

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.

Bethany Collins: Chorus is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Chief Curator, with Misa Jeffereis, Assistant Curator.

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Related Programs

Trailnet: Literary Tour Community Ride
Saturday, September 28, 9:00 am–2:00 pm

Artist Talk: Bethany Collins
Thursday, November 7, 6:30 pm

Film Screening: What You Gonna Do When the World’s on Fire?
Friday, November 15, 7:00 pm

Artist’s Suggested Reading List

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

Borzutzky, Daniel. (2016) *The Performance of Becoming Human*. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Arts Press.

Hartman, Saidiya. (2019) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Jemisin, N.K. (2017) *The Fifth Season*. Burton, MI: Subterranean Press.

Russell, Mary Doria. (1996) *The Sparrow: A Novel*. New York: Villard.

Smith, Zadie. (2016) ‘On Optimism and Despair.’ *The New York Review of Books*, Vol 6. No. 20. Available at: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/12/22/on-optimism-and-despair>.

United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. (2015) ‘Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department’ Available at: https://justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.

Williams, Heather Andrea. (2012) *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wilson, Emily. (2017) *The Odyssey*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Bethany Collins

Chorus



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

Language is both subject and primary material for Bethany Collins. The artist uses language to interrogate American history and the nuance of racial and national identities. She fractures and erases text from dictionaries, patriotic songs, bureaucratic reports, and classified ads, rendering select phrases illegible. Through these actions Collins seeks to remaster the language that others have made.

In *Chorus*, Collins makes multiple conceptual explorations. In the first section of the exhibition, the artist examines contrasting forms of reportage through two bodies of work: one an act of journalistic denial from decades ago; the other a more recent attempt of public truth-telling. In *The Birmingham News* series, Collins reproduces select cover pages from the city’s daily newspaper during a series of organized Civil Rights demonstrations in the spring of 1963. As acts of violence were perpetrated against protesters mere

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blocks from *The Birmingham News* offices, the newspaper’s editorial board chose to publish banal articles on its front pages while burying Civil Rights stories inside. If newspapers indeed provide the first draft of history, the innocuous above-the-fold lead stories Collins presents here highlight blatant gaps in our shared history.

A Pattern or Practice comprises 91 blind-embossed prints featuring the entire Department of Justice report on the Ferguson Police Department. Although barely



Audio Tour
Visit camstl.org/audio on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.

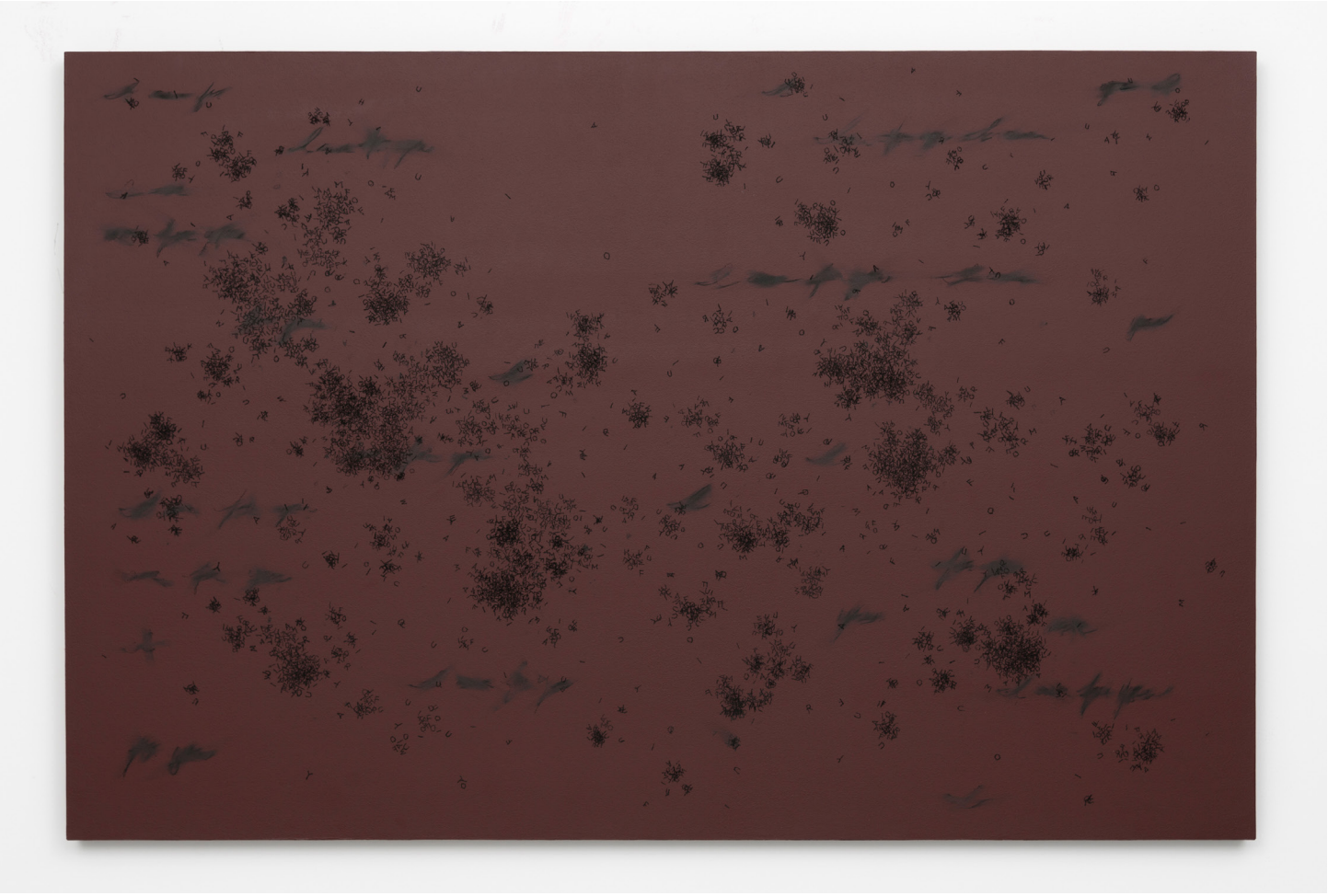
legible, the entire report is present here, excluding the conclusion. For this work, the artist used a blind-emboss technique: she engraved the pages backwards into acrylic plates, soaked, then pressed the pages, resulting in text that protrudes from the surface of the page, like braille. Both this installation 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

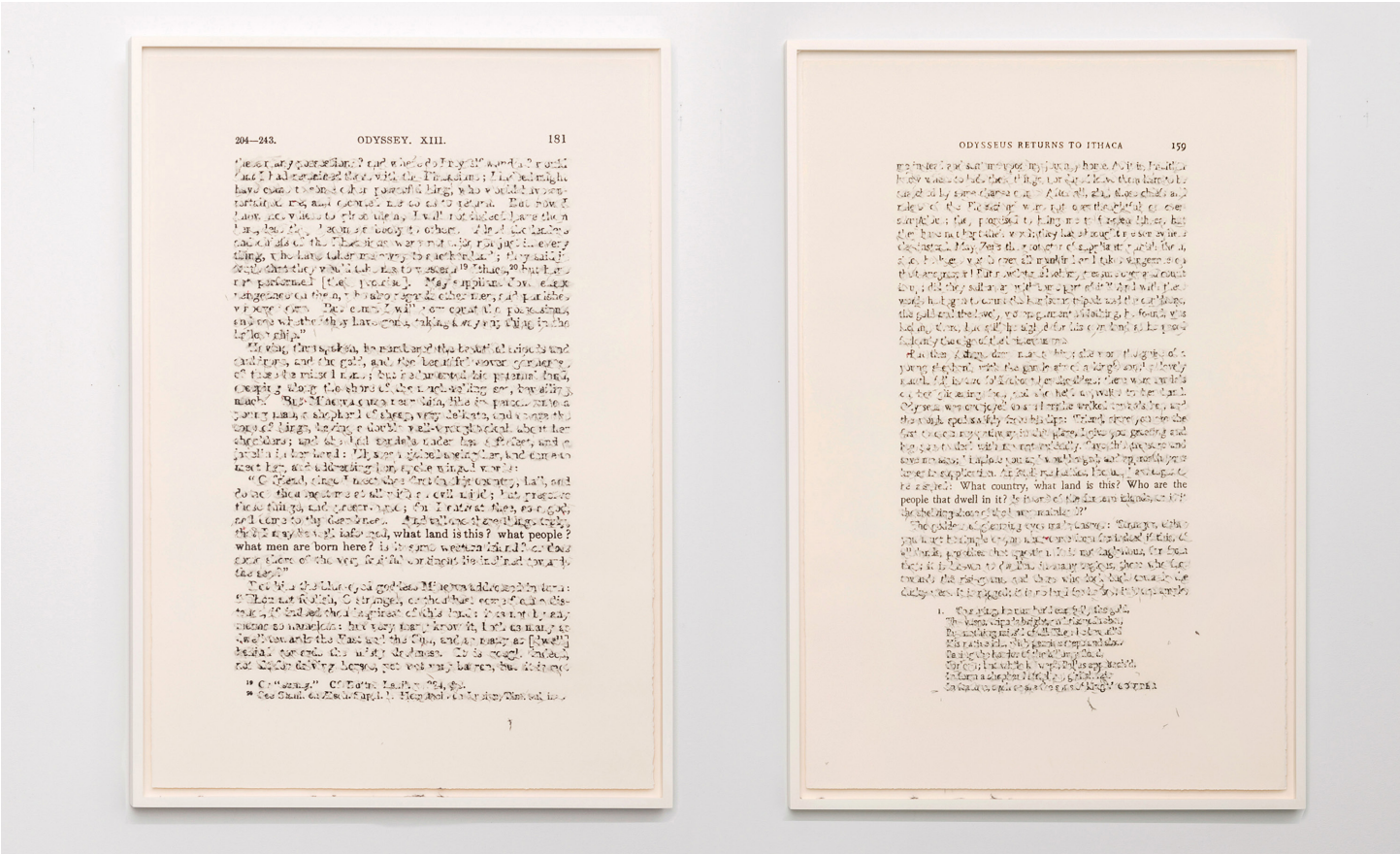
remembrance, with phrases that recur like refrains: “Do you know them?” and “help me to find my people.”

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.



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



The Odyssey: 1852 / 1980, 2018. Graphite and toner on Somerset paper, 44 × 30 inches each (44 × 60 inches overall). Courtesy the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Aron Gent.

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.



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