

“A Complex Mapping of Power”: Deanna Bowen’s Investigative Installations

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The Golden Square Mile

A project by Deanna Bowen

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The Golden Square Mile in Montreal, much like the city’s Old Port, is an area of multiple histories. For some, these stories evoke an eerie sense of unease, whilst wandering these neighborhood’s streets. A sense of unsettlement emerges, as ongoing anti-Black and settler-colonial histories seep through the cracks of these historical sites. Deanna Bowen’s artistic practice tackles the disturbing annals of Canada by diving headlong into such cracks, using both private and public archives to illustrate “a complex mapping of power.”¹

Throughout her work, Bowen locates Black people, their presence and movement across time and space.² Her own family history forms the crux of her auto-ethnographic interdisciplinary practice. She scrutinizes her family’s lineage, migration, and connections to Vancouver’s Hogan’s

¹ Crystal Mowry, *Crystal Mowry Introduces Deanna Bowen: Black Drones in the Hive*, video tour, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, August 17, 2022, <https://kwag.ca/content/deanna-bowen-black-drones-hive>.

² Crystal Mowry, *Exhibition Tour of Deanna Bowen: Black Drones in the Hive*, video tour, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, August 17, 2022, <https://kwag.ca/content/deanna-bowen-black-drones-hive>.

Alley as well as to Black Strathcona, the Black prairie pioneers of Alberta and Saskatchewan, the Creek Negroes, the “All-Black” towns of Oklahoma, the Kansas Exoduster migrations, and the Ku Klux Klan in Canada and the United States.³ Bowen’s iterative and cumulative approach explores topics of white supremacy in the Canadian context, as they relate to global anti-Black and settler-colonial histories. Bowen’s artworks can be read as complementary pieces that imbricate one another, forming a metanarrative which frames her family history. Her project *The Golden Square Mile* thus slots into place among her other works.

The Golden Square Mile is a central portion of Montreal’s downtown area which developed between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Located at the foot of Mount Royal, the area was predominantly populated by affluent white families, who made their fortune through settler-colonial Canadian enterprises such as rail, shipping, timber, mining, fur, and banking.⁴ Among the borough’s key establishments and mansions were the structures that would become the (William) Notman House and the Beaver Hall.⁵

During this same period, Montreal’s Black community was composed of a mixture of Black diasporic peoples, including Black Canadian descendants of enslaved people as well as individuals hailing from the

³ Mowry, *Crystal Mowry Introduces Deanna Bowen*.

⁴ Patricia Harris and David Lyon, “Golden Square Mile,” in *Compass American Guides: Montreal* (New York: Fodor’s, 2004), 132–35.

⁵ Margaret W. Westley, *Remembrance of Grandeur: The Anglo-Protestant Elite of Montreal, 1900–1950* (Montreal: Éditions Libre Expression, 1990), 331; Larry Gingras, *The Beaver Club Jewels* (Richmond, BC: L. Gingras, 1972); Douglas Mackay, *The Honorable Company, A History of the Hudson’s Bay Company* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1936).

United States and the Caribbean. This, according to Dorothy Williams, was the beginning in earnest of Black community in Montreal after the abolition of slavery.⁶ Indeed, several portraits of Black individuals in the William Notman Photographic Archive, housed in the McCord Museum, bear witness to the presence of Black people in Montreal at the time.⁷ This was also an era during which many Black organizations were founded and became pillars in the development of the city's Black community. Williams describes the 1920s as "the golden period of Montreal's Black history, bringing the city millions in taxes on alcohol alone."⁸

Montreal was simultaneously earning a strong reputation in the fine arts milieu and its jazz fame was being cemented. The *École des beaux-arts de Montréal* was also founded during this decade.⁹ Montreal was also a crucial site for the development of modernism in Canada.¹⁰ Enter the Beaver Hall Group. Nestled within the Golden Square Mile, in their namesake studio at 305 Beaver Hall Hill, and led by their president, A. Y. Jackson, a founding member of the Group of Seven, this Montreal-based group set themselves apart from the Group of Seven both aesthetically, in

⁶ Dorothy W. Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997), 38–43.

⁷ Cheryl Thompson, "Black Canada and Why the Archival Logic of Memory Needs Reform," *Les ateliers de l'éthique/The Ethics Forum* 14, no. 2 (2019): 87–92.

⁸ Dorothy Williams, "Little Burgundy and Montreal's Black English-Speaking Community," in *Canadian Encyclopedia*, Historica Canada, January 17, 2020, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/little-burgundy-and-montreal-s-black-english-speaking-community>.

⁹ Ray Ellenwood, *Egregore: A History of the Montréal Automatist Movement* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1992), 3.

¹⁰ Tracey Collett, "Montreal: Its Role in the Beginnings of Modernism in Canada," in *Culture + State: Nationalisms*, Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux and James Gifford, eds. (Edmonton: CRC Humanities Studio, 2003), 77–83.

their emphasis on urban landscapes with human figures, and socially, in their inclusion of women, who likely attended the Art Association of Montreal (later the Montreal Museum of Fine Art), another important institution for the education of artists at the time.¹¹

The Beaver Hall Group's legacy exemplifies the myriad ways in which Black Canadian (art) histories continue to be obfuscated by white supremacist tendencies in this land. Indeed, in Montreal, de facto segregation affected the social settings of both jazz and painting. Black artists were barred from performing "uptown" and in venues in the more lucrative areas of the city—namely the Golden Square Mile.¹² Black visual artists, like their musician counterparts, would also have been barred from institutions where they may have wished to educate themselves or showcase their talents. While the 1920s are regarded as a key cultural moment in Montreal when it comes to music and the visual and performing arts, the Black art histories of the period remain largely obscure.¹³

Meanwhile, Prudence Heward, considered a member-at-large of the Beaver Hall Group as a close friend of Group members such as Anne Savage and Sarah Robertson, produced several portraits of Black women.

¹¹ Julia Skelly, "Prudence Heward, Life and Work: Significance and Critical Issues," *Art Canada Institute*, accessed 26 July 2021, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/prudence-heward/significance-and-critical-issues/>; Evelyn Walters, *The Women of Beaver Hall: Canadian Modernist Painters* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2005), 11–20; *Show Girls*, dir. Meilan Lam (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1998), <https://www.nfb.ca/film/show-girls>; Joana Joachim, "Black Gold: A Black Feminist Art History of 1920s Montréal," *Canadian Journal of History* 56, no. 3 (2021): 266–91.

¹² Sean Mills, "Democracy in Music: Louis Metcalf's International Band and Montreal Jazz History," *Canadian Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (2019): 351–73.

¹³ Joachim, "Black Gold," 266–91.

Heward came from a wealthy family and lived on Peel Street, in the heart of the Golden Square Mile. After an island retreat to Bermuda in the 1930s, with modernist Montreal painter Isabel McLaughlin, Heward began depicting Black figures amid tropical flora. Upon her return to Montreal, she continued to paint Black women, mostly cleaners and domestic workers, who at the time predominantly lived beyond the foot of Mount Royal.¹⁴ Heward's wealth and whiteness gave her power over and access to these economically, socially, and racially disadvantaged women, whom she depicted in various levels of undress and almost always in unflattering and demeaning postures.¹⁵ Similar to Lawren Harris's *Decorative Nude* (1937), which also depicts a nude Black woman, Heward's paintings demonstrate another avenue in which implicit bias rears its ugly head.¹⁶ While many of her portraits of white women offered sensitive and powerful representations of individuals seeking to assert their place in a (white) male-dominated world, Heward failed to convey any such empathy in works such as *Dark Girl* (1935) or *Hester* (1937), choosing instead to fetishize and exoticize them through the use of tropical plants.¹⁷

In the documentary *By Woman's Hand* (1994), viewers are given a glimpse at six of Heward's portraits of Black women, painted from at least

¹⁴ Dorothy W. Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997), 38–43; *By Woman's Hand*, dir. Pepita Ferrari (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1994), https://www.nfb.ca/film/by_womans_hand/.

¹⁵ Charmaine A. Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 32.

¹⁶ Charles C. Hill, "The Beaver Hall Group," in *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 40–42.

¹⁷ Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*, 2.

three sitters.¹⁸ While some historians have assumed that she chose these mostly unnamed Black women for the “aesthetic challenge” of painting them and because of the so-called propriety required of white women, who could or would not pose nude, the fact remains that a serious power imbalance undergirds this portion of Heward’s body of work.¹⁹ Indeed, as Charmaine Nelson notes:

How could one seriously interpret Prudence Heward’s *Dark Girl* (1935), a lone naked and melancholic black female surrounded by tropicalized foliage, without discussing the evocation of Africa as the “dark continent” and without mentioning Heward’s seeming preoccupation with black women and girls as subjects for other paintings like *Hester* (1937), *Clytie* (1938), *Girl in the Window* (1941), and *Negress with Flower* (n.d.)?²⁰

Although the documentary asks, “who were these women?” it never ventures to answer the question beyond gesturing vaguely toward the unnamed, generic figure of Black domestic workers of the 1920s and ‘30s. This is yet another way in which the Black histories, which Bowen endeavours to weave together, are obfuscated. *The Golden Square Mile*, then, opens an avenue by which viewers can contend with the racist legacies of the Group of Seven and the Beaver Hall Group, through an investigation of figures such as Barker Fairley, A. Y. Jackson, Edwin Holgate, Lawren Harris, Prudence Heward, and Anne Savage.

¹⁸ One child, one light-skinned woman with almond-shaped eyes, and one darker-skinned woman named Hester, who may have also posed for *Dark Girl* (1935), although this seems unlikely. Ferrari, dir., *By Woman’s Hand*.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Nelson, *Representing the Black Female Subject*, 2.

The visual strategies that Bowen uses, along with the narrative threads in this work, extend from several of her previous works. Crystal Mowry, former senior curator at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, notes that Bowen uses strategies of juxtaposition.²¹ I would add that Bowen's approach is a form of "investigative installation." This phrase could also describe the works of Black Canadian artists Sylvia D. Hamilton and Camille Turner, in regard to their similarly research-based approaches. Bowen's, Hamilton's, and Turner's artistic vocabularies echo what seems to be an enduring tendency among Black women in the Canadian art sector, a direction that curator and professor Andrea Fatona identifies as emerging from a need for diverging forms of historical discourse and documentation of Black (art) histories in this land, namely through oral histories and artistic practices.²²

Bowen's video work *sum of the parts: what can be named* (2010) is in some ways emblematic of her trajectory through the archives of her family and, more broadly, of Canada. Indeed, she tugs at threads of history, unravelling so-called mysteries surrounding the white supremacist circumstances amid which her kin had to survive, from generation to generation. In so doing, Bowen embarks with the viewer on a circuitous process of uncovering the layers of Canada's racist entanglements, on the individual, institutional, and global levels.

In this video, the artist stands alone against a dark backdrop, lit from above, holding before her a relatively thin binder, which amounts to all the

²¹ Mowry, *Exhibition Tour of Deanna Bowen; Crystal Mowry Introduces Deanna Bowen*.

²² "Conservation: Andrea Fatona and Joana Joachim," *Blackity Symposium*, ArtexTe, Montreal, May 27, 2022, <https://artexte.ca/en/2022/04/blackity-symposium/>.

information she had uncovered so far about her family across multiple generations and in multiple archives. She reads this data to the camera. Bowen's language, in the early portions of this video performance, is as perfunctory as the archives themselves, reproducing aurally the experience of locating Black histories in the archive. In this piece, we see Bowen beginning to locate her family archive temporally and geographically, and in relation to other peoples and moments in global history. For instance, she notes that runaway enslaved novelist Harriet Jacobs goes into hiding in 1835, around the same time that Reese Bowen, her great-great-grandfather, is born. This results in a convergence of written and oral histories, bringing to light otherwise disregarded historical parallels.

The use of text on screen further echoes the perfunctory nature of the archive and Bowen's narration thereof. Text-based visual components would also become central to her later works. As she moves forward in time through the generations, Bowen's narration becomes increasingly detailed and fluid, flowing into a series of statements which begin with "I remember" and "I know," melding her living memory with archival documentation and oral histories. Bowen sees her work as a form of publishing, which is apparent in *sum of the parts* inasmuch as it serves as a record of her family history as it relates to Black Diasporic and other global events.²³ This work is key to understanding Bowen's artistic vocabulary and visual strategies²⁴ and is thus a crucial entry point into her cumulative installation projects *Black Drones in the Hive* (2021) as well as *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play* (2019), *The God of Gods: Berlin, Berlin*

²³ *Exhibition Tour of Deanna Bowen; Crystal Mowry Introduces Deanna Bowen.*

²⁴ *Exhibition Tour of Deanna Bowen.*

(2020) and, eventually, *The Black Canadians (after Cooke)*, setting the table for her investigation of the Golden Square Mile.

In Bowen's quest to situate her family history in relation to global milestones of white supremacy, she engages largely with white archives: a body of documentation written by white individuals, about Black populations, for white people.²⁵ She deems these as translations of Black life that are not, in fact, articulations of Black experience.²⁶ The artist's visual vocabulary is thus a crucial intervention which disrupts white supremacist narratives and introduces new levels of understanding to seemingly innocuous archives.

In her investigative installations such as *Black Drones in the Hive*, the artist brings together archival documents, reproductions of images from archives ranging from local to national collections, commemorative objects, sound and video works, facsimiles, and artworks from museum collections. Bowen's use of clustering as a visual strategy frames and restores certain relationships and contexts, which often become elusive when these items are stored.²⁷ Each cluster is a snapshot of the powers at play in a given moment across time and space, as seemingly disparate events collide in the artist's weaving of this intricate historical web.²⁸ The installation at the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery included a video piece with sound, depicting Charles Ellison performing a trumpet solo of "Taps,"

²⁵ Crystal Mowry, *Black Drones in the Hive: Virtual Exhibition Tour #3*, video tour, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, August 17, 2020, <https://kwag.ca/content/deanna-bowen-black-drones-hive>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mowry, *Crystal Mowry Introduces Deanna Bowen*.

²⁸ Mowry, *Black Drones in the Hive: Virtual Exhibition Tour #3*; Mowry, *Exhibition Tour of Deanna Bowen*.

a significant composition in military life and service. The use of jazz here, Bowen says, serves not only to “honour the dead” but also to connect *Black Drones in the Hive* to Montreal and its Black history.²⁹

This installation was presented for the first time in the context of the centenary of the first-ever show by the Group of Seven painters. Echoing and expanding this commemorative moment, Bowen includes a petition, signed by fifteen percent of Edmonton’s population, demanding a ban on immigration by Black settlers from the United States to western Canada.³⁰ The piece in question, *1911 Anti-Creek Negro Petition* (2013), is a reproduction of a two-hundred-page document revealing the anti-Blackness that confronted African Americans upon their arrival at the border. In an imposing display of dozens of sheets from this document, the work presents the collective racist actions undertaken in an attempt to bar Black and Indigenous entry into the country. The petition was signed by many influential individuals from the Canadian milieu. Among them was none other than the friend and avid supporter of the Group of Seven, Professor Barker Fairley.³¹ This document thus reveals not only the depth and breadth of white supremacist values engrained in Canada, but also how well and truly they are anchored in Canadian art history and connected to this revered collective of Canadian artists. This list also

²⁹ Deanna Bowen, *Artist Talk: Deanna Bowen*, video, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, August 17, 2020, <https://kwag.ca/content/deanna-bowen-black-drones-hive>.

³⁰ Mowry, *Exhibition Tour of Deanna Bowen*.

³¹ Michèle Faguet, “Deanna Bowen,” participant bio, Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 2020. <https://11.berlinbiennale.de/participants/deanna-bowen>; Jacob Gallagher-Ross, “Twilight of the Idols,” *Theater* 50, no. 3 (2020): 29–47; Mowry, *Crystal Mowry Introduces Deanna Bowen*.

serves as a bridge leading into another nexus in Bowen's ever-expanding body of work, *The God of Gods*.

In these installations, Bowen points to a network of individuals, including Barker Fairley, affiliated to the University of Toronto, as well as to a network of white male Canadians engaged in circulating white supremacist ideologies across the globe, all the way to Germany.³² Hart House, for instance, was a key public institution presenting Group of Seven works in Canada. According to Bowen's findings, it was also at the core of Canada's "white supremacist fantasy and cultural strategy."³³ The installation further highlights a deeply racist article titled "The Black Canadians," published in *Maclean's* magazine in 1911, which was illustrated by Lawren Harris, a core member of the Group of Seven.³⁴ Like the petition, the article is particularly focused on the unwanted migration of Black and Indigenous people from the United States to Canada, positing that: "It should now be decided whether or not Canada is to permit the immigration of the colored people from the Southern States into this country. Is it desirable that there should be admitted an element which will either remain always apart from the other Canadians, or which will place in the blood of the ultimate Canadian, a tinge of the Ethiopian?"³⁵ The article makes further racist and anti-Black comments about Black people's ability to contribute to society, even questioning our capacity to live in a

³² Faguet, "Deanna Bowen"; Gallagher-Ross, "Twilight of the Idols," 29–47.

³³ Bowen, *Artist Talk*.

³⁴ Ibid.; Britton B. Cooke, "The Black Canadian," *Maclean's*, November 1911, <https://archive.macleans.ca/article/1911/11/1/the-black-canadian>.

³⁵ Bowen, *Artist Talk*; Cooke, "The Black Canadian."

northern climate.³⁶ A reproduction of the original article, complete with ethnographic images and racist commentary, is shown in the installation. With interventions such as these, which draw clear connections between prominent figures in Canadian art history and the country's long legacy of white nationalism, Bowen brings together threads that lead to Montreal and the Golden Square Mile.

With *The Golden Square Mile*, Bowen picks up where the historical through lines in previous works left off, tracing a line from the wealth and social connections revealed in *The Black Canadians (after Cooke)*, to the Anglo-Montrealers who profited from Queen Victoria's annexation and industrialization of Canada.³⁷ This work chronicles Bowen's family history, from the birth of one of her ancestors in Africa to the year of her mother's birth.³⁸ *The Golden Square Mile* maps the history of the founding of the National Gallery of Canada alongside her family's evolution across Turtle Island, framing the beginnings of white Canadian cultural production within the British Empire and its foundational art networks, and ultimately leading to the Group of Seven and the Golden Square Mile.³⁹

In a conversation with Mowry, Bowen discusses the four pillars of genocide: extermination, segregation, assimilation, and extraction, to which Mowry adds a fifth aspect: exhaustion—that is, the labour of

³⁶ Cooke, "The Black Canadian."

³⁷ Deanna Bowen, artist statement for *The Golden Square Mile* (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, 2022).

³⁸ "Panel conversation: Deanna Bowen, Betty Julian, and Joana Joachim," *Blackity* Symposium, Artexpte, Montreal, May 27, 2022, <https://artexpte.ca/en/2022/04/blackity-symposium/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

maintaining such histories and telling these stories.⁴⁰ Indeed, this seems to be another of the artist's strategies. Bowen's investigative installations contain a large quantity of documents for visitors to read. Physical, emotional, and intellectual fatigue, then, form part of the experience of this portion of her body of work. The array of evidence presented forces non-Black visitors to do the work of learning this history while experiencing, in a minuscule way, some of the weight and exhaustion of being Black and carrying these histories. With works such as *The Golden Square Mile*, Bowen requires visitors to grapple with the very real and ongoing legacies of white supremacy, which permeate nearly every sphere of what we call "Canada."

Joana Joachim's research and teaching interests include Black feminist art histories, Black diasporic art histories, critical museologies, Black Canadian studies, and Canadian slavery studies. Her SSHRC-funded doctoral work, *There/Then, Here/Now: Black Women's Hair and Dress in the French Empire*, examined the visual culture of Black women's hair and dress in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, investigating practices of self-preservation and self-care through the lens of creolization as well as historical and contemporary art practices. She earned her PhD in the department of Art History and Communication Studies and at the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at McGill University working under the supervision of Prof. Charmaine A. Nelson. In 2020 she was appointed a McGill Provostial Postdoctoral Research Scholar in Institutional Histories, Slavery and Colonialism. Joachim is Assistant Professor in Black Studies in Art Education, Art History and Social Justice at Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts.

⁴⁰ Bowen, *Artist Talk*.