

Deanna Bowen

~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway*

14 September – 4 November 2017

Opening: Thursday 14th September, 7-10pm

Curated by Georgina Jackson

Mercer Union is delighted to present a commissioned solo exhibition by artist Deanna Bowen entitled ~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway* opening on 14th September and running until 4th November.

Working across film, sculpture, performance, installation, drawing and photography, Bowen excavates traumatic episodes and invisible histories. Through genealogical and historical research, she digs into histories of slavery, oppression, migration, and Civil Rights' movements, in North America, making discerning personal work through the historical. From re-staging a 1964 interview between an ABC News reporter and the Klu Klux Klan's Imperial Wizard in Notasulga, Alabama, against the backdrop of a violent school-integration incident,¹ to tracing her family's history from their first documentation in 1815 in Jones County, Georgia,² to today, she makes present the invisible with political force.

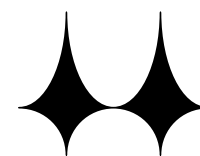
This newly commissioned work takes as its starting point a 1956 CBC teledrama ~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway* by Canadian screenwriter Stanley Mann. The teledrama tells the story of a rising Black legal aide lawyer who is assigned to represent a young white student who has assaulted a fellow student/rising Black athlete playing out in locations across Toronto such as the Don Jail, the Court House and Roncesvalles. Bowen is interested in the screenplay as the piece is a rare dramatic work that deals with Black/white race relations in Toronto and in Canada; and the live to broadcast production featured her great uncle Herman Risby in a supporting role. Broadcast from the CBC's Toronto studios there are no archived recordings of the teledrama; the script was found in Queen's University while set drawings by CBC Art Director Nikolai Soloviov are housed in archives in Ottawa.

~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway* re-inserts this forgotten teledrama into the present day. The galleries of Mercer Union are transformed into a series of sets (a jail cell, a legal aid office, a living room, a locker room, and court house) for live rehearsals and recordings to take place every Saturday for its duration. These rehearsals take place amongst archival documents from the era, from Canadian documentaries exploring race relations and U of T's *The Varsity*, to *Life* magazine's coverage of the Emmett Till murder trial. The script will be animated by five Black actors, multiplying their roles and representations, while blurring the lines between black and white, rehearsal, action, and performance. As curator Liz Park has written "The political potency of Bowen's work lies in her ability to recharge the power of historic and archival documents."³ ~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway* is an installation and 'performed production' work that uses the gallery space as a set for rehearsals and present day video production of the teledrama, from audition, to rehearsals, to final shot.

¹ *The Paul Good Papers: Atlanta Reels* (2012)

² Deanna Bowen *sum of the parts: what can be named* (2010)

³ Park, Liz. 2017. "Deanna Bowen: ~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway*," *Deanna Bowen ~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway**, Mercer Union, Toronto.



In delineating the necessity of “wake work” (connecting the experience of enslavement to contemporary violence, mourning, survival, and happiness) writer Christina Sharpe argues “toward inhabiting a black consciousness that would rupture the structural silences produced and facilitated by, and that produce and facilitate, Black social and physical death.”⁴ The antagonisms, divisions and traumas, of race relations in the 1956 teledrama re-staged in 2017 are even more urgent today.

Deanna Bowen makes use of a repertoire of artistic gestures in order to define the Black body and trace its presence and movement in place and time. In recent years, her work has involved rigorous examination of her family lineage and their connections to the Black Prairie pioneers of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the Creek Negroes (Black Indians) and All-Black towns of Oklahoma, the extended Kentucky/Kansas Exoduster migrations, and the Ku Klux Klan. The artistic products of this research were presented at the Royal Ontario Museum of Art, Toronto (2017); the Art Museum at the University of Toronto (2016); the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (2015); McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton (2015 – 14); and the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2013). Her works and interventionist practice have garnered significant critical regard internationally. She has received several awards in support of her artistic practice including a Canada Council New Chapter Grant (2017); Ontario Arts Council Media Arts Grant (2017); John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship (2016); and the William H. Johnson Prize (2014). She was part of a contingent of invited Canadian presenters in the Creative Time Summit at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015; and her writings and art works have appeared in numerous publications including *Canadian Art*; *Transition Magazine*; *Towards an African-Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, and Resistance* (all forthcoming); *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*; *PUBLIC Journal*; *North: New African Canadian Writing - West Coast Line*; and *FRONT Magazine*.

Deanna Bowen’s commissioned project is made possible with leading support from Partners in Art



Deanna Bowen would like to acknowledge support through the Media Arts Program from the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario/un organisme du gouvernement de l’Ontario

A theatrical performance of ~~On-Trial~~ *The Long Doorway* will be in development after the exhibition, with support from the Theatre Centre, Toronto. Special thanks to the Theatre Centre, Toronto, in particular Franco Boni.

⁴ Sharpe, Christina. 206. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, p.22.