. 1988, a 21-color serigraph on paper gifted to the Albuquerque Museum by an anonymous donor in honor of the artist. Top: Ron Adams' *A Frog in the Hand*, 1992, a framed pen and ink on paper on display at the Albuquerque Museum.

for centuries or millennia, the sovereign homelands of Indigenous peoples."

The tourists, clipped from magazines, wear cowboy hats and ride horses.

"He intentionally shows them proceeding west to underscore the historical Manifest Destiny aspirations of Americans who were colonizing this country in its early days," Gassaway says.

Black Hills is part of the museum's permanent collection, and it was one of the first pieces the curators selected for the show.

Gassaway says that whenever he was asked what the museum wanted to do for the 2026 United States Semiquincentennial—the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—he pointed to *Black Hills* and said, "This is what I want to show. More of this. These are the stories that need to be told."

This sense of unresolved history resonates in the work of Ron Adams, whose *Endangered Species* series reframes Black subjectivity through the language of ecological precarity. Adams' figures of Black



Maurice Burns' *A Letter from Home*, 1989, oil on canvas, at Gerald Peters Contemporary in Santa Fe.

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men crowned with birds look physically and emotionally uncomfortable and out of place. Who are the “endangered species” here? Is it the birds or the men? The language of conservation becomes a lens through which to understand structures of racist violence and human vulnerability.

For Maurice Burns, the landscape becomes a site of imaginative return. His dreamlike paintings meld New Mexican terrain with African imagery, suggesting that geography itself can be reassem-

bled—not in a violent and destructive way, as in Creightney’s *Black Hills*, but in ways that are psychologically healing.

In Burns’ *A Letter from Home*, deserts transform into African vistas. Volcanic mountains become pyramids. Palm trees and a camel emerge. A woman with an ancient Nubian or Egyptian headdress merges into the landscape, her lapis lazuli shadow unfurling into a sea of stars.

Most Black Americans don’t know which parts of Africa their ancestors

came from, rendering literal repatriation impossible. But between simply sitting around thinking about Africa and actually going there, exists a third possibility—an in-between space of creative fabulation, where one may simply walk alone through a landscape and imagine that one is walking elsewhere. Humans are able to project tremendous psychological depth onto landscapes, turning dead sand into living whispers of other times and places. Africa is not over there, across the sea, but a right-

here, right-now proposition—just as it is in Breeze’s *Arc of Return*.

A related exploration appears in Jackie Mitchell Edwards’ Abstract-Expressionist-influenced paintings, which capture the energy of dust storms, monsoon rains, and other dramatic weather events while imbuing them with her own psychological and emotional subjectivity.

If Edwards and Burns turn inward, Noé Barnett looks outward, bringing the visual language of the street into the museum. The curators invited Barnett, a respected local muralist, to spray-paint a new piece directly onto a wall of the gallery. Gassaway says he put very few parameters on the artist, telling him, “This is yours to make whatever you want.”

Barnett paints mind-blowingly photorealistic images using a modern, industrial medium—spray paint—that’s as far removed from organic pigments as you can get. His work questions long-held assumptions about what’s natural and what’s not, showing how nature can be reimagined or remembered even within urban settings.

Gassaway says the nine artists in the show tell “a story without a single vantage point, without a stable frame, and without a clear boundary between past and present, nature and culture, self and environment.”

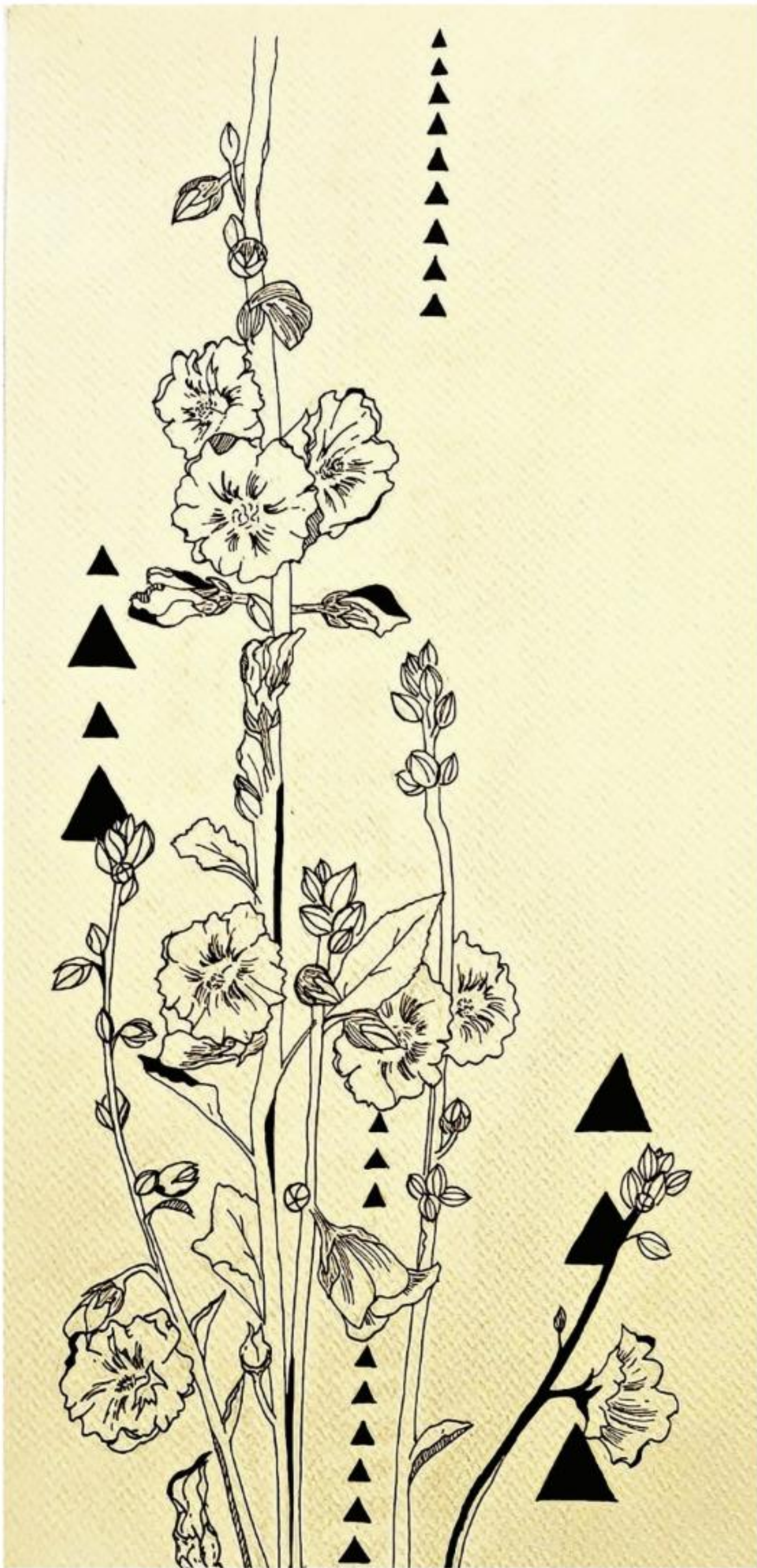
Although the artists do not deny the weight of history, they gesture toward a vision in which Black presence in the landscape is neither exceptional nor precarious, but fundamental, and nature is something lived, felt, remembered, reconstructed, and transformed through the power of the imagination. In their hands, the woods before sunrise are a place of shadows, where real objects remain hidden and imaginary ones appear as hallucinations. It’s a place of danger but also inspiration. ✱

The Woods Before Sunrise: Environment and Place in New Mexico’s Black Contemporary runs from June 20 through October 18 at the Albuquerque Museum.



Karsten Creightney’s *Outskirts*, 2018, comprising collage, acrylic, oil, and wax on canvas in the collection of Ryan and Carri Holler.

KARSTEN CREIGHTNEY



Jakia Fuller’s *The Acceptance and Surrender of the Hollyhock’s Ongoing Growth*, 2023, ink on textured paper in collection of the artist.

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