

## VISUAL ARTS

# The past speaks; we still shudder



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**Deanna Bowen at Gallery 44**  
 Until April 21, 401 Richmond St.  
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The old adage “history is written by the victorious” has never been less true. Today, history is read as a-linear and is thus written, re-written, challenged and validated, at break-neck speeds, victor be damned. History is as up for remixing as a dance track.

That does not mean, however, that the very real issues brought forth by historical investigation are in any way diminished. Arguably, this new fluidity makes what we learn from these narratives all the more loaded.

Deanna Bowen’s fascinating multimedia exhibition *The Paul Good Papers*, at Gallery 44, incorporates video, archival materials, performance (and performance documentation) as well as audio/sound sculpture to revivify, give new context(s) to and generally put under a wide magnifying glass an ugly, violent school-integration incident from the U.S. civil-rights era.

Without giving the whole show away, here are the basics: Paul Good was an ABC news reporter from the North who, in 1964, visited the small town of Notasulga, Ala., to witness a school integration. Good documented the brutal violence that accompanied the event and stayed on to interview key players, including Robert Shelton, the Ku Klux Klan’s Imperial Wizard.

From this incident, via Good’s work as well as other documents, Bowen has assembled a disturbing portrait of a terrible time.

Bowen’s video installation takes the audio portion of one of Good’s filmed reports from Nota-



Artist Deanna Bowen (left) stages re-enactments of reporter Paul Good’s interview with a Ku Klux Klan leader.

## Q&A DEANNA BOWEN

Speaking with artist Deanna Bowen, I learn that *The Paul Good Papers* (a project that will have a further iteration at the Art Gallery of York University in January, 2013) continues to generate new meanings both for her and inquisitive viewers seeking to untangle this thorny Gordian knot of race and media, original voice and reportage, lived experience and learned example.

**In Paul Good’s 1964 interviews that you work with, Good often coaches his subjects – the local white power brokers in particular. Can this be read as a kind of complicity?**

No, that’s how you navigate the South, as an outsider, a northerner. You can’t come in finger-pointing. In my own experience, southerners have to feel that you are not going to come and reprimand them for the way they live.

And, in Good’s archives, he interviews black locals as well and black civil-rights activists, plus he recorded entire Klan rallies.

**Is Paul Good a hero to you?**

I’m indebted to him. If he didn’t have the courage to witness, we would never know anything about these incidents. So, yeah, he’s a hero.

**You’ve inserted yourself into this history, especially via the performances. Is it difficult, emotionally?**

To do this project requires so many roles, from researcher to naive spectator to interpreter to producer, which puts you in a self-conscious, creative place. But then there are moments when the words actually hit you, and it becomes a very personal engagement. And I don’t like performing publicly at all!

Ha! But it seems the only way to bring the work forward.

**What changes have you noticed as the performances progress?**

The performance is rooted in an understanding of how the Ku Klux Klan spreads its message: through the repetition of rhetoric. So, we’re doing the same text, every day. At first, we were terrified. The Klan had just been run out of Edmonton the week before.

What I wanted to see was whether or not the actor I paired with would find any of this ugliness inside them, after days of repetition. I wasn’t including myself in this, but I should have! It starts to sit in your body.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*

R.M. Vaughan

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*Both performers appear to want to hide, or at least enclose their bodies within their hunched shoulders, and yet they cannot.*

sulga (the audio is all that Bowen has found, to date, of Good’s film) and creates a kind of sub-film to accompany the soundtrack – a series of scratched, lined, erased and occluded filmic textures that remind us of both what is missing from, and how much we project onto (especially when the screen is all but blank) historical records.

The archival material Bowen has collected – from photographs taken at the Notasulga riot, to an advertisement for a “whites only” rally, to Canadian newspaper accounts of the incident (including those in this paper), to a massive (arguably glamorizing) 10-page spread on the KKK printed in a 1965 edition of the U.S. “family magazine” *Saturday Evening Post* – tell how the mainstream media at the time expressed both righteous horror and also, subtextually, a resistance to embracing fully the complex issue of racism.

Adding another layer, Bowen and actor Russell Bennett have been re-enacting Good’s interview with the KKK leader Shelton – daily, in front of a live audience and recording the performances. The physical dynamic between the actors, particularly as evidenced in the growing chain of performance photo stills on the gallery walls, is fascinating. The performance situation is casual, but the tension in Bowen and Bennett’s uneasy bodies as they speak and respond to Shelton’s contemptible ideology is palpable. Both performers appear to want to hide, or at least enclose their bodies within their hunched shoulders, and yet they cannot, because they are performing under stark lights in the middle of the gallery. But there’s no hiding from the past.