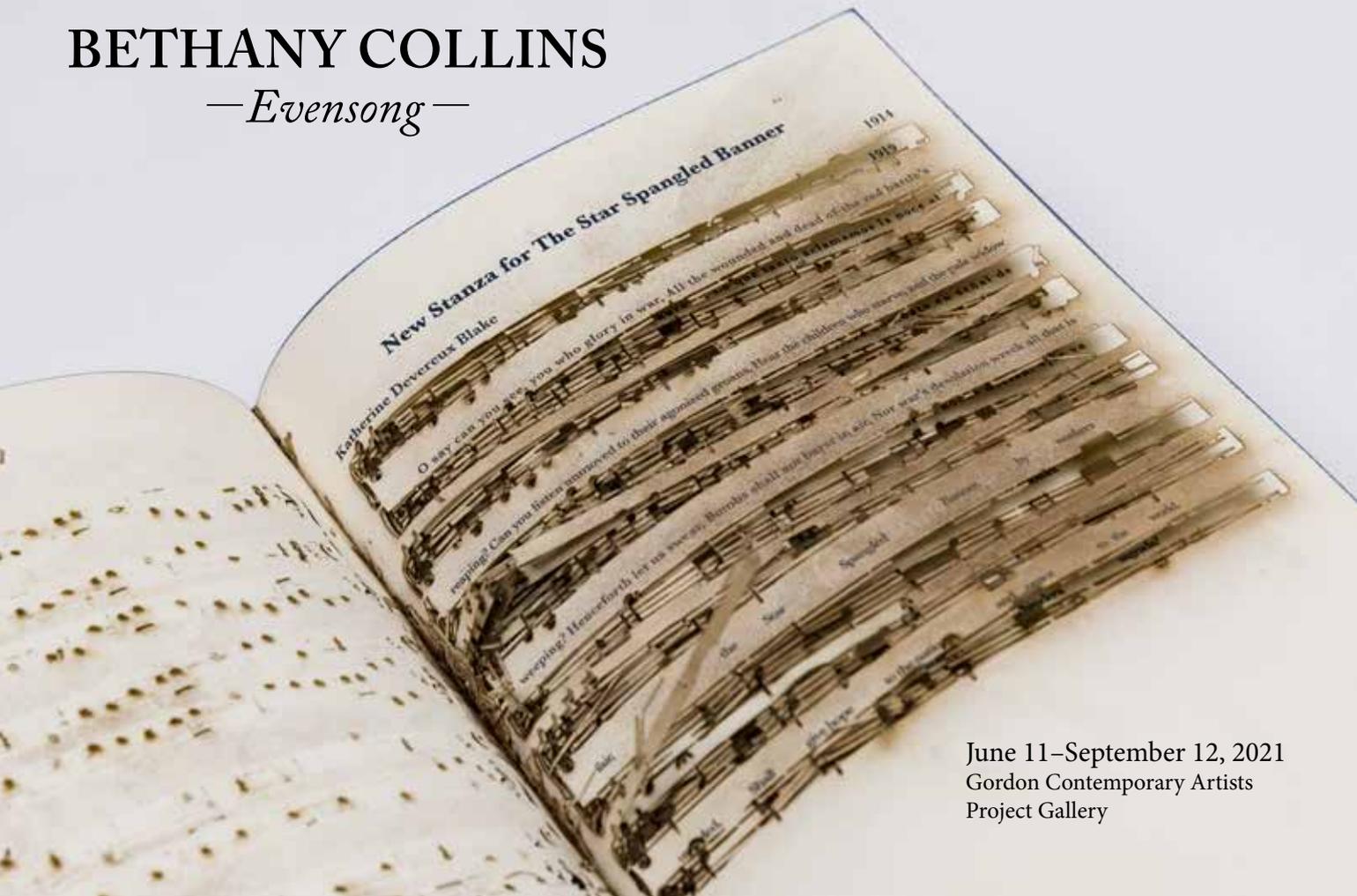


BETHANY COLLINS

—*Evensong*—



June 11–September 12, 2021
Gordon Contemporary Artists
Project Gallery

Language, and all that it can signify, is both the primary subject and material in the work of multidisciplinary artist Bethany Collins (b. 1984). She mines official publications—from dictionaries to newspapers to government reports—to find words or phrases that can act as lenses through which viewers can examine topics related to American history and race. Collins then reproduces selected texts through a range of labor-intensive means, including blind-embossed printing, precise laser cutting, or tedious handwriting. Lastly, she manipulates the final form to critique the accuracy of the historical record or to highlight both the nuances and suggestive power of words.

Following the 2016 presidential election, which revealed and exacerbated a divide greater than some had imagined in American society, Collins has deepened her study of past texts in an effort to better understand the present moment. One linguistic genre she has been drawn to is patriotic hymns, including “Amazing Grace” and “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” As she researched

these songs and others originally written to bind us together as a nation, she discovered dozens of versions (called *contrafacta*) where the melody stays the same, but the lyrics shift to support a particular political or social cause. These causes range from abolition to the confederacy, the suffragist movement, and temperance. This exhibition features a newly produced artist’s book containing one hundred iterations of “The Star Spangled Banner,” originally written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key and the U.S. national anthem since 1931 (cover). Although the lyrics of each contrafactum remain visible, the musical notes—the component that remains consistent throughout—have been cut away by a laser, a process that leaves the paper singed and crumbling. The many reinterpretations suggest that there are multiple and often contradictory ways to express patriotism. They are also a reminder that as a country, we have never reached absolute consensus on what it means to be American.

The Star Spangled Banner: A Hymnal (2020) is surrounded by three related paintings. Each contains

a verse from an alternate version of the song represented in the book: “The Stripes and the Stars,” “The Chase,” and “Heroes of the Mind.” Collins specifically selected verses that romanticize violence or physical conflict in support of patriotic duty. The letters of the words, however, have been dissociated and scrambled to the point where they are barely recognizable. Only the paintings’ titles inform the viewer of the lyrics: *And the glory of death—for the Stripes and the Stars, Where the lash is made red in the blood of the slave*, and *Till the pen, or the orator, stirs them to fight*. Collins refers to these works as “Black Noise” paintings—*black noise* being silence on the auditory spectrum. Painstakingly rewriting, erasing, and deconstructing the lyrics ultimately mutes the anthems and challenges the notion of a cohesive American identity.

Another historic text that resonates with Collins’s sense of discomfort with aspects of her country is Homer’s ancient poem *The Odyssey*, which recounts the ten-year journey homeward of the Greek warrior

Odysseus after the Trojan War. She is especially interested in Book 13, where the poet describes the unfamiliarity Odysseus feels when he finally returns to his homeland. Equally of interest to Collins is the fact that more than sixty translations of the canonical text exist in the English language alone, demonstrating humanity’s impulse to revisit and revise. She has created a body of work that examines several different translations of the passage describing Odysseus’s first steps on the shore, such as:

“but he lamented his paternal land, creeping along the shore of the much-rolling sea, bewailing much” (1851)

“still he sighed for his own land as he paced forlornly the edge of the boisterous sea” (1980)

Collins began each work by drawing pages from particular printed editions of *The Odyssey* on large sheets of paper. Then, with a Pink Pearl eraser and her own saliva—thereby literally inserting her DNA

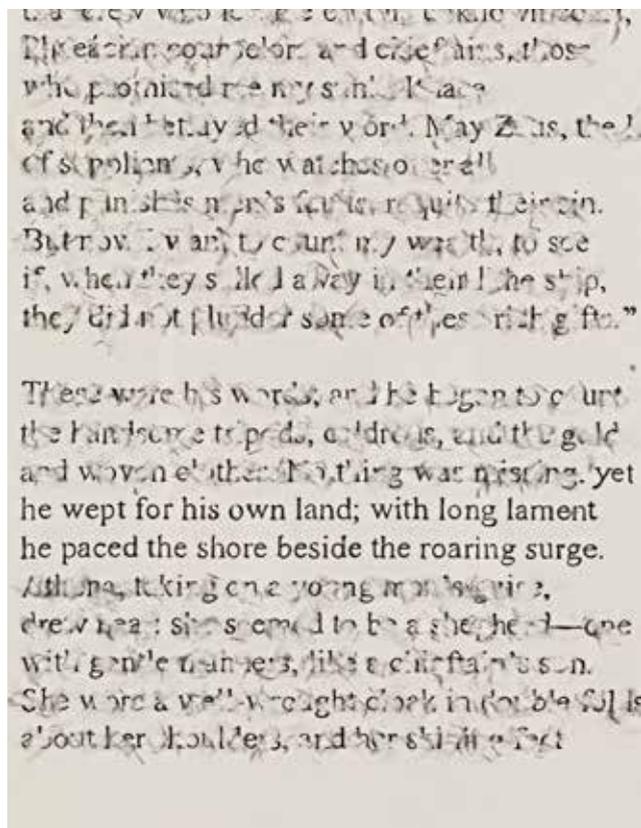


fig. 1

into the narrative—she erased all the words except select passages (fig. 1). Together, the words that remain visible become a new poetic composition. As with the patriotic anthems, Collins is interested in how the variations in translation over the ages reflect changing societal attitudes and demonstrate an inevitable lack of consensus.

“Homeland” is a recurring concept in Collins’s practice. Born and raised in Montgomery, Alabama, and trained at the University of Alabama and Georgia State University, she has deep ties to the southeastern United States. Since graduate school, though, she has lived in northern cities such as New York, as well as Chicago, where she currently resides. Her relationship to the region of her upbringing—like her connection to the country as a whole—is one fraught with conflicting emotions. This tension is expressed in the black-on-black screen-printed and flocked wallpaper covering three walls of the central space in the Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery (fig. 2). The wallpaper’s imagery features botanical specimens



fig. 2

mentioned in a 1965 translation of *The Odyssey* as sourced from the Alabama Herbarium Consortium, an archive of pressed flowers used for the study of Alabama's native plants. Floriography, the language of flowers, is another idiom utilized by Collins. For this work and a related wallpaper produced in white, she identified the symbolic meaning of each plant. Here, they include the cotton shrub, which translates to "I feel my obligations," and ivy, whose translation, "I cling to you in sunshine and in shade," suggests the deep-rooted and complicated imprint of the South on the artist. Floriography is a way for Collins to grapple with her relationship with a place that she claims, but that doesn't always fully claim her back. The all-encompassing installation is both a love letter and indictment.

In a different series related to homelands, classified ads placed by formerly enslaved people looking for lost family members after the Civil War speak beyond the displacement they experienced to the separation of families at the U.S.-Mexico border. The blind-

embossing technique Collins employs for these prints does not use ink; rather, when the paper is pressed onto the plate, the letters are raised in a manner similar to braille. The final result is very difficult for sighted people to read. This is especially true of *Help me to find my people* (2018), because it is printed on black paper. Collins's work is often intentionally hard to read, which suggests the insidious nature of systemic inequities and the fact that meaning can be found in the barely perceptible, or even in the invisible.

By foregrounding the subtle shifts of language found in different versions of songs or translations of ancient literature, Collins encourages us to wrestle with multiple, contradictory positions in this period of great division. As in the Christian liturgical service of evensong, Collins looks to the recitation and repetition of texts that are deemed sacred by many as a way of seeking solace amid the chaos.

Katie Delmez, senior curator

Illustrations

Cover

The Star Spangled Banner: A Hymnal (detail), 2020. Book with 100 laser-cut leaves (Edition of 3, 2 AP), 9 x 6 x 1 in. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. © Bethany Collins. Photo: Evan Jenkins

Fig. 1

The Odyssey: 1990 / 1851 / 1980 / 2002 / 2000 (detail), 2020. Graphite and toner on Somerset paper, 44 x 30 in. each. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. © Bethany Collins. Photo: Evan Jenkins

Fig. 2

I cling to you in sunshine and in shade (detail), 2020. Screen-printed and flocced wallpaper (Edition of 2, 2 AP), dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. © Bethany Collins

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