The Making of a Dream: Loy Bowlin + Jennifer Joy Jameson

Loy Bowlin’s art environment, “The Beautiful Holy Jewel Home” (c. 1975–1990), was a small but extravagantly embellished home in McComb, Mississippi. Inspired by Glen Campbell’s 1975 hit record, “Rhinestone Cowboy,” Bowlin adopted the rhinestone cowboy persona, first by hand-sewing and gluing rhinestones onto garments, later by purchasing and altering a 1967 two-door Cadillac and performing in front of small crowds in the McComb town square. The final step was creating a home environment to serve as the ultimate backdrop for his showmanship. Bowlin decorated much of the exterior and nearly every inch of the interior. He covered the walls with patterns of cutout paper, paint, glitter, and collaged photographs and magazine illustrations.

After Bowlin’s death in 1995, his property was sold, and the house, due to be razed, was purchased by Houston artist and collector Katy Emde, with the stipulation that she must remove it from the property. Emde documented and dismantled the house. In 1998, Kohler Foundation, Inc. acquired the disassembled house and worked for four years on its preservation. The Foundation gifted the home and many of Bowlin’s works to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Jennifer Joy Jameson is a public folklorist and cultural organizer with an interest in documenting the ways culture shapes creativity, especially in rural spaces. She directed the Folk and Traditional Arts program at the Mississippi Arts Commission from 2014–17, and now works with the Alliance for California Traditional Arts in Los Angeles.

Here, Jameson discusses her role in the development of the exhibition and what drew her to the work of Loy Bowlin.

**How were you first introduced to the work of Loy Bowlin?**

It’s a very full-circle thing to share that I was actually introduced to Bowlin’s work through the *Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds* book in 2007, which, to me, was the most stunning and full body of work I’d come across. Bowlin’s aesthetic stuck with me for many years after. The breadth of Bowlin’s creative expression, from material manifestations like the Beautiful Holy Jewel Home to his persona as the “Original Rhinestone Cowboy,” stood out to me as a brave and compelling example of rural, Southern creativity. When I moved to Mississippi, I knew I wanted to find some way to check in with Bowlin’s local community. Twenty years after his death and the removal of the home, this project for the John Michael Kohler Arts Center was an incredible opportunity to consider his legacy in a new light.
How does your own background inform your response to Bowlin’s work?

As a folklorist and documentarian, I knew my response would be less about digging in the archives and more about creating a contemporary collection of oral histories and portraits, and gathering photographs and ephemera sourced from the many Mississippi friends, family, and collaborators who knew “Rhinestone,” as he is locally referred to.

My background and training emphasizes the value and cultural importance of everyday arts and everyday people. As extraordinary and skilled as Bowlin’s work was, I believe it was made with himself and his community in mind first, before the greater art world. Bowlin became a performing fixture on the public square when he took up the identity as the Rhinestone Cowboy. He always found ways to bring his latest creative endeavor to the people of McComb, whether it was a newly adorned suit, a customized Cadillac, or showing friends around his impressive Holy Jewel Home.

Who better than the local people who knew and collaborated with Rhinestone to help interpret his life and work? With over twenty years since Bowlin’s passing, several important local voices and memories have been lost, yet his story is still widely valued and spoken of as a defining element to the uniqueness of McComb.

When the Beautiful Holy Jewel Home was removed from his small, Southern town, it brought the work into the wider sphere of appreciation—a rare opportunity for this complex body of work to be cared for and exhibited to an international audience. This growing appreciation for Bowlin’s work also presents an opportunity to continue a dialogue between the house and community. When a work like this is taken out of context, it creates a new challenge in meaningful interpretation.

The social history and cultural context gained from new documentary work within the community of McComb has offered a renewed sense of value and partnership in honoring Bowlin’s creative spirit on both local and international levels. The care taken toward the conservation of the home and his work has been meaningful for Rhinestone’s community to witness. Additionally, this dialogue has fostered new reflection on the many ways in which Rhinestone benefited from the support and response of his community. An interesting by-product of this partnership has been a renewed local interest in memorializing Rhinestone through plans for the development of a historical marker honoring Rhinestone’s legacy in McComb, among other forms of commemoration.

Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

It’s wonderful to consider how this project has simultaneously stood true to my praxis in community-based fieldwork, while totally shifting its standard process, reach, and output. It has been an extraordinary
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opportunity to see up close the conservation process of Bowlin’s work, as well as the impressive historical records related to the Bowlin collection at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center. I know that this special access has been an incredible tool in facilitating a valuable dialogue in Mississippi and beyond. This new documentary work may serve as a resource for local people and researchers alike for years to come, as this community-sourced archive will eventually be available as a digital resource as an extension of the exhibition. I’m thankful for the visionary leadership of the curatorial staff at the Arts Center to invite this special kind of collaborative research.