

Bethany Collins' America: A Hymnal Offers Refuge From Basel and American Madness

December 5, 2018

By Celia Almeida



Bethany Collins presents America: A Hymnal at Locust Projects. Photo by Chris Edward

Visual artist Bethany Collins knows she's about to be uncomfortable. That's got nothing to do with the themes of race, geographic identity, and troubling American history that underlie "The Litany," the exhibition she'll show at Locust Projects during Art Basel. Collins' work regularly addresses and explores the way these themes intersect with her own identity. Instead, it's the performative element she'll introduce in her latest piece that's making her a little bit nervous.

The anchor of "The Litany" is a display of Collins' latest artist book, titled *America: A Hymnal*. The book features 100 reworked versions of American proto-anthem "My Country 'Tis of Thee," originally written by Samuel Francis Smith in 1831. From the 18th through 20th Centuries, its melody was used as a template for songwriters who crafted reworked versions in support of different causes throughout the course of American history.

On Thursday, December 6, Locust Projects will host a day-long performance of the 100 versions included in Collins' book. It is the artist's first time introducing the element of performance into her work, and though this particular experience is new, she can trace its origins to traditions she grew up with in her home state, Alabama.

"I grew up in a very liberal Presbyterian church," she remembers. "We used to do these 48-hour Bible readings. So, you would sign up for your hour at any time, day or night, and you would come and read. It's 3 a.m., someone's reading, but no one usually is in the pew. It's this beautiful idea that it doesn't matter if you hear it necessarily, it's just knowing that a sacred text is being read." Collins's adaptation of that tradition in *America: A Hymnal* takes as much inspiration from her upbringing as it does from the present political moment. Some guests will filter in and out, she says, while others stay longer. "I imagine that some people will come in and they'll be expecting a kind of quick performance, something that's eye-catching... and some people will come in and they'll leave. And some people will come in and they'll stay for an hour. And I bet there's one person that'll come in and stay all day. I think all of those are important, 'cause it feels like how we engage with democracy. All these different voices: Some of us are paying attention, some of us aren't. All of that messiness feels reflective of now."

Those schisms are apparent even within the pages of the book that inspired the seven-hour performance. Collins burned out the musical notes in the book so that only the lyrics remain legible. "The thing that's holding together all these different versions of what it means to be American are burned away and only the differences remain," she says. Some versions of the song are controversial enough that singers asked not to sing them. Collins cites a version with the lyrics, "God save the South/God save Kentucky/God save the Confederacy," as an example. "But without them being sung it's not a true chronological retelling of American history through this song," says Collins. "It needs all of them. Even the really hard ones."

The piece illustrates that modern tensions in America are hardly fresh wounds, but rather, they're reopened scars. Yet even when spotlighting the historically fractured state of America, Collins hopes her exhibit serves as a kind of refuge for those who view the work. "I think regardless of where they come in, where they enter the work or how they enter the work, I hope what I've created is a kind of quiet space that sits apart from everything else that's happening around it in the city, and maybe more, metaphorically. I hope I've created some silence in the middle of Basel."