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A Harlem Nocturne

Deanna Bowen

Curated by Kimberly Phillips

September 12 – October 17, 2020

Deanna Bowen's artistic practice concerns itself with histories of Black experience in Canada and the US. Her focus is the "dark matter" in our midst: figures and events that have remained below the threshold of visibility not because they are impossible to find but because their existence reveals a systematized racism difficult for the majority culture to acknowledge. Bowen reactivates historic material sourced from overlooked archives through a process of extraction, translation and enlargement, and then reinserts this material into public consciousness in a new form.

A Harlem Nocturne presents a terrain of research that Bowen undertook in Toronto and Vancouver over the past four years, recovered from civic documents, newspaper clippings and numerous personal and organizational archives. These materials trace a series of interconnected figures—many of them part of Bowen’s own family—who formed an integral part of the Canadian entertainment community from the 1940s through the 1970s. As Black bodies living and working in a settler colony underpinned by institutionalized racism, they were at once invisible and hyper-visible, simultaneously admired, exoticized and surveilled. They enjoyed certain celebrity in their local milieu but also endured differing degrees of bigotry, segregation and racial violence.

One of Bowen’s artistic strategies is to confront us with her own tools of retrieval and viewing, whether overhead projectors, lightboxes or flatbed film editors. These apparatuses are often the only means through which the material becomes visible and legible to us. Such legibility, however, is simultaneously challenged by the many registers of the colour black evident throughout the exhibition: a darkly luminous black in the lightbox and video works; a light-absorbing black monochromatic flocking; draped black chiffon; and black redaction. These different examples of black speak to the obstructions and opacity Bowen encountered in her research efforts, and to her strategies for protecting communities close to her family by avoiding a repetition of the overexposure they endured in their public and private lives. The unrelenting presence of the colour black is undoubtedly also employed by the artist as a gesture of insurmountable grief—both her own and that of the broader Black community.

A Harlem Nocturne takes up many of the concerns currently shaping discussions in photography and Black visual studies. Africana studies scholar Tina M. Campt urges her readers to consider photographs as dynamic and contested sites of Black cultural formation, and as “an everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility.”¹ She follows feminist theorist and photography historian Laura

Wexler in stressing that “what we learn of the past by looking at photographic records is not ‘the way things were.’ What they show us of the past is instead a ‘record of choices.’” Campt extends this to suggest that photographs offer a record of *intentions* as well, as “it is only through understanding the choices that have been made between alternatives—learning what won out and what was lost, how it happened and at what cost—that the meaning of the past can appear.”² Bowen’s work also reminds us of photography’s instrumentalizing power. The late photography theorist Allan Sekula spoke of the way that photography produced a generalized, all-inclusive “shadow archive,” which encompasses an entire social terrain and positions within it the bodies of not only heroes, leaders and celebrities, but “the poor, the diseased, the insane, the criminal, the nonwhite, the female, and all other embodiments of the unworthy.”³ Perhaps this “shadow archive” is Bowen’s dark matter—a representational paradigm that cannot be seen directly but silently constitutes the all-encompassing structure within which Black experience was contained, made visible, and variously vilified or admired in twentieth century Canada (as elsewhere). In daylighting this evidence, Bowen’s objectives are forensic. We might argue that the force of her work lies in the visual and material *mattering* of that archive.

Bowen’s aim is to posit a powerful counterpoint to common narratives that oversimplify historical narratives of Canada’s complex and vibrant Black presence. She reminds us that even seemingly insignificant documents can be rich repositories for unintended readings, and for questioning who has been charged with writing our histories and why. To borrow the words of artist Hito Steyerl, “a document on its own—even if it provides perfect and irrefutable proof—doesn’t mean anything. If there is no one willing to back the claim, prosecute the deed, or simply pay attention, there is no point in its existence.”⁴

Kimberly Phillips

1. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 7. See also Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

2. Laura Wexler, quoted in Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters*, 6.

3. Allan Sekula “The Body and the Archive,” *October*, no. 39 (Winter 1986), 10.

4. Hito Steyerl, “What Is a Document? An Exchange between Thomas Keenan and Hito Steyerl,” *Aperture* (Spring 2014), 62.