

At Harvard's Carpenter Center, performance as pollination — and pollination as performance

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 18, 2025, 5:27 p.m.



Tourmaline, still from "Pollinator," 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CHAPTER NY

CAMBRIDGE — Tourmaline is a queer, Black, trans woman. It's important to note these facts about her because they do so much to define her work as a photographer, video artist, activist, and author.

"Tourmaline: The Lives of a Pollinator" runs through Dec. 21 at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The exhibition, which has been curated by the center's Kate

McNamara with Danni Shen, is an across-the-Charles homecoming. Now based in New York, Tourmaline was born and raised in Roxbury.

The most important word in the title is, of course, the artist's name. But "pollinator" matters a lot, too. Pollination of many sorts — artistic, social, political — is central to what Tourmaline does. Even her name, shared with a gemstone, is a form of pollination, crossing mineral and human, beauty and strength.



Tourmaline, still from "Pollinator," 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CHAPTER NY

"Pollinator" is the title of the show's centerpiece, a five-minute video that follows the artist, sumptuously gowned, walking through the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and Edwardian period rooms in the Brooklyn Museum. That portion of the video is in a notably handsome, even dreamlike black-and-white. The image of her staring at the camera, one eye concealed by a floral headdress, is indelible.

Interspersed with those flower-filled scenes is color footage of the activist [Marsha P. Johnson](#) — Tourmaline's biography of her was published earlier this year — and home video of the artist's late father. His presence lends "Pollinator" a nice flourish.

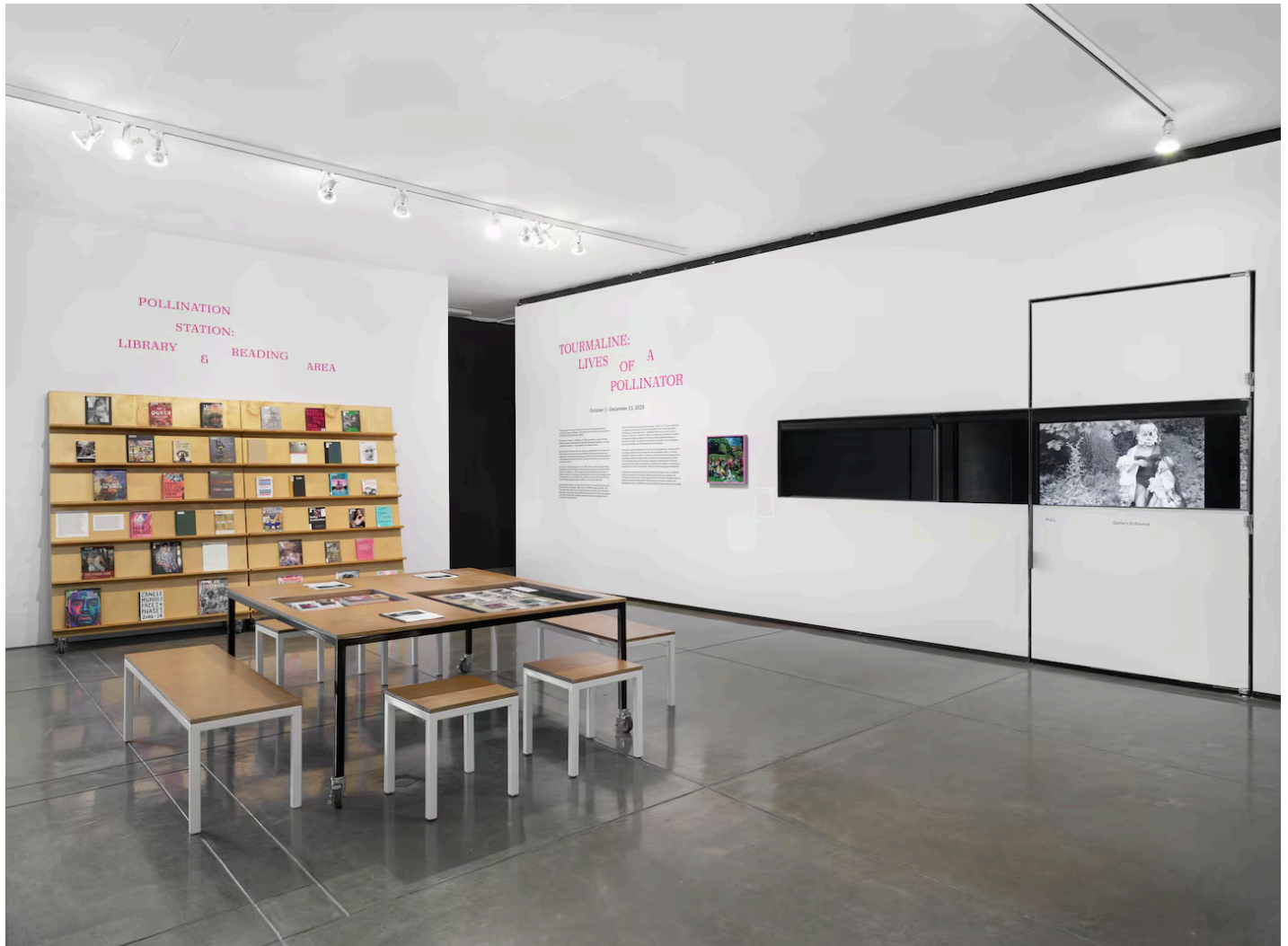


Tourmaline, "It's giving Countach," 2022. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CHAPTER NY

Also in the exhibition is another Tourmaline video, "Atlantic is a Sea of Bones." The title comes from a Lucille Clifton poem. Seven minutes long, the video pays tribute to the performer-activist Egyptt LaBejia. In feeling, it's far removed from "Pollinator."

The show includes half a dozen Tourmaline photographs. In several, we see her, a la "Pollinator," lavishly dressed in vernal settings. Those are in black-and-white. A color photograph shows her on a terrace at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The image has a striking

subtext. Overseeing a late 1940s renovation of that outpost of La La Land luxe was the architect [Paul R. Williams](#), who was Black.



Installation view of "Tourmaline: Lives of a Pollinator." COURTESY CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS. PHOTO: JULIA FEATHERINGILL

Text, sub- and otherwise, matters to Tourmaline. In a fitting touch, the show includes a Pollination Station. Intended for “reading, research, rest, and exchange,” it includes a table, benches, and stools to go with a community bulletin board and 40 books. One of them is that Johnson biography. In the gallery showing “Pollinator,” there’s a photograph taken in 1978 of Johnson, bullhorn in hand, beaming. What a grin she had. The photograph is unframed and unmatted, emphasizing a sense of immediacy. Clearly, hers was a highly active activism.

TOURMALINE: LIVES OF A POLLINATOR

At Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, 24 Quincy St., Cambridge, through Dec. 21. 617-496-5387, carpenter.center

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