Bethany Collins (b. 1984, Montgomery, Alabama, lives and works in Chicago) is a multidisciplinary artist whose conceptually driven work is fueled by a critical exploration of how race and language interact. As Holland Cotter noted in The New York Times, “language itself, viewed as intrinsically racialized, is Bethany Collins’ primary material.” Her works have been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions nationwide, including the Studio Museum in Harlem, The Drawing Center, Wexner Center for the Arts, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, and the Birmingham Museum of Art. Collins has been recognized as an Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the MacDowell Colony, the Bemis Center, and the Hyde Park Art Center among others. In 2015, she was awarded the Hudgens Prize. She received her MFA from Georgia State University, and her BA from the University of Alabama.

Do you know them? (1898), 2018. Twice embossed archival newsprint, 9 x 6 inches each (9 x 60 inches overall). Courtesy the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Aron Gent.

**Artist’s Suggested Reading List**

Bethany Collins provided the following list of books and an essay to share insights into her art and ideas.


legible, the entire report is present here, excluding the conclusion. For this work, the artist used a blind-emboss technique: she engraved the pages backwards into acrylic plates, soaked, then pressed the pages, resulting in text that protrudes from the surface of the page, like braille. Both this installation and The Birmingham News series are blind-embossed on Somerset Radiant White paper. Their elusiveness suggests the slippage of language—meaning may be found in the traces of what is barely perceptible, or even invisible. On view at CAM five years after Michael Brown’s death, A Pattern or Practice suggests that even that which has been made clear and impossible to deny, remains hard to see.

Another section of the exhibition focuses on the themes of mourning, the loss of loved ones, and the loss of home. In Information Wanted, 1893 and In Mississippi, Collins reproduces collections of classified ads—published in six different newspapers shortly before the end of the Civil War until the 1920s—by African Americans separated from family members by war, slavery, and emancipation. The text within these ads is brief, constructed from memories—a name, their loved ones’ former owners, where they once lived. Together the ads convey a scattered yet shared remembrance, with phrases that recur like refrains: “Do you know them?” and “help me to find my people.”

Information Wanted and In Mississippi belong to a larger series which Collins began in 2018 following the family separation crisis at the US-Mexico border. The artist twice-embossed the paper, leaving the text particularly illegible and the paper deteriorating. Collins’s repetitive embossing technique echoes a repetition of violence throughout our country’s history.

Also included in the exhibition are paintings from Collins’s Noise series. Each panel contains obsessively rewritten lyrics from American patriotic hymns. From these anthems, the artist chooses lyrics that focus on notions of love, then obsessively abstracts and renders the text illegible. The clustered text becomes a form of “noise” that prompts us to reconsider the meaning of the original lyrics and songs. Patriotic songs are meant to unify the group, a nation. Sung collectively, they empower a sense of pride, of patriotic love. In undoing the text, Collins questions what it means to love a place, to belong together, to be citizen, and to be American.

The Odyssey: 1852 / 1980 presents two translations of the same passage from Book 13 of Homer’s The Odyssey. To create this work, Collins meticulously re-writes the text in graphite, only to erase portions of the text with a mixture of Pink Pearl eraser and her own saliva. Collins employs editorial precision: she leaves a brief snippet of text legible across the distinct translations. This passage focuses on the return of Odysseus, who after his decade-long journey home from war, fails to recognize his own country. Collins connects a historical sense of loss with the unease and frustration that has swept the nation today, confronting America’s tragic histories that continue to permeate the present. What has become of the home we thought we knew not so long ago?

Equal parts love letter and indictment, Chorus presents a reconsideration of the America we thought and felt we knew—a land we long to call home, which feels intimately familiar, yet estranging.

I am for you/You’re A Grand Old Flag, 2018. Charcoal and latex paint on panel, 48 x 72 x 2 inches. Courtesy the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Aron Gent.