

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Atlanta artist Bethany Collins wins \$50,000 Hudgens Prize

By HOWARD POUSNER

JUNE 15, 2015



Atlanta artist Bethany Collins reacts to being named the third Hudgens Prize winner. CONTRIBUTED BY HUDGENS CENTER FOR THE ARTS



"Southern Review" by Bethany Collins is featured in the "2015 Hudgens Prize Finalist's Exhibition" at the Hudgens Center for the Arts.

Atlanta artist Bethany Collins has been selected for the third Hudgens Prize, a honor for a Georgia artist in which the winnings include a \$50,000 award and the opportunity to have a solo show at Duluth's Hudgens Center for the Arts.

Donated anonymously, the prize amount makes it one of the country's largest art awards to an individual artist. It will provide Collins support as she creates works for the solo show, planned for April 2016.

The announcement was made in an ceremony at the arts center on Saturday night.

The other finalists were Scott Ingram, Rylan Steele and Orion Wertz. Works by all four continue on display in the finalists' exhibition at the center through June 27.

In her Atlanta Journal-Constitution review, critic Felicia Feaster called Collins "the most politically engaged of the four artists" and noted that she "tackles the topic of race with a deft hand."

"Collins uses the iconography of education: chalkboards, academic journals, dictionaries and pencil erasers to create sculptures, paintings and installations about how race is understood in language and in cultural conditioning," Feaster continued. "In 'Colorblind Dictionary,' she has smeared and obscured references to color, from the 'red' in mistletoe to the 'white' blossoms of the mock orange shrub. In 'Southern Review,' Collins blacks out thick sections of that academic journal, suggesting these essays focused on revelation may just as likely mystify the artist."

Like Collins, Ingram is an Atlanta artist. Steele teaches photography at Columbus State University. Columbus artist Wertz specializes in paintings and drawings. Find a gallery of their work at thehudgens.org.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Collins provided this statement about her work:

"I am interested in the unnerving possibility of multiple meanings, dual perceptions, and limitlessness in the seemingly binary. Drawing repeatedly allows me to fully understand objects in space, while defining and redefining my own racial landscape.

For me, racial identity has neither been instantly formed nor conjured in isolation. Rather, identity entangles memory: actual and revisited, cultural and historical, individual and collective. Through the dissolution of dichotomies and exploration of language, this work recalls moments in the formation of my racial identity as Black and Biracial. And each re-worked mark is yet another attempt to navigate the binary paradigm of race in the American South by grasping invisible limitations and grounding myself within the collective African American visual narrative."

Jurors were Shannon Fitzgerald, executive director of the Rochester Art Center in Minnesota; Buzz Spector, art professor at Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in St Louis; and Hamza Walker, associate curator for the Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago.

The jurors selected the four finalists, viewed the finalists' exhibit and then made studio visits last week before making their selection.

Pam Longobardi won the second Hudgens Prize in 2013; and Gyun Hur the first in 2010. Both are metro Atlanta artists.

The Hudgens is at 6400 Sugarloaf Parkway, Bldg. 300 (in Gwinnett Center complex), Duluth. 770-623-6002, www.thehudgens.org.

flagpole

ARTS & CULTURE ART NOTES

Concurrent Exhibits Explore Race and Ethnicity in Art

Art Notes

By JESSICA SMITH

FEB. 25, 2015

[...]

“AS WE WISH TO BE:”

ATHICA's first exhibition of the year, a solo installation by Atlanta-based artist Bethany Collins, is comprised of two large murals with clusters of handwritten letters appearing like constellations against black chalkboard paint. As part of her language-based “White Noise” series, the letters rearrange to spell messages such as “too white to be black.” Born to a white mother and black father, Collins creates subtle, deeply personal conceptual works that visually deconstruct language to explore the relationships between race and identity.

ATHICA will host “Racial Identity + Art,” a panel discussion held in conjunction with Collins' exhibit, on Thursday, Feb. 26 from 6:30–8:30 p.m. Panelists include Stanley Bermudez, who in addition to being an artist in Contrapunto, is an art professor at UGA and the University of North Georgia; Valerie Babb, professor of English and director of the Institute for African American Studies at UGA; and Alisha M. Cromwell, a PhD candidate in UGA's department of history. Local artist and former ATHICA director Hope Hilton will lead “As We Are: A Kids' Workshop” on Sunday, Mar. 1 from 2:30–4:30 p.m., giving children of all ages an opportunity also to explore themes of identity and acceptance through activities sponsored by Treehouse Kid & Craft and Double Helix.

“As We Wish to Be” will remain on view through Sunday, Mar. 8.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

The Stuff of Life, Urgently Altered

Artists in Residence Display Work at Studio Museum in Harlem

By HOLLAND COTTER AUG. 28, 2014



Ms. Collins's "Southern Review" consists of dozens of framed tear sheets from a 1987 issue of *The Southern Review*, a venerable literary magazine published by Louisiana State University. Credit Emon Hassan for *The New York Times*

David Hammons's "African American Flag" — with its Pan-African red and black stripes and green field of black stars — floats high over the sidewalk outside the Studio Museum in Harlem. Originally created nearly a quarter-century ago, it has become an identifying emblem for a museum dedicated to nurturing the careers of artists of African descent.

In 1980, Mr. Hammons himself was the beneficiary of that nurturing. A Los Angeles transplant still little known in New York, he was chosen that year to participate in the museum's annual artists-in-residence program, which provides on-the-premises studio space, a stipend and a culminating exhibition. Today, he's a star, the program continues, and work by its latest graduates is on view in a show called "Material Histories: Artists in Residence 2013-14."

All three of its artists are, in more ways than one, Mr. Hammons's heirs. Like him, they take race as a subject, one as critical as ever, as the news keeps reminding us. And they address that complex theme in a variety of subtly polemical visual languages with sources in popular culture.

Language itself, viewed as intrinsically racialized, is Bethany Collins's primary material. It's the very substance of the inconspicuous centerpiece of her work done over the past year. Called "Colorblind Dictionary," it's simply a found and well-thumbed 1965 edition of a Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language in which the artist, who identifies herself as biracial, has carefully erased, or scratched out, all mentions of the words "black," "white" and "brown." As you flip through the book, paper shavings fall from the pages like dust.



"Ravel," by Ms. Collins, who often uses language — viewed as intrinsically radicalized — as the primary material in her works. Credit Emon Hassan for The New York Times

She applies a comparable editing process to dozens of framed tear sheets from a 1987 issue of *The Southern Review*, a venerable literary magazine published by Louisiana State University. The contents of the journal itself are neither programmatically about the American South nor about race, but Ms. Collins, born in Montgomery, Ala., in 1984, turns its pages into a metaphorical play of black and white by inking out sections of printed text and isolating references to the writers Elizabeth Alexander, Derek Walcott and Carl van Vechten.

Finally, she cuts language loose from obvious meaning in two abstract paintings. Both, despite strongly worded references to race in their titles, are ethereal looking, with clusters of alphabetical characters

written in light-blue pencil on a dark ground, like smudges left on a blackboard, or barely legible nebulae seen in a night sky.

The basic language in Kevin Beasley's sculpture is body language, or the compressed traces of it. Several pieces in the show are made in part from clothing worn by the artist or someone he knows. An urn-shape sculpture from 2013 incorporates a floral-patterned nightgown of a kind favored by his grandmother. A 2014 wall hanging consists of a shag rug encrusted with studio debris, sealed in clear resin and festooned with soft-sculpture globes made from bunched-up underwear.

The work looks at once abject and extraterrestrial, like mysterious, vacuum-packed matter from some other universe. It also has connections, direct or otherwise, to art history, specifically to a style of dense, street-derived assemblage made by John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Dale Brockman Davis and other members of a group of black artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and '70s, of which Mr. Hammons was an integral member.

As was the case with some of those artists, Mr. Beasley's output often has an aural dimension in the form of live or taped music. In 2012, he filled the Museum of Modern Art's atrium with an earsplitting, bone-rattling multitrack soundscape composed from the layered voices of dead rappers like Eazy-E, Guru and Biggie Smalls. Sound doesn't figure in the Studio Museum work, at least that I could detect, but layering does. So does a sense of vitality generated by objects that look both ruined and precious, pulled raw from the gutter but tenderly detailed, as if they'd been touched a lot, which they have.

Abigail DeVille's big, busy, conglomerate sculptures speak street talk. Almost everything that went into their making — shopping carts, cinder blocks, plastic bags, clothes mannequins — was harvested from the neighborhood surrounding the museum. She combines the material in very intricate ways, but still leaves the components warm with their individual histories. (An installation she made for the group show "Fore" at the museum in 2012 included cigarette butts from her grandmother's home in the Bronx.)

Now in her early 30s, Ms. DeVille has been exhibiting in the city for nearly a decade and developing increasingly refined and cogent forms of sculpture and installation. Her work at the Studio Museum, some of her best so far, leans in a distinctly sculptural direction, with "ADDC Obelisk" being the show's tour de force. It is a 15-foot-long skeletal version of the Washington Monument, tilted on its side, propped up by box springs, its innards exposed, revealing tangles of rope and wiring, chicken-wire walls and mannequin limbs in illogical combinations.

As with everything Ms. DeVille does, the piece is expansively theatrical. (She has done stage design, most recently for the Peter Sellars production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at the Stratford Festival in Ontario.) But it's deliberately shaped and self-contained enough to make a statement, which I take to be a political one: about the attention deficit of an American government that allows monumental degrees of racism to fester under its very eyes.

The exhibition, organized by Lauren Haynes, an assistant curator at the Studio Museum, also has the closest thing to painting I've yet seen from Ms. DeVille, an abstract collage assembled on pieces of Sheetrock attached to a gallery wall. The main material is paper, plain but imprinted with rubbings she made of the surface of local streets. With areas of drilled perforations and the addition of a brightly colored but paint-flaking found door, the result looks like a giant, distressed Anne Ryan collage, an aria to art history and to the story of everyday urban life. Its title is "Harlem Flag." A salute to Mr. Hammons? My guess is yes.

"Material Histories: Artists in Residence 2013-14" runs through Oct. 26 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; 212-212-864-4500, studiomuseum.org.

A version of this review appears in print on August 29, 2014, on page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: The Stuff of Life, Urgently Altered.



Atlanta artist Bethany Collins thrives during residency at Studio Museum of Harlem



Bethany Collins in her studio at the Studio Museum of Harlem. (Photo by Jati Lindsay)

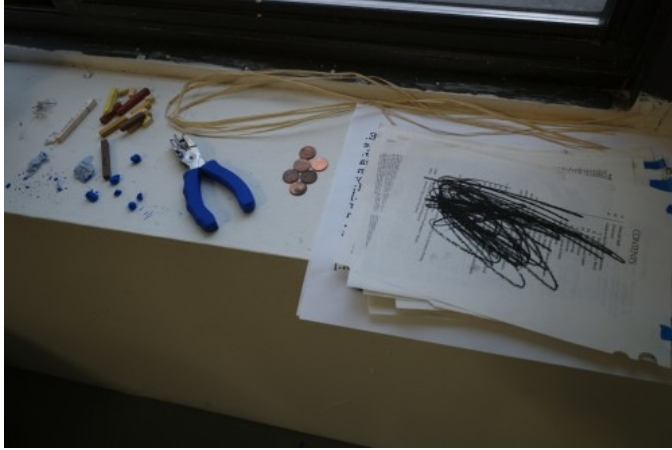
March 3, 2014

By CATHERINE FOX

NEW YORK – Five months into a prestigious residency at the Studio Museum of Harlem, Bethany Collins spends her days and nights in a studio overlooking storied but gritty 125th street. Photos of clouds in Georgia and Alabama skies tacked to the wall and a newly purchased jade plant are talismans of the openness and verdure the Atlanta artist left behind.

But the contents of the studio make it home: Four new pieces from her White Noise series hang in various stages of completion. Dictionaries — seven of them — are stacked on the window ledge or open on her work table. Collins, one of ArtsATL's 30 under 30 artists, uses the tomes for research and sometimes even the material of her meditations on race and identity.

A conceptual artist who makes alluring paintings, she parses, decodes and deconstructs language and then deploys sentences, words and letters as visual vocabulary, writing, erasing and finally exploding charged painful phrases into showers of letters.



Tools and notes. (Photo by Jati Lindsay)

The residency comes with a stipend, this rent-free studio on the museum's third floor and a year in the center of art world. "I've had more studio visits [with curators, collectors and other artists] since I've been here than I had in a year in Atlanta," she says. "It's nice to have eyes on the work."

There are other opportunities, of course. Collins had just attended the opening of Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video at the Guggenheim Museum, and Kara Walker was to speak at the Studio Museum the evening of our visit. She takes weekend art jaunts with Lily Lampe, another transplanted Atlantan. She counts seeing first-hand Byron Kim's charged

minimalism and David Hammons symbolic assemblages as highlights. Perhaps the most important benefit of the residency is the luxury of time. "In Atlanta I taught six classes, and had to fit making art into evenings and weekends," Collins says.

Now she has days on end with no responsibilities for anything but making art, and she's used it not only to add works to her ongoing series but also to experiment and explore new paths. New to her series of drawings of partially erased dictionary definitions are a set of contronyms — words that carry two opposing meanings. ("Oversight," for instance, means watchful control and something not noticed.) She's found 75 and plans to do them all. The series comments on the arbitrariness of language, but, like most of her work, it is personally freighted. The idea of a word that holds opposite meaning might be a metaphor for her biracial heritage.

Something brand new: Collins has taped pages of the 1993 edition of *Southern Review* to the wall and blacked out the text, creating rectangular blocks akin to Allan McCollum or Ad Reinhardt paintings. "People always want to talk about my art being southern," she says "I don't think of myself as a southern artist; to me that's a white male."

It might be a negating concept, but it is also a relief. "I've been dealing with noise [referring to her painting series] for so long," she says. "This feel silent."

Perhaps the silence is a little wish fulfillment. One downside of being in New York, she says, is the lack of personal space. "Some days I'm ready to go home — I just want to be alone in my car," she says with a laugh. Collins admits that having unlimited time has been an adjustment as well. The approach of her exhibition at the museum with the two other artists- in-residents, Kevin Beasley and Abigail DeVille has been useful as a deadline.

Though the residency is sure to open doors and plant seeds, it is too soon to say how it will impact Collins' work. But it has gotten her to thinking about talking about race and identity but in a different way. "Maybe if I simplify it, it becomes broad," she muses. And she now sees making a living as an artist as a possibility.

But then, perhaps the spark will come from reading four of Octavia Butler's science-fiction novels on the subway ride to and from her Crown Heights apartment — a marathon inspired by the Studio Museum's recent exhibit, *The Shadows Took Shape*, which focused on afrofuturism.

No matter what, Bethany Collins' own future looks bright.

Bethany Collins: The visual artist

How an obsessive quest for self-definition led the conceptual artist to wide-open spaces

By Rodney Carmichael
January 2, 2014

To understand how novel visual artist Bethany Collins' approach is to deconstructing the coded language that shapes perceptions of race and identity in America, look no further than the latest addition to her *White Noise* series.

The chalk on chalkboard work "Black as this Board" — which will help launch the grand opening of Kennesaw State University's new Zuckerman Museum of Art during its spring exhibition *See Through Walls* — takes its title from Paula Deen, queen of cliché Southern cuisine and unintentional ethnic slurs, who used the colorful remark during a 2012 *New York Times* webcast to describe the complexion of her longtime African-American "friend"/employee.

Collins couldn't help but laugh at the thought of Deen's dubious description as she took a break from her work in progress one day last November at the under-construction Zuckerman. On an oversized chalkboard, cosmic in scope, jumbled white letters handwritten in all-caps converged like constellations against the vast black background. For Collins, who was born of mixed parentage in the Deep South, it's a personal statement with universal implications.



BLACK IS BLACK: "I don't have to define my blackness so stridently anymore. It doesn't have to be one thing. It just is."

In her figurative quest for space to define herself beyond the binary of black and white, the artist's work has taken her to new heights — the latest being a coveted 12-month residency at Studio Museum in Harlem. It's resulted in a new identity of sorts; that of full-time artist.

In conversation, Collins has a way of whispering certain details to provide subtext. That's how she incidentally lets it slip during our interview that she's due to turn 30 this year.

"I told a friend in college, I'm going to really try being an artist when I turn 30," she says. Despite an impressive CV that includes multiple exhibitions, residencies, and awards dating back to 2007, her need for stability led her to double-major in studio art and photojournalism, the latter of which she

attempted as a career after undergrad at the University of Alabama. After realizing that being a nosy reporter wasn't her bag, she earned an MFA at Georgia State University in 2012 while juggling four part-time jobs.

A native of Montgomery, Ala., Collins was familiar with the conservative racial politics that define the region. But not until pursuing a fine arts graduate degree in Atlanta did she expose herself to a more subtle form.

It's a story she's shared often over the past couple of years as her star has risen among the Southeast's shortlist of emerging artists to watch. In an attempt to make sense of the early critiques her work received from mostly white peers and professors, she turned text into context by feeding their words back to them in elaborate conceptual pieces.

"It was kind of a strange attempt to root myself in blackness," says Collins, who found herself defending her work against claims of elitism. "Instead of absorbing that critique," she decided, "I'll just push it back and label it white noise."

Through obsessing over language from external sources in the *White Noise* series, she began to gain her own outline — a term for self-definition she references from biracial author Rebecca Walker. Though she's always defined herself as black, despite having a white mother and black father, Collins says that reality wasn't by choice as much as it was rooted in the historical one-drop rule. So, what began as a private quest for the liminal space between racial extremes became a public unveiling of what Collins calls the "absurdity or arbitrariness of language itself."

It's enabled her to embrace a more evolved sense of self. "I don't have to define my blackness so stridently anymore," she says. "It doesn't have to be one thing. It just is."

Since beginning her residency at the Studio Museum last fall, her quest for space has turned quite literal now that she resides in New York, where, she jokes, "everybody touches on the subway." Far from abandoning the Southeast, where the themes of her work are rooted, she says she likes the idea of remaining based in Atlanta.

But she does intend on expanding her chalk palette. In newer works, she's already beginning to experiment with a wider series of colors to define blue noise ("like a frying pan, something sizzling"), Brownian noise ("a bit more calming"), and black noise ("almost silent"). The idea is to continue chipping away at the limitations surrounding race, identity, and language in an indirect way.

"It's not like I want to end this conversation, but I do think the *White Noise* series solved something for me, so it would be disingenuous to remain in that space without becoming more broad. I'm looking for more space, I think," she says, before adding with a subtle whisper: "Space again, it's apparently very important to me."



30 Under 30 Artist Spotlight

Talking Art, Race and Identity with Bethany Collins

10:00 AM TUE SEPTEMBER 10, 2013
By KATE SWEENEY & JOHN LEMLEY



'Unrelated,' Chalk and charcoal on chalkboard, Bethany Collins

Here's a conversation between WABE's John Lemley, visual artist Bethany Collins, and Arts ATL's Stephanie Cash, who recently wrote about Bethany for the magazine's "30 Under 30" series. They talked about Collins's creative process and how she grapples with race and identity in her longest-running series, "White Noise."

We'll spend the coming months dropping in on some of the artists highlighted in '30 Under 30,' and the people writing about them.

Collins is a visual artist whose work often reflects encounters she's had regarding her biracial identity. This fall, she travels to New York for a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Collins was among the first ten Atlanta artists to be spotlighted in Arts ATL's series, which seeks to highlight young people making an impact in Atlanta's visual arts, drama and literary scenes. On City Café, we'll spend the coming months dropping in on some of the artists highlighted, and the people writing about them.

MP3 LINK: http://cpa.ds.npr.org/wabe/audio/2013/09/BethanyCollins30_Under_30_FINAL.mp3



30 Under 30: Artist Bethany Collins explores race and identity through a personal lens

August 16, 2013
By STEPHANIE CASH



Bethany Collins: "Well They Just Don't Match Up," 2013.

Bethany Collins makes art about herself. Or rather, art about race and identity through a very personal lens. Never strident or didactic, her approach is as subtle as the subtle forms of racism she often encounters. She simply holds up a metaphorical mirror to society to expose its assumptions about race. (A telling "60 Minutes" experiment demonstrating those assumptions is [here](#).)

Collins is of mixed race: her father is black, her mother white. Like many mixed-race people, she identifies as black because that is how she is perceived. She grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, where she was always assumed to be black. "In Atlanta, people aren't as sure," she says. "There are more possibilities" of ethnicity.

Collins earned a BA from the University of Alabama in 2007 and received an MFA from Georgia State University in 2012. Since then, she has landed most of the opportunities available to Atlanta artists: a Waltham Artist Fellowship, a Hambidge residency and a Dashboard Co-op affiliation. And she's about to

embark on a prestigious year-long residency in New York that promises a major career boost (the official announcement will come August 20).

Atlanta critic Cinque Hicks, who selected Collins for “Talent Loves Company” at Barbara Archer Gallery last year, admires her intellectual ambition and ability to tackle issues without sacrificing aesthetics. “She avoids easy answers to complicated questions — questions that need to be asked now,” Hicks says.

The 29-year-old artist’s best-known works are from her “White Noise” series, which she began in response to class critiques in graduate school. She was the only person of color in the program. “Conversations about my work in that setting were awkward — well-meaning but always awkward,” Collins says.

At the time she was making works from paper bags that referred to the “brown paper bag test,” the self-imposed standard once used by African-Americans to determine acceptable skin tones. Her peers didn’t understand it, and she didn’t know how to process some of the feedback, such as “Don’t you think your work is a little elitist?” (as in exclusionary) or “Maybe you should make it into a slave ship” so that viewers could “get it.”

Collins began using the feedback itself — the “white noise” — as material for her work, “to break the language apart.” On wooden panels covered with blackboard paint, she writes out the statements in chalk-like white charcoal (or actual chalk, for temporary installations), which she then obfuscates by partial erasure and overlays with seemingly random clusters of letters. The titles of her paintings are always the phrase they contain, so viewers can know what the illegible text says even if they can’t decipher its meaning or pick it out in the morass.

The free-floating letters make the same statement as the background, which the artist neatly spells out, over and over, flopping the letters, letting them drift apart, overlap or circle around one another. In the nebulous clusters, viewers often see maps, clouds or constellations.

“I like that people project what they want onto them,” Collins says, “because that’s what people do to me.”

The classroom associations directed her choice of materials. She likens the act of repetition to the classic schoolroom punishment of repeatedly writing a statement on a blackboard. “It allows me to meditate on the statement, because I never have a good response to those remarks in the moment.”

She then began drawing phrases from her personal life. She takes ownership of the offensive words and uses them to poke fun at the speakers’ cluelessness, though their comments elicit stunned disbelief more than chuckling. The back stories of the works are compelling, and Collins struggles with how much narrative to give away, because people often start to focus on the personal revelation more than the object.

With the small easel-mounted piece “I Just Don’t See Race in Your Work,” for example, we at least know race is a factor. A work titled “Unrelated,” however, leaves the viewer wondering. Collins is often intentionally ambiguous. Her work conveys a sense of frustration around communication, something she recently realized might be related to her attempts to communicate with her mother, who lost her hearing when Collins was in her teens.

“Unrelated” is based on the caption of a photograph of the artist and her family that ran in the Montgomery newspaper circa 1994. A reporter did a sidewalk interview with them as they were leaving a volunteer effort. “The next day in the paper, the caption read ‘James R. Collins . . . and Connie Collins, unrelated.’” They were never asked about their relationship, the artist says. “It was just assumed that my parents weren’t a couple, even though we were all holding hands and my sister and I look like them.”

Other works are inspired by current events, such as celebrity chef Paula Deen’s train wreck of an apology for past racial remarks and a Walmart visit that went awry for a white father and his three biracial daughters. Collins feels that viewers more easily can comprehend her works by using widely reported phrases such as “black as that board” and “well, they just don’t match up.”



Type to enter text Bethany Collins: "Thick, But Not Thick Enough," 2013. Pastel on Tiziano paper.

She tries to complete her works in one session, or perhaps over a weekend, depending on their size. She writes until her hand hurts and stays close to the surface to avoid an overall view of the composition, intentionally looking away if she has to leave and re-enter the studio.

She works organically, without concern for the overall composition. The process is cathartic. In a sense, scrambling the words and letters helps her to unscramble her thoughts about the loaded comments, to make sense of the nonsense. Inevitable comparisons to Gary Simmons’ chalkboard paintings are one of the reasons she consciously avoids making composed, “pretty” works.

Collins has dabbled in color — blue, yellow, brown — but feels that those pieces aren’t as strong. In them, she uses phrases that black people have said to her. “It’s the same language but coming from a different place,” she says.

They both reveal an attempt to label her, she feels, to find out where her allegiances lie. “Thick But Not Thick Enough,” for example, is about her hair being thick enough to hold a braid but “not to do all the real stuff.”

Erasure comes up in other of her works, a theme perhaps stemming from a sense of being negated by both races. The pieces in her “Webster’s New World Dictionary” series are minimalist in nature, consisting of a few lines of text at the center of 30-by-22-inch sheets of white paper (American Master’s paper, an intentional choice).

She selects terms that are used to describe degrees of blackness or of being mixed race, such as beige, gray and half and half. The text — photo transfers of enlarged dictionary entries — is mostly illegible because of her rigorous rubbing that has chewed into the surface.

Collins’ “Half-breed, 1951,” on view in the High Museum of Art’s “Drawing Inside the Perimeter,” is completely obliterated, though she usually leaves a key fragment of text untouched — “confused, muddled” for the word “mixed,” for example.

“You should be able to figure out what the word is by its definition, but you can’t,” she says — again thwarting assumptions and communication.



Bethany Collins: "Half Breed."

When I visited her studio last month, Collins was working on a multipanel piece for the dictionary series. Each panel contains a definition of “gray” from successive editions: 1951, 1953, 1968, 1970 and 1986. An

early version, for example, partly defines “gray” as “designating an urban area that is deteriorating,” a usage that is removed in later editions.

“It’s interesting to see how language changes over time,” the artist says. “It’s similar to identity in that it’s not fixed.”

She has also been making black-and-white photographs that are more conceptual in nature. After creating a chalkboard piece, she erases the text with old-school felt erasers, which then “contain” the written sentiment. Clapping the erasers together, she photographs the clouds of dust.



Bethany Collins in her studio.

“It’s kind of a way to let the language go,” she explains.

Collins is undertaking her first collaboration, with artist and Zuckerman Museum Director Justin Rabideau, for the upcoming Decatur Book Festival. Titled “Too White to Be Black,” their project is based on a community in Appalachian Ohio whose members self-identify as African-American even though they look white. The story raises a multitude of questions about identity, history, “passing,” the “one-drop rule” and race relations.

Other works in progress involve photographs of single clouds, taken in Alabama and Georgia.

Collins says they’re about “a desire to get out of my own body, to address race, but in a broader way.” While addressing race outside the body, or outside lived experience, poses certain challenges, Collins’ knack for nuance promises to yield thought-provoking results.

Collins will have a show in September at Kibbee Gallery and will create a wall drawing for the opening of the Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University (postponed to early 2014).