



lillian blades through the veil

JUNE 1-OCTOBER 26, 2025



Lillian Blades in the studio. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Toni Smailagic.

In *Through the Veil*, artist Lillian Blades (Bahamian, born 1973) invites visitors to step into a lush world of intricate, mixed-media assemblages. Bringing together various materials such as acrylic, mirrors, wood, fabric, resin, and found objects, Blades creates dense compositions teeming with texture and color. Her visual language has evolved through an exploration of her personal history and ancestral connections, resulting in a method that appears abstract but is deeply rooted in her own experiences. Drawing from the bold colors and patterns of her Bahamian upbringing, familial memories, and African ceremonial traditions, she transforms fragmented materials into layered works that reconnect her with her roots and reimagine the past.

Originally trained as a painter, Blades studied at the Savannah College of Art and Design and earned her MFA from Georgia State University. Over time, her practice has expanded beyond the two-dimensional surface into sculptural assemblages and immersive installations, incorporating a wide range of materials and techniques. This shift from traditional painting began in the mid 1990s, when she affixed a pair of her worn African sandals onto the surface of a canvas. From there, she began collecting and arranging objects that reminded her of the island, her seamstress mother, and her ancestors, exploring how the elements of each piece relate to one another aesthetically, structurally, and symbolically.

Now, in her first solo museum exhibition, Blades showcases recent and newly created works that reflect two distinct but interconnected approaches that define her practice. Wall-mounted mixed-media assemblages on wooden panels feature carefully layered objects in gradients of color and texture. Alongside these, her suspended “veils,” named for their transparent, lace-like appearance, float within the gallery space, shaping how visitors move through and around them. The exhibition’s title, *Through the Veil*, invites viewers to move through the installation with intention and curiosity, while also prompting them to look beyond the surface to uncover hidden narratives and layered cultural references.



Gumbo, 2022. Mixed-media wired assemblage, 4 x 8 ft. Photo: Ryan Gamma.

Veils as Thresholds

The first work viewers encounter, *Gumbo* (2022), radiates with saturated blues, oranges, and greens, forming an elaborate composition that feels both grounded in cultural memory and alive with energy. Constructed from an array of painted wood, transparent acrylic, mirrored surfaces, sequined and embroidered textiles, and floral and decorative prints collected from African fabric stores and salvaged from old dresses, *Gumbo* hovers between painting, sculpture, and textile. These diverse materials are joined together with visible wire, evoking the hand-stitching of patchwork and the repetition and rhythm of quilting. The work's title references the culinary tradition rooted in the American South derived from West Africa, a mix of ingredients all brought together to create a warm and nourishing meal. Like its namesake, *Gumbo*

blends disparate elements into a richly layered whole, offering an exuberant entry point into the exhibition.

Beyond this bright threshold, the mood shifts. Subdued veils hang freely in a dimly lit gallery, beckoning a slower, more contemplative encounter. Hanging from above, rather than mounted on walls, these works reshape the gallery into a space that encourages bodily movement. Visitors must choreograph their paths around and through them, glimpsing reflections in mirrored fragments and observing the interplay of shadow and color. With their abstract nature, the works resonate on their own terms, independent of narrative or explanation.



Obsidian, 2022.
Mixed-media wired
assemblage, 8 x 8 ft.

Obsidian (2022), composed entirely of black materials and lit dramatically to cast extended shadows, blurs the boundaries between object and environment. This work was the first of Blades' experiments using a monochromatic palette, allowing her to focus on form and texture, rather than color. The work operates as a protective veil, borrowing

properties from the stone, a volcanic glass often associated with shielding, grounding, and the release of negative energy. Nearby, *Sunset* (2021), one of the first veils she ever constructed, features white, orange, and black strips of materials interspersed with photographs of the landscape, city buildings, neighbors and community members near her studio in Atlanta, Georgia.

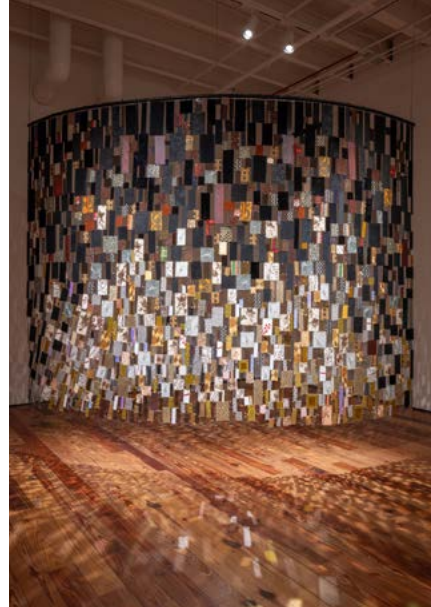
In *What Is Your Reflection?* (2021), Blades' connects several panels and brings in more wooden elements, playing with the opacity and the scale of her works.



^ *Sunset*, 2021.
Mixed-media wired
assemblage, 8 x 4 ft.
Photo: Ryan Gamma



< *What is Your Reflection?*, 2021.
Mixed-media wired
assemblage, 8 x 16 ft.
Photo: Ryan Gamma



Subtle Divergence, 2025.
Mixed-media wired
assemblage, 8 x 12 ft.
Photo: Ryan Gamma

Positioned at the back of the gallery, *Subtle Divergence* transitions from stark black at the top into glimmering shades of gold and white below, its flowing gradient evoking a range of memories or associations. In the lower left corner, the slightest tilt of material disrupts the vertical pattern. Within this cascading effect, Blades balances tension and rhythm, crafting a design that exists delicately between structured order and an organic flow. The pattern is not pre-

sketched or mapped out in advance; instead, the artist works intuitively, moving across several panels at once to arrange and layer textures and colors in dialogue with one another throughout the entire composition.

In this space, the veils take on a liminal quality, neither opaque nor fully transparent. The negative spaces in their patterns conceal and reveal, offering shifting perspectives with every step. Metaphorically, the veils act as gateways between past and present, self and other, memory and observation, physical and spiritual realms. As we pass through them, we are called to create our own connections and look closely to discover hidden narratives.

Assemblage as Homage

Upon entering the second gallery, visitors are met with an outburst of saturated color and the glow of natural light streaming through the Museum's skylights. On either side of the galleries, Blades introduces another central mode of her practice: the densely layered, wall-mounted assemblage. A precursor to her suspended veils, they remain integral to her ongoing exploration of material and meaning. Backed by splatter-painted panels, the assemblages bring together painted wood scraps, mirrors, textiles, buttons, jewelry, artificial flowers, craft supplies, and countless other found materials. The resulting compositions suggest abundance, but with deliberation and intention.

In *Divine Providence* (2025), a restrained palette of silver, black, and gold is built up from carefully placed elements that ripple outward from a central force. Embedded throughout are symbolic objects that gesture toward the diversity of human spirituality, reflecting on the many paths of belief and a shared sense of searching. Blades plays with the physical depth of the surface, allowing elements to protrude outward in ways that feel topographical. This sense of depth is intensified by mirrors reflecting the space in front of the work.



Installation view of *Lillian Blades: Through the Veil* at Sarasota Art Museum, Sarasota, Florida, 2025. Photo: Ryan Gamma.

Companion works *Bougainvillea* (2022) and *Coconut Palm* (2022) extend this approach through lush yet earthy palettes inspired by the flora and landscapes of the Caribbean. Recycled pieces of furniture, such as the back of a wooden chair that doubles as the face of an African mask, reveal Blades' ability to transform everyday items into raw materials.

Across the gallery, *Perennial* (2024) makes a bold impression.

With over two hundred wooden picture frames, and an assortment of large mirrors and decorative objects, the work is a testament

to Blades' dedication to her craft. The title *Perennial*, suggesting

something enduring or infinite, underscores the work's meditation on time, memory, and continuity. A still clock embedded in the lower left corner becomes a quiet meditation on timelessness, while the frames suggest an accumulation of reminiscence, moments, and histories. Floral motifs throughout nod to natural cycles of growth and renewal, while also honoring the lineage of florists in Blades' family, including her mother, Grammy, and the aunt who raised her as her own. The ornate fixtures also pay homage to her Grammy's love of adorning and decorating her home, and her grandfather's carpentry, crafts Blades sees herself continuing through these assemblages. Blades describes the color palette and soft, diagonal composition flowing from lower left to upper right as reminiscent of lying in a field of wildflowers.



Perennial, 2024. Mixed-media assemblage on wood, 8 x 12 ft. Photo: Ryan Gamma

In *Sandy Beach* (2022), an abstracted vision of a Bahamian shoreline emerges. Pink sand, turquoise

water, white sea foam, and golden sun are rendered through unexpected materials, including PVC pipes and sewing materials, both nods to her father's work as a plumber and her mother's as a seamstress. *Reflective Horizons* (2022) shares the same palette but intensifies the colors and engages viewers with more reflections. Smaller in scale, these works carry intimate, personal resonance.

Across the assemblages, recurring motifs such as buttons, mirrors, and ornate yet often empty frames serve as markers of personal and collective memory. The buttons and spools of thread refer to her mother's sewing tools, invoking a lineage of craft and handiwork. Empty frames register the absence of memories with her mother, who passed away shortly after giving birth, yet whose presence continues to inspire the work. For Blades, this personal loss also serves as a reflection of a broader, universal search for ancestral and foundational connection within the African diaspora, which she references again and again. Mirrors appear throughout the assemblages and veils, not only as tools of reflection but as fractured surfaces that speak to the ways memory and identity are assembled from what remains.

While many of the decisions and methods are rooted in her personal experience, her works remain abstract and open-ended. Blades constructs them with space for interpretation, allowing viewers to assemble their own experiences, memories, and meanings as they go, piece by piece.



Sanctuary, 2025. Mixed-media wired assemblage. Photo: Ryan Gamma.

Sanctuary: A Space for Reflection

At the center of the space, *Sanctuary* (2025) enchants. This suspended, labyrinthine, site-specific installation immediately draws the eye and the body into its contemplative interior. Cascading layers of pink and purple veils hang from a central dome composed of a constellation of round discs in varying sizes overhead. Their painted surfaces filter the sunlight and cast shifting shadows throughout the day. Circles flow seamlessly down into shimmering vertical forms in the shape of ribbons and rectangles of acrylic and mirrors, extending a sense of motion from the dome to the ground.

Despite the work's bold palette, abundant shapes, and monumental scale, the effect is welcoming and gentle. The environment feels intimate and calming, inviting visitors to slow down, move thoughtfully,

and look up through its unfolding architecture. The soft pinks and purples are overtly feminine, and the presence of orchids, woven into the pattern, suggest themes of birth, growth, and renewal. The suspended structure evokes the feeling of sacred space and gestures toward both shelter and the body, recalling the protective qualities of a womb or the quietude of a shrine.

As visitors pass through the concentric veils, which expand outward in layered rings, a pathway emerges. *Sanctuary* becomes more than a sculptural enclosure. It offers a place of reflection and pays homage to the women who raise, nurture, and protect us. The translucent veils allow glimpses through to other layers, and their reflective surfaces not only capture fleeting images of others moving through the space but also return the viewer's own gaze.

Beyond the Veil

Through the Veil showcases Lillian Blades' remarkable fluency with material and form. Her work captivates through intricate layering, unexpected textures, and a vivid, intuitive sense of color. From the suspended veils that bounce light and cast shifting shadows, to the wall-mounted assemblages that hum with energy, each piece pulses with a dynamic interplay of rhythm, pattern, and structure. Blades transforms everyday materials

into compositions that feel both meticulously arranged and joyfully spontaneous, ultimately celebrating the visual and tactile pleasures of making.

For visitors, moving through the exhibition becomes a journey—both a physical passage through a labyrinth of light, texture, and form, and a symbolic one through memory, family, and personal history. The reflective surfaces woven throughout her work deepen this experience, offering ever-changing perspectives that encourage self-reflection and discovery. Beyond this, they also suggest that the past is never fixed, and the present is always flickering into view.

> Visitors viewing
Lillian Blades: Through the Veil
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Photo by Harry Sayer.



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