

**What's Left Unsaid? *Unbound Narratives: Embodied Language* at Atlanta Contemporary Review by Ming Joi**

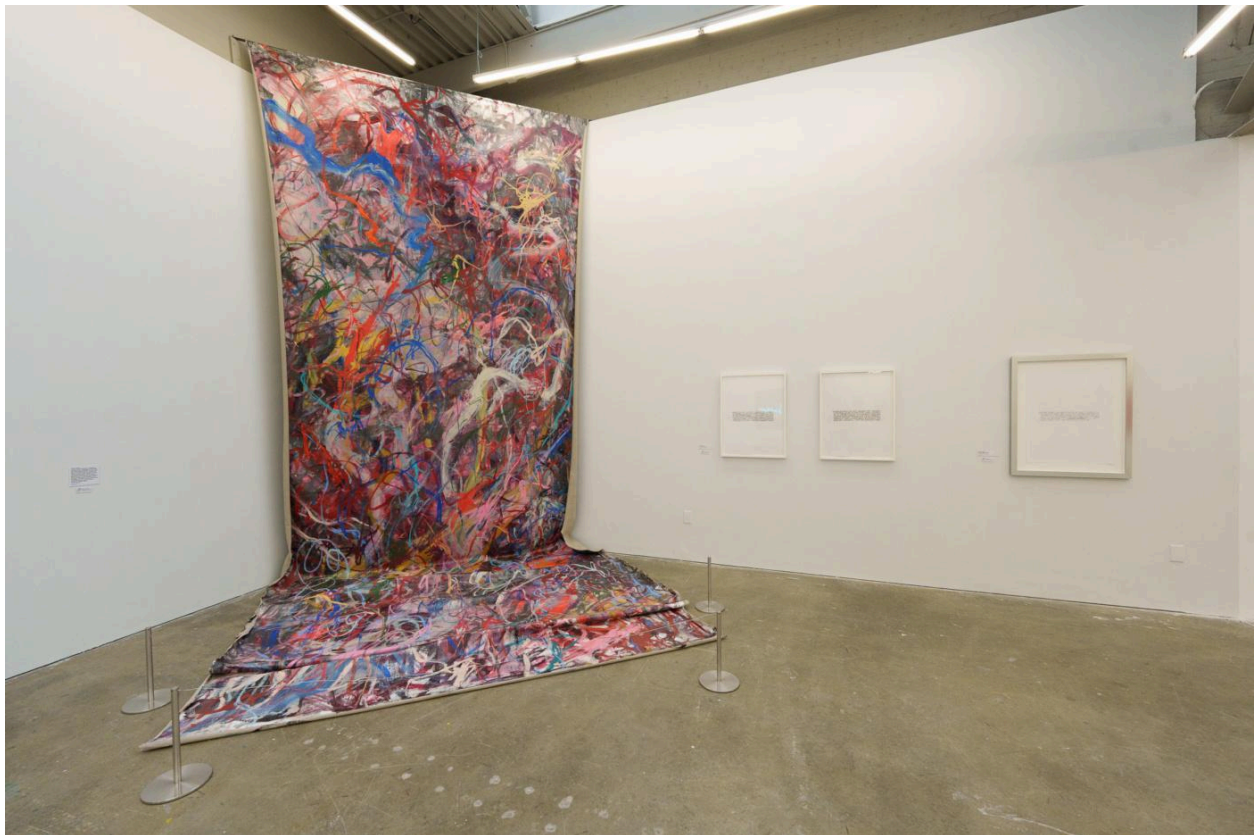
Speechlessness is a seldom experience for a wordsmith like myself, but what is there to say when the artworks do all the talking / take the words out of my mouth / speak for the silent moments / phrase it in a way my tongue would never try? In *Unbound Narratives: Embodied Language*, a group show at Atlanta Contemporary, Bethany Collins, February James, adriene nieves, and Gabi Madrid challenge the unsaid; instead, the inner thoughts, personal vocabularies, and living libraries of women artists are laid bare, stripped of form, and transformed into raw, fluid material.

Curator Karen Comer Lowe organized this exhibition as a complement to the GA Women's to Watch Book Art Revolution, both shows on view at Atlanta Contemporary until May 17, 2026. In our age of threats to literacy and arts education, being bookish has become an aesthetic weapon; these shows employ visual artists as creative writers, encouraging close reading. Rightfully so, the literary and visual arts have long been complementary learning tools.



**Installation view of Bethany Collins, *So What Are You (White Noise)* at Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, February 1—May 17, 2026. Image courtesy of Jordan Young.**

For Bethany Collins, words and language are her material. *White Noise* and *Erasure* series are early responsive works completed during Collins's graduate studies at Georgia State. An Alabama native now based in Chicago, Collins experienced the “often-awkward and sometimes-stilted conversations concerning race and racial identity in graduate critiques, studio visits, conversations among friends, or even inquiries from strangers,” during her time in the South. Her chalkboard drawings obscure the hateful messages into delicate abstractions that, from afar, read as a starry night sky or textural TV static. Collins controlled black and white palette reveals the gray areas between words, their uses, and meanings. The blackboard drawings, such as *So What Are You? (White Noise)* are joined by works on paper of Collins' *Erasure* series. The series title explaining the process, Collins erased entries of Webster's New World Dictionary, rubbing, chewing, and obscuring the definitions of “mixed” and other terms that denote race. The fragmented meanings left legible, “confused” and muddled” for the word ‘mixed’ are remixed as Collins obscures entries from subsequent editions showing how it's “interesting when language changes over time, similar to identity, it is not fixed,” explains the artist.



**Installation view of a'driane nieves, *i find myself suddenly swinging between the enormity of this grief and the inconsolability of this rage that I cannot seem to shake no matter how much I scream or flail my body in protest of all we've been forced to endure and witness during these years. Survival has become a prison and a gravity well swallowing me and all of our dreams whole at Atlanta Contemporary, Image courtesy of Jordan Young.***

Working with a fixed color palette, painter adriene nieves' abstract offerings are immediately recognizable by their rich burgundy, orange, cerulean, and yellow marks. Using what she has in her Philadelphia studio, nieves' approaches painting like choreography, an action which requires full presence of mind and body. Alphabet monotony becomes movement and memory, taking on new meanings from small gestures in intimate drawings to a monumental map of moving through healing, grief, resistance, and transformation. Her artistic vocabulary draws on personal history and collective memory, especially the lived experiences of Black women. She references writers like Alice Walker, June Jordan, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde. Aligning with Lorde's logic about the master's tools, nieves writes in 2023, "throughout my life, documentation has been my oppressor and liberator." Curator Karen Comer-Lowe focuses on the contradictions of documentation, pairing Collins and nieves, "both artists are asking: who controls the record, and how do we reclaim it?"

Local Atlanta artist, Gabi Madrid, reclaims traumatic memories by turning inward, using her personal journal for affirmation and reconstruction in her *Mourning After* series (2025). Her intimate entries and careful cursive are carved and woven into the head, footboard, and frame of an antique bed. Poetic phrases like "I tore myself down to the frame to build myself back up," and "the dreams will serve as riddles waiting to reveal their secrets, only to uncover more of the mystery and lead you further down the Labyrinth of Life..." prove the dual talents of visual artists, knowledge producers, and poets in Madrids' *Notes to Self I & Notes to Self II*.



**Installation View, artist Gabi Madrid pictured with the *Mourning After* series (2025) at Atlanta Contemporary. Image courtesy of the artist.**

February James takes on a new artistic language, showcasing her first film, a stop-motion animation, *All of My Stuff and All of Your Stuff Too*, in the exhibition. The protagonist, a fishnet-clad female figure in James' signature moody portrait style, is activated as a paper doll moving through an interior setting where blooming flowers fall as easily as tears. The work investigates marginalized emotional states, fear, grief, longing, and shame inspired by Ceanne DeRohan's book "Original Cause I: The Unseen Role of Denial," which considers why suffering exists when God has power.

On view at Atlanta Contemporary until May 17, 2026, *Unbound Narratives: Embodied Language* has the power to change lives, the art gives vocabulary for our intimate experiences, and promotes visual, emotional, and written literacy.