# Dannielle Bowman

Above a brick fireplace mantle, built in the late 1960s or early 1970s, are five carved masks. Hung thoughtfully, they create harmony and surround two cut-out shelves, within which nest two figurine birds—the kind popular in mid-century homes. A clown accompanies one. On the mantle, almost in the center, upright letters that resemble antlers spell out the name "Bubba," something you might find at a Texas gas station. A proud marker, perhaps, of the mantle's owner. On the right, a fisherman sits, his pole pointing to a handheld lighter you might use to light candles or indoor fires so you don't burn your fingers. To the left, a sculpture of two lovers kissing, their faces blurred as if by wind, frozen, surreally, in wood. A tall vessel, at least three feet high, sits beside the hearth, filled with a dark, impenetrable liquid. It looks decades-old, a relic of some groovy experience. A circular fire bellows, painted with pears, likely in dark mahogany reds and verdant greens, resembles an old Italian painting discovered from an attic. An unconfirmed assumption, since the photograph is in black and white. The electric space heater suggests the fireplace's true function: now only used for objects showcasing the influences of the owner's life, which as you see, are many. A magazine with Barack Obama on its cover sits next to it. Another mask lies next to a basket filled with maracas and percussion instruments. In this cozy, wood-paneled room with dried eucalyptus and vertical blinds, we find, in part, *what had happened*. A life had happened, in these details, but that is all photographer Dannielle Bowman gives us—a fragment of the accumulation of times and places.

Bowman shot this ongoing project throughout historically Black neighborhoods in Los Angeles, in and around where she grew up, exposing such everyday details almost as simple, poetic gestures. What does it mean to observe fragments of an individual—for the artist and for the viewer? What does it mean to observe them in black and white? This photograph of a space intimately familiar to the artist is a small autobiographical thread running through a project that broadly observes and imagines the numerous cultural pockets and influences within this place. Many of these photographs depict family members and people she knows. Many are strangers she approached and scenes she staged that portray a little-discussed part of the narrative of the often-photographed American West, a place that has become central to the national imaginary of the United States.

Black and white typically historicizes it subject, but Bowman uses the documentary vernacular as a space of reimagining, a sfumato blurring fact from fiction through her noir-like gaze. Photography's ability to construct new realities, not through abstraction or dramatic manipulation, but precisely through its direct relationship to the real world, presents an opportunity to underscore our own disconnection from the nuances of "the truth." This is a novel approach to the American West and to still-underrepresented histories. Photographs made by white men still largely shape our understanding of the American West—from the US Geographical Survey photographs depicting 19th-century exploration and colonization of the West to the unflinching, critical yet starkly poetic New Topographics view, to the late 20th-century cultural landscape studies epitomized by Richard Misrach's work. An explicitness about these nearly two hundred years of images proclaims their views. Bowman's American West is a place not of aggressive fact but of overlapping gestures that point in no one direction, but in all directions and even to fiction itself.

Bowman tells a detective story in vignettes that mysteriously conceal and highlight unusual aspects of a scene—the cluster of feet at a family reunion, the Masonic ring displayed on a hand casually resting on the sitter's knee, sidewalk cracks. Or the shadow a home casts on its back yard, framing the merging of four fences—brick, wooden, latticed, chain-linked. Unlike a back yard in which the fence partially obscures the traditional 19th-century view of the mountains that once dwarfed the viewer (I'm thinking specifically of Robert Adams' *A Back Yard, Colorado Springs, Colorado*, from 1968), Bowman's back yard is about intersection. Such connecting points and moments of overlapping narratives create this layered space, the details of the mystery revealing the plainness of the facts. At once anticlimactic and profound in its subtlety, it suggests a bigger, more encompassing acknowledgement that what really has happened is often written over in the larger narrative—of the American West, of the African Diaspora, of the gray gradations of culture when carried out through individual lives. So much has happened that a photograph or an essay or a newsreel can never contain, but in these cinematic moments—both lived and staged—we have the privilege of seeing what's small that connects the bigger pictures.

*Ashlyn Davis Burns*

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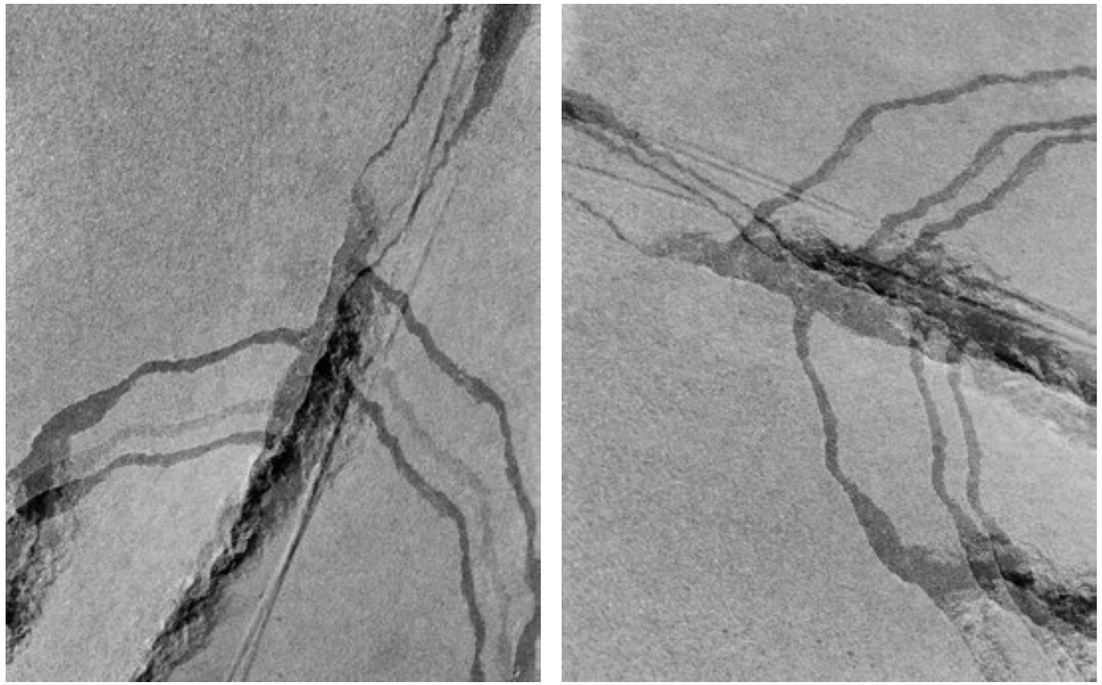
60 *Fireplace with Masks, Space heater, and Obama Magazine*, 2021

61 *Inglewood I*, 2019



62 *Untitled Diptych (Crack)*, 2019

63 *Reunion Shoes (Texas I)*, 2012–2020

64 *Mason's Ring*, 2020

65 *Vision (Garage)*, 2019