

**HOME Deanna Bowen  
Pitt Gallery, March 31–April 23**

Home. Place(s) of conflict and safety

9 pm Friday night

Another opening at the Pitt Gallery. Gotta go to this one. Why? She's black, she's cool. Bus ride. Anticipating a beer or maybe two. Greetings politely given and received. Head for the bar. Relaxation technique. Scanned the objects on the walls. Intriguing.

Artist book.

Scrutinized the meticulous binding job, acquired the artists' book from the artist. Intently gazed at the work on the wall.

Text.

Text in the Deep Southern American vernacular. Quite the challenge. Stories about the rev'rend, lesbianism, growing up in a working class black Canadian family.

Light boxes.

The encased: silver flask, tattered black purse, pair of scissors, old telephone set, bottle of bleach, fumigation canister.

Contemplation. I know that I am drawn into the work and would very much like to talk to the artist about her work.

The interview is postponed once again. She's relocating to a new city. Seventy-two hours to transcribe the piece if we follow through with the new arrangement. Perhaps I'll make it all up.

Tape recorder, extra batteries, paper, pen and a pot of coffee. Unable to get record levels. I can't imagine writing all the information down. Red light flashes on the tape deck, telephone rings. Rewind, playback, record.

Fatona: Shall we do a sound check?

Bowen: La de da. The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plains. Is that enough? So we're going to talk about culture?

Fatona: Why the artis't book?

Bowen: It was actually an accident. I tried to deal with the physical height of the boxes in the gallery as I thought it would be difficult to read the text in them. I had originally planned to have photocopies of the text, but it turned out that it was quite inexpensive to have the pages bound.

Fatona: The text is written in African-American dialect — an oral dialect. The language is specific to a particular group of black people, do you think that other people are able to read the signifiers in the work?

Bowen: It falls into the discussion of whether or not text legitimates the dialogue — the notion that if it is written it is real, if it is spoken it is not. Somewhere in there I fell in and bought it. I wanted to take the spoken notions of superiority between men and women; straight and not; black and white out of the realm of the spoken. When I return home and say, "well, why is it this and not that?", the reply is usually, "we don't know what you are talking about". I've put it in print to prove it. Document it. I felt that if it were spoken there would be ample room to avoid it. Writing in slang is definitely about my returning home. It was a struggle to write it and I found myself constantly slipping into a more formal way of writing. I wanted the text to be readable by a black community and assumed it would be. I now realize that I am speaking to and about my family, my American family.

Fatona: As an insider-outsider to this black community or home that you speak about, were there any fears around backlash or further alienation as a result of this exhibition?

Bowen: I had a fear that I was slipping into the white academic scheme by putting my history up as if it were gone or there was no continuation or evolution of this culture. It is by no means over. I looked at the light boxes and the objects or artifacts in them and realized that they could be read as remnants, shards of a lost community. My biggest fear was that I had positioned myself as an observer involved in an anthropological inspection of my culture, as well as airing dirty laundry. I've come out as a lesbian and I know that this is not something that one talks about. I had to overcome my complicity with the silence and say "this is who I am".

There is also the discussion I have with myself about the importance of portraying positive imagery of black culture. It shouldn't matter to me as the aspects of my life and culture that are represented are very real but there is some trepidation that the information will get into the wrong hands. I am essentially trying to discard the fear and advance dialogue within seemingly airtight spaces.

Fatona: Are those seemingly airtight spaces/places the sites you refer to as home?

Bowen: Yes. Closeted notions of sexuality is home. The church is home. I've left those things behind to construct a new home for myself, yet every now and then I check in to see how much of myself I've lost. My new understanding of the world is usually discarded at the door when I go home. The home that I was raised in is more about comfort — it's like macaroni and cheese.

Fatona: Objects as metaphors.

Bowen: I am more often than not mistaken for a black man when I walk down the street. The bleach bottle on the first glance is just a bleach bottle, but upon deeper investigation it becomes this cue for other memories. The bug-sprayer evokes memories of the intense homophobia and fear of others I've lived with inside and outside of my own black community. The purse — my relationship to the purse is about the notion of aligning myself to the white person, Eurocentric mores, in order to achieve increased status. It is a physical object which proves an arrival to a certain location. It's very simple, the gist of it is that what you see may not always be what you get. The object is presented and its meaning is altered by the text and photography. The object then becomes both real and a metaphor for the impossibility of absolute truth.

Place the receiver on the set. Stop the recorder. Playback.

ANDREA FATONA