

Bethany Collins: Evensong

Language 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—for language that can act as a prism through which viewers can examine topics related to American history and race. Collins reproduces selected text through a range of labor-intensive means, such as blind-embossed printing, precise laser cutting, or tedious handwriting. She often then manipulates the final form to critique the accuracy of the historical record or to highlight both the nuances and suggestive power of words.

Since 2016, Collins has deepened her study of historic texts in an effort to better understand the present moment. She has been drawn to translations of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* because of its tale of exile, homecoming, and estrangement from one's native land. Collins has also focused on patriotic songs such as "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "The Star Spangled Banner," which were originally written to bind us together as a nation; however, dozens of alternative lyrics, composed to support a particular political or social cause, reveal that America has never been a country of complete consensus. 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 divide. As in the Christian liturgical service of evensong, Collins looks to the recitation of texts that are deemed sacred by many as a way of seeking solace amid the chaos.

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I cling to you in sunshine and in shade, 2020

Screen-printed and flocked wallpaper (Edition of 2, 2 AP)

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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 is one fraught with conflicting emotions. This tension is expressed in the black-on-black screen-printed and flocked wallpaper covering three walls in this gallery. It features botanical specimens found in a 1965 translation of *The Odyssey*, Homer's ancient Greek text about Odysseus's ten-year journey back to his homeland after the Trojan War. The floral imagery is 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 project, she identified the symbolic meaning of each plant, including 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. The all-encompassing work becomes both a love letter and indictment.

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The Odyssey: 1853 / 1932 / 1900, 2020

Graphite and toner on Somerset paper

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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The Odyssey: 1990 / 1851 / 1980 / 2002 / 2000, 2020

Graphite and toner on Somerset paper

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

Collins identifies with Odysseus's sense of unfamiliarity with the land of his birth when he arrives back in Ithaca after twenty years away, as described in Book 13 of *The Odyssey*. Equally of interest to Collins is the fact that more than sixty translations of the canonical text exist in the English language, demonstrating humanity's impulse to revisit and revise. In this gallery are two examples from a series that compares different translations of the same passage from Book 13 over the course of many decades. Each work begins with Collins tediously drawing a page from a particular printed edition. Then, with a Pink Pearl eraser and her own saliva—thereby literally inserting her DNA into the narrative—she erases all the words except those she is focused on. Together, the passages that remain visible become a new poetic composition. The subtle shifts in language reflect societal attitudes at the time of translation and the suggestive power of words.

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Find 1982, I, 2015

American Masters paper and Black Magic erasers

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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Help me to find my people, 2018

Blind-embossed Stonehenge paper

Private collection

Like the *Odyssey* drawings nearby, this work is part of a series related to homeland and familial relationships. Collins based each print on a classified ad placed by a formerly enslaved person looking for lost family members after the Civil War. The identifying recollections of loved ones are poignant—from their names to their former enslavers, to where they had lived, to the simple plea to “help me to find my people.” The blind-embossing technique Collins employs does not use ink; rather, when the paper is pressed into the plate, the letters are raised in a manner similar to braille. The final result is very hard for sighted people to read. Collins’s work is often intentionally difficult to decipher, 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. This body of work speaks beyond the displacement experienced by newly freed African Americans in the nineteenth century to the separation of families at the U.S.-Mexico border.

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The Star Spangled Banner: A Hymnal, 2020

Book with 100 laser-cut leaves (Edition of 3, 2 AP)

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

Another linguistic genre Collins has been drawn to since 2016 is patriotic hymns. As she researched songs like “Amazing Grace,” “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” and others, she discovered dozens of versions where the melody stays the same, but the lyrics change to reflect a particular political or social cause. This newly produced artist’s book contains one hundred adaptations (called *contrafacta*) of the lyrics to “The Star Spangled Banner,” originally written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key and the U.S. national anthem since 1931. Although the lyrics remain visible, the musical notes—the component that traditionally remains consistent—have been laser cut and singed by flames and are beginning to crumble. The many reinterpretations suggest that the multiple ways of expressing love and pride of country represented within the hymnal are often in contradiction with one another.

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And the glory of death—for the Stripes and the Stars (The Stripes and the Stars), 2021

Charcoal and acrylic on panel

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

Each of the three paintings in this gallery contains a verse from an alternative version of “The Star Spangled Banner”: “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, though, have been dissociated and scrambled to the point where they are barely recognizable. Only the paintings’ titles inform the viewer of the lyrics. Collins sees these works as “Black Noise” paintings—*black noise* being silence on the auditory spectrum. Laboriously rewriting, erasing, and deconstructing the lyrics ultimately mutes the anthems and challenges the notion of a cohesive American identity.

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Where the lash is made red in the blood of the slave (The Chase), 2021

Charcoal and acrylic on panel

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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Till the pen, or the orator, stirs them to fight (Heroes of the Mind), 2021

Charcoal and acrylic on panel

Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

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