

Kelly Taylor Mitchell: *mouth wide open*

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Ada Evans, Boston University



Kelly Taylor Mitchell, *Totem #10*, 2023–2025. Hand embroidered and transfer-printed found textile, tassel, ceramic beads, and crystal. Image courtesy of the artist.



Kelly Taylor Mitchell, *Namesakes*, 2024–2025. Hand embroidered and transfer-printed pano da costa, tassel, found T-shirt and peanut sacks. Image courtesy of the artist.

Kelly Taylor Mitchell's *mouth wide open*, recently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, unfolds as a fragmented yet insistently relational archive, suturing familial memory, vegetal matter, and syncretic spiritual practice with beaded embroidery, glittering thread, tinsel, and raffia. Based between Atlanta and San Juan, Mitchell (b. 1994) takes Brazil's Bahia region as a generative departure point, drawing on her encounters with creolized religious practices and oceanic spirituality during the Festival of Yemanjá in 2023. While her experiences amidst Bahia's large Maroon-descended population anchors the exhibition historically, *mouth wide open* ultimately advances a diasporic geography that refuses fixed territories or national borders.

This refusal materializes in *Namesakes* (2024–25), which merges a found *pano da costa* textile fragment from Bahia with transferred photographs from Mitchell's family and cuttings



Detail of *Totem #10*. Photograph by author. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

hanging's white brocade surface. Yet while *Totem #10* directs a circular movement through the transitional space, *Come Bearing Gifts* (2025), spanning a monumental wall, serves as a



Kelly Taylor Mitchell, *Family Reunion*, 2024. Blow out, pulp painting, and deckle box techniques. Flax, Georgia kudzu, Georgia Spanish moss, Alabama Spanish moss fibers and sequin tassel, textile, image transfer and/or cowrie inclusions. Image courtesy of the artist.

from an anonymous family reunion T-shirt. These images remain partially obscured, resisting full legibility. Rather than affirming lineage through clarity or completeness, Mitchell reframes diasporic kinship as contingent, relational, and mobile, formed through crossings rather than mapped boundaries. Guided by Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" and Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation," *mouth wide open* presses beyond the limits of conventional archival practice through ancestral methods of craft, like sewing and quilting. *Totem #10* (2023–2025) hangs suspended from the museum's tall ceiling, interrupting visitors' passage through the Edward H. Linde Gallery, a large open space with wooden floors, bright lighting, and a grand staircase. Pieces of photographic memories are embroidered across the

brightly colored and embellished anchor work that demands attention. Constructed of handmade paper, the layered and gridded format of *Come Bearing Gifts* combines ancestral quilt making formats with fragmented memories pieced together through collaged multi-media details—price tag stickers, a row of red clay bricks, reflective number signs—that invite prolonged close-looking. Each of these works reflects a sustained engagement with crafted materiality and familial memory across temporal and geographic space.

A parallel logic of transformation animates Mitchell's handmade paper series that is framed along the wall behind *Totem #10*. In these artworks, the watery processes of soaking, pulping, and reforming bind material production to spiritual encounter. These works recall the Bahia region's Yemanjá festival, the largest celebration of the sea goddess within the Orisha diaspora. Documented by Jeffrey Gonzales, devotees travel collectively toward the ocean bearing offerings, often invoking the refrain that "all rivers lead to the ocean and all waterways are interconnected."¹ In *Family Reunion* (2024), Mitchell

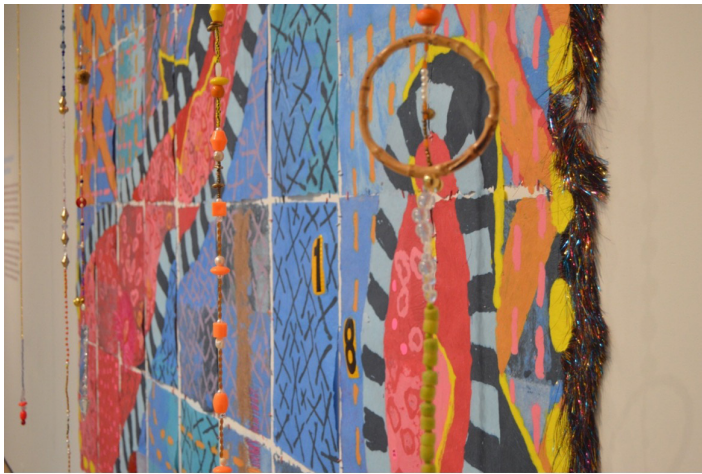


Detail of *Namesakes*. Photograph by author. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

1 Jeffrey M. Gonzalez, "Finding Orisha in New Places," in *Indigenous and African Diaspora Religions in the Americas*, ed. Benjamin Hebblethwaite and Silke Jansen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 307.

aligns this watery interconnection with her wet papermaking practice, embedding spirituality not as iconography but as process.² Mitchell has written that “Yemanjá, Oshun and Mami Wata are all present in Great Dismal Swamp and in my papermaking vat,” connecting her familial geography of the Southeastern U.S. Swamp’s histories of maroonage to those 4,000 miles away in Brazil.³

Material choices contextualize her framework. By harvesting and reconstituting invasive plants such as kudzu and Spanish moss, Mitchell foregrounds the colonial displacement of flora and fauna that occurred alongside forced displacement of bodies. Yet, kudzu’s reputation as an insidious invader obscures its deliberate introduction to the American South as a remedy for soil erosion—a problem produced by plantation monocultures that decimated biodiversity and supplanted Indigenous land stewardship.⁴ As Mitchell observes, “the histories and stories of the materials themselves carry the actual raw fiber plant life... I think memory can be translated through material.”⁵ Morrison’s rememory, the recollection of a forgotten or concealed past, emerges here



Kelly Taylor Mitchell, *Come Bearing Gifts*, 2025. Handmade paper, sequin and tinsel tassel, raffia, netting, stickers, bricks, and beads. Image courtesy of the artist.

through Mitchell’s embodied practices of papermaking, sewing, and quilting that selectively reveal histories, while leaving others hidden and protected.

Across Mitchell’s solo exhibition, discarded textiles, foraged plant matter, and familial photographs function as historical witnesses that refuse to resolve into stable evidence. Mitchell’s kinship with material processes, alongside her vibrant colors and sparkling embellishments, asks its viewers to both consider non-traditional materials as holders of archival memory and ponder what can emerge in *excess* of material knowledge.

2 Didactic text throughout the show explores the connections between Mitchell’s papermaking process and spirituality. Notably, a text block titled “Papermaking and Other Rituals” reads: “Papermaking serves as a connection to the spiritual festival Mitchell observed in Bahia, Brazil, in which water symbolized aspects of rebirth, baptism, and nourishment. This water-reliant process also gestures to histories of forced displacement across oceans that gave rise to African-derived diasporic spiritual traditions in the first place.” Wall text for *mouth wide open*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

3 Kelly Taylor Mitchell, “An Invitation: Ancestral Mapping,” *Burnaway*, November 2023, <https://burnaway.org/magazine/an-invitation-ancestral-mapping/>.

4 Yota Batsaki, “Kudzu in the Patchy Anthropocene,” 1st ed., in *Crossings: Migrant Knowledges, Migrant Forms*, ed. Natalya Din-Kariuki, Subha Mukherji, and Rowan Williams (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2025), 463.

5 Sarah Higgins and Kelly Taylor Mitchell, “Kelly Taylor Mitchell: Masking Practice,” *Art Papers*, 2023, <https://www.artpapers.org/kelly-taylor-mitchell-masking-practice/>.