

DEANNA BOWEN

Gospel

Through photography, music, video, and sculpture, Deanna Bowen's *Gospel* presents personal and collective narratives within the context of the black American Diaspora. The exhibition revolves around three inter-related projects. Photographs depict hymnals from the early to the latter part of the twentieth century. An audio sculpture plays a composition based on gospel spirituals. And a video projects footage from numerous sources including two film adaptations of the novel *Imitation of Life* as well as King Vidor's film *Hallelujah!* (1929) about a troubled sharecropper-turned-preacher.

Imitation of Life, which Bowen borrows from, revolves around a white woman, her black maid, and the troubled relationships they both have with their daughters. In the white woman's case, her careerism drives away her daughter. The black mother suffers a contrasting fate as her light-skinned offspring's ability to pass for white causes the daughter to reject her and the racial and social status quo that she represents. Finding affinities with the black daughter's struggle for independence, although not for her desire to pass for white, Bowen uses *Imitation of Life* as a way to think through her relationship with her mother and family.

Revivalist Christianity provides much of the exhibition's audio track and mise en scène as well as its underlying theme of religion as source of both sanctuary/salvation and delusion/oppression. Through *Hallelujah!* Bowen reflects upon her strict Christian upbringing. Bowen's great grandparents had been black settlers who migrated from Guthrie, Oklahoma, to Amber Valley, Alberta, in the early 1900s. Her grandfather was a Methodist minister. Unable to tolerate the claustrophobia and homophobia at home, Bowen eventually severed contact with her family.

Bowen tackles her history through the prism of found footage and digital imagery. Appropriating, rather than originating, her materials enables her to tease out her story's broad social and political resonances while preventing it from becoming narrowly autobiographical. Bowen's complex distillation of personal material is echoed in her resistance to being labelled as a black artist. "I have always insisted that I do not make work around race and have been frustrated with race-based discussions of my work" she has commented.

"I resist this categorization because there is a way in which it obscures the other equally important matters that I deal with. My works are autobiographical and not necessarily always about race, and while I am proud of my heritage, I resent the way institutions take up my work as ethnic artefact, not artistic work."¹

Interestingly, this wilful rejection of racial categorization works to complicate the theme of passing for white in *Imitation of Life* by alluding to a more complex review of race and institutionalized systems of racial naming.

Always working to understand her family and herself, Bowen worried early in her career "that [she] had positioned herself as an observer involved in an anthropological inspection of [her] culture, as well as airing dirty laundry." Remarking that she had left her former home to construct a new home for herself, she added, "Yet every now and then I check in to see how much of myself I've lost."²

Previous Page
Joyful Praise: (Song Book Press, Booneville, Texas, Arkansas, 1960)
Archival Inkjet Print on Epson Photo Paper
24.25 X 30.75 inches

Facing Page
stills from **Imitations of Life (A Hypothesis)**
Single channel video projection
7:10 minutes played in timed cycle. 2008

This pull of her abandoned past informs every aspect of *Gospel*. Bowen's complex feelings about her background reflect a mixture of anguish, distaste, fascination, and nostalgia. Her desire to understand her historical place also fuels an experimental documentary film that she is making about her family's migration to Canada and the Alabama plantation where her family lived as slaves.

Facing Page:
Treasury of Song: (Robert H. Coleman, Dallas, Texas, 1917)
Archival Inkjet Print on Epson
Photo Paper
24.25 X 30.75 inches

Reflecting the artist's ambivalence, the mood of *Gospel* is one of ecstatic, though anguished, reverie. Bowen presents family and community artefacts with reverence and curiosity. The larger-than-life photographs of hymnals meticulously convey every detail of these discarded books. In recording their places of publication – Arkansas, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Texas, Ohio, and Missouri – Bowen evokes the ways in which black culture migrates (she found the books in an antique shop in Guthrie, Oklahoma, as well as in her grandfather's church in Vancouver, British Columbia). With titles like *Joyful Praise* and *Songs of Faith and Hope* they present images of refuge and release. Yet by depicting them with covers closed Bowen suggests that she cannot access the uplifting messages within. These photographs also act as portraits of Bowen's grandfather. Embodying many of his traits - "dated, weathered, theologically (and conversationally) spare, and highly moralistic"³ they evoke "a wall of religious bravado that ultimately concealed a *practiced performer* and deeply conflicted man."⁴ Bowen also summons up her grandfather in *Preacherman (Stela)* - based on the aptly named Advent loudspeaker – an audio sculpture that plays a new recording derived from him singing spirituals. Placed in the entrance to the second part of her exhibition, it acts as a menacing, albeit avoidable, barrier. Notes Bowen: "His bravado was false and was in fact surmountable."⁵

The video projection, *Imitation of Life (A Hypothesis)*, which alternates with the audio track, explores the fate of four archetypal figures: the preacher, the fallen woman, the missing mother, and the perpetually longing daughter. Drawing upon the melodramatic language of Southern Gothic, each character symbolizes painful events in Bowen's life. Together they evoke a family history riddled with ghosts, persecuted young women, disturbed personalities, and hereditary curses.

Treating the screen as a canvas, Bowen uses digital animation, Photoshop and other editing tools to integrate manipulated and still images with found footage that play with time, scale, speed, rotation and opacity. The video also incorporates texts from such iconic novels as James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* along with dictionary definitions and diary entries. Palimpsests of images, text, and sound, some scenes include up to 30 layers.

In Bowen's hands, materials from her family archive become souvenirs, aids to recalling events that she has not come to terms with fully. "We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable," suggests Susan Stewart. "Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative."⁶ With its looping structure and multi-layered quotations, *Gospel* is a form of re-enactment that, to quote Cathy Caruth, "does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned."⁷

Bowen's use of quotation can also be linked to the African tradition of call-and-response. A foundation for music ranging from gospel, blues and jazz to reggae and hip hop, call-and-response embodies "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener, in which all of the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener."⁸

At once culturally specific yet also enigmatic, *Gospel* transcends the autobiographical while possessing a powerful recuperative force. Freed from the pressure of keeping family secrets, it suggests, Bowen can now confront a past that she neither fully possesses nor entirely comprehends but which profoundly shaped her. Understanding that processes of personal and collective remembrance are fragmentary and incomplete, *Gospel* hauntingly evokes a world in which redemption is longed for but always out of reach.