Review:

IT CAN HOWL

Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta

Text / Erin Jane Nelson

It Can Howl, installation view, 2016 [courtesy Atlanta Contemporary]

Roots, TV monitors, a concrete dog, piled bricks, a "welcome" sign, Rubbermaid trashcans, and enamelware bowls stuffed with fake food give *It Can Howl*, a group exhibition on view at the Atlanta Contemporary [May 19-August 7, 2016], the total effect of the yard sales, storage unit auctions, and garage workshops I remember from my childhood in Georgia. Described in the press release as a look at "numerous experiences of the American South," the exhibition is refreshingly not a "who's who" survey of contemporary Southern artists, but instead a cross-section of some of the most exciting young artists working today, along with voices from the past, all affectionately approached through a regional lens.

The works greeting visitors just outside the gallery are Chloe Seibert's *Concrete Expression #25* (2015)—a gray relief of a manic, shitty grin—and Hayley Silverman's light-up boob bindle, *Spare Ribs I* (2016). Imagine the pair of works as a smirking "Her," telling viewers that this exhibition is animated with fierce, politicized bodies and an urgency to play. This energy also inhabits Danielle Dean's *Baby Girl* (2012), an awkwardly acted, raw, cyclical 12-minute video narrative exploring the artist's own multinational identity. Dean cast members of her family to perform her collaged, part-found and part-original script, which took its readymade narrative structure from Nigerian soap opera. In doing so, she builds a compelling intersectional mini-saga that connects the dots between corporate greed in Nigeria, institutionalized racism in the United States, and global issues of feminism and familial discord.

Another powerful video in the exhibition is Martine Syms' *Lessons I-XXX* (2014-present), part of an ongoing project consisting of digitally scrubbed images and videos, sequenced into a masterly, staccato orchestra of mass culture. Syms' acute ability to find a range of depth and complexity in such a flicker of cuts suggests that an ongoing Final Cut Pro file is perhaps the most appropriate record-keeping software for our clip-soaked lives.

Bessie Harvey, *The Poison of the Lying Tongues*, 1987,
found wood, cowrie shells, paint, 20 x 13.5 x 17 inches [courtesy Atlanta Contemporary]

This seemingly generational predilection for amalgam and collage also inhabits Silverman's resin-fused bowls of soup, in which fake ramen noodles swim with silk flowers and strange groups of figurines, resulting in sculptures reminiscent of the sand trays used in art therapy. In a similar spirit, works by the late, Georgia-born artist Bessie Harvey (1929-1994) engage a different kind of readymade: the natural form of a tree, which in her root sculptures transforms into brightly decorated personalities accentuated with paint, cloth, beads, and string. Harvey's inclusion here brings a welcome break from the cut-and-paste narrative that surrounds generalization about emerging artists in the digital age, as a break from usual presentations of work by self-taught artists who, like Harvey, are often exhibited separately, relegated to adjacent categories of "folk" or "outsider" artists. Although there are several of Harvey's large-scale works on display at the Atlanta Contemporary, the star among them is a small, single face placed near a corner of the room: *The Poison of the Lying Tongues* (1987), a sculpture of found wood, painted black except for four gnarled bright red tongues spilling out of a toothy mouth.

Nancy Lupo's *Train* (2015) is another reimagining of quotidian, mundane materials. The work comprises nine fire-engine red plastic trashcans, hitched together and covered with consumables—cherries on one can, toilet paper, quail eggs, and candies on others—materials that aren't quite, but are well on their way to being, garbage. Linked together, the trashcans effectively recall Southern Railway steam engines, with their cars full of coal, corn, diapers, and other products for American consumption.

In contrast with these symbolically packed videos and materially fierce sculptures, three ghosts in the room provide a cooler repose. Lili Renaud-Dewar's four-channel black-and-white video *I don't know what a conceptual artist looks like* (2012) follows the artist's black-painted, naked body as it oscillates around an empty gallery space—a dance which queasily references both the history of blackface and that of the reclining female nude so often depicted between similar institutional walls. Renaud-Dewar's intensely physical, inwardly focused movements read as an attempt to exorcise these Western cultural demons. Chloe Seibert's bucket-brained concrete dog, poised to howl, and her all-caps "WELCOME" sign written in letters roughly hammered into the largest wall in the space, provide the show with humorous yet still heavy anti-heroes. And Jeanine Oleson's brick shrine, *Building an empire and other things of no consequence ... (detail of ziggurat)* (2009), is a structure that, although dense and glowing, seems to evade our attention, perhaps communing instead with something we cannot see.

I fled the South the moment I turned 18; *It Can Howl* spoke to me as an artist reimagining a regional experience I once so self-consciously tried to reject. The show reflects a commonality to Southern identity that can be recognized across regional

borders as a galvanizing, constructive background. The exhibition's "howl" is an ebullient, sovereign, and challenging cry from the eight women presented; I am grateful to have heard and identified myself in their chorus.

—Erin Jane Nelson