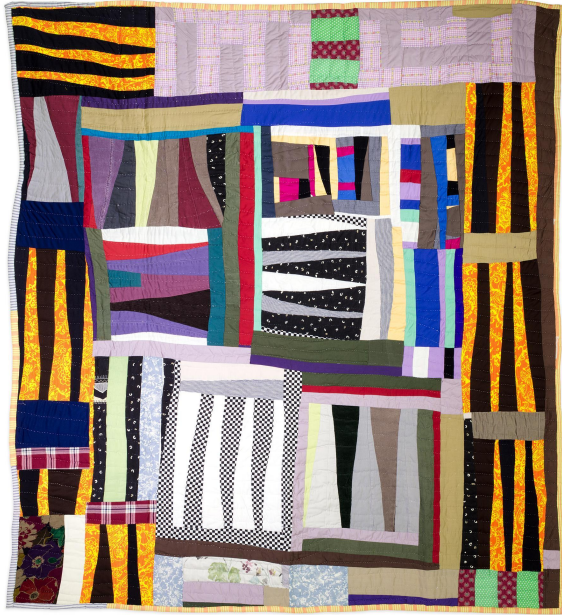

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Mary Lee Bendolph, *Strip Quilt*, 2006, mixed fabrics including polyester, corduroy, and cotton blend, 82 x 75 inches.
Image: Rubin Bendolph Jr. in honor of Mary Lee Bendolph

**Celebrating the Quilts of
Gee's Bend with
Concurrent Exhibitions
at Swarthmore College**

September 6–October 28, 2018

***Piece Together: The Quilts
of Mary Lee Bendolph***

The List Gallery and
McCabe Library Upper Atrium

Responses to Gee's Bend

17 artists from throughout the United
States responding to the aesthetic legacy
of Gee's Bend quilters

McCabe Library Lower Atrium

The List Gallery is pleased to announce two concurrent exhibitions: ***Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*** and ***Responses to Gee's Bend***, which will be on view at Swarthmore College September 6—October 28, 2018. These exhibitions, public events, and an accompanying 82-page scholarly catalog examine the history and aesthetic legacy of Gee's Bend and celebrate the artistry of Mary Lee Bendolph, one of three quilters from Gee's Bend, Alabama who were recognized with a 2015 National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts. Mary Lee Bendolph has been profiled in numerous essays including the 1999 Los Angeles Times Pulitzer Prize-winning article "Crossing Over". Together with other quilters in the remote community of Gee's Bend, she has been honored through nationally touring museum exhibitions such as *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (2002) and *The Architecture of the Quilt* (2006).

Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph, will take place in both the List Gallery and McCabe Library and feature a selection of quilts Mary Lee Bendolph made between the 1970s and 2010 as well as several prints she made in collaboration with master printers at Paulson Bott Press (now Paulson Fontaine Press) in 2005. McCabe Library's Upper Atrium will feature several quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph together with one quilt by her mother, Aolar Carson Mosely (1912—1999), and several quilts made by her daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956)—three generations of women who responded to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow with remarkable faith, resilience, and creativity. *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*

marks Mary Lee's first solo exhibition and highlights her distinctive approach; it also reflects the intergenerational and communal practice of quilt making in Gee's Bend.



At Left: Mary Lee Bendolph in a still image from *While I yet Live*, a short documentary directed by Maris Curran and produced by Jon Coplon. The film features six Gee's Bend quilters and focuses on Mary Lee Bendolph and her daughter, Essie. *While I yet Live* has been screened internationally including at the Berlin Film Festival, and the RiverRun International Film Festival in Winston-Salem, NC, where it won the Special Jury Prize.

PUBLIC EVENTS

Panel Discussion, Film Screening, and Opening Reception for *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*

Thursday, September 20, 4:30-5:30 p.m., Lang Performing Arts Center Cinema

Introductory remarks by Andrea Packard, List Gallery Director

Screening of *While I yet Live* a documentary about Gee's Bend by Maris Curran

Panel discussion with: Rubin Bendolph Jr., curator of Bendolph family quilts

Essie Bendolph Pettway, quilter

Maris Curran, film director

Hannah W. Blunt, Associate Curator, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

Public Reception 5:30-7:00 p.m., List Gallery

Gee's Bend: Personal Narratives and Artistic Legacies

Friday, September 21, 10:00 a.m.–Noon, Scheuer Room, Kohlberg Hall

Moderator: Andrea Packard, List Gallery Director

Panelists: Gee's Bend residents and members of Mary Lee Bendolph's family including

Essie Bendolph Pettway and Rubin Bendolph Jr.

Yixuan Maisie Luo '19 and Catherine Williams '19

Ellen M. Alvord, Weatherbie, Curator of Education and Academic Programs, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

Quilting and Conversation

Friday, September 21, 1:30-4:00 p.m., McCabe Library Atrium

An informal public gathering with quilters and other residents from Gee's Bend

Demonstrations and refreshments

**Public Reception and Curators' Talk for *Responses to Gee's Bend*
and *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph***

Tuesday, October 23, 4:30-6:00 p.m., McCabe Library Atrium

About Mary Lee Bendolph

The seventh of 17 children, Mary Lee Bendolph was born on August 25, 1935, in a pole cabin Gee's Bend, Alabama, a small community on a remote peninsula largely surrounded by the Alabama River, and one of the poorest counties in the United States. Most Gee's Bend residents, were descended from individuals enslaved by Joseph Gee and his heirs and had survived through farming, communal support, and resourcefulness. Quilts not only provided a source of beauty—they also insulated homes, softened corn-husk mattresses, and provided layers of warmth through winter.



The practice of quilting also went hand in hand with childrearing, prayer, and friendship. In this context, Mary Lee learned aesthetic strategies and techniques from her mother and an extended community of women who found quilt making essential. Mary Lee and other quilters incorporated any fabric they could find—sack cloth, worn clothes, or even scraps found on the ground—and arranged them into inventive, dynamic, and colorful designs.

In 1965, Mary Lee and other Gee's Bend residents took inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr. when he preached at nearby Pleasant Grove Church and joined him in protesting for voting rights nearby Camden, Alabama. Such activism led racist white officials to retaliate with unjustified

arrests and the discontinuation of the ferry service to Gee's Bend—a way of further isolating its residents and curtailing their access to voting, commerce, and health care. The ferry was not restored until 2006, after Gee's Bend quilts had earned national acclaim.

At Right: *Bricklayer*, a collaboration with Mary Lee's sister-in-law, Ruth P. Mosely, 1928–2006) incorporates bold rectangles of corduroy and dates from the late 1970s or early 1980s—a time when many Gee's Bend quilt makers were earning additional income through working at the Freedom Quilting Bee, a cooperative based in the nearby town of Alberta. In 1972, the Quilting Bee received a contract to create corduroy pillow shams for Sears, Roebuck and Co. Mary Lee welcomed the opportunity to use leftover scraps of material from such commissions but preferred to improvise when creating her own designs.



Mary Lee Bendolph has made approximately 150 quilts during her lifetime. The majority of quilts in *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* were created after 2002, when the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston mounted an exhibition of some 70 quilts. The subsequent nationwide museum tour led to widespread recognition and additional opportunities. Several prints on exhibit in *Piece Together* were created in 2005, when Paulson Bott Press invited Mary Lee to collaborate with master printmakers in Berkeley, California. Although Mary Lee increasingly enjoyed greater access to new materials and tools, she continued to tear fabric rather than cut it and to prefer fabric worn by family members. When her son Rubin Jr. returned from college for a visit, he was not surprised to find that clothes he had left in a closet had been transformed into a vibrant quilt. As he observed, *Dashiki* (2003), like all of her quilts, was "full of love."

During the past decade, as health challenges caused Mary Lee to step back from quilting, her only daughter, Essie, has continued family quilting traditions. Represented by two quilts in the exhibition, Essie is one of the leading quilters in their 50s and 60s who sustain the values and aesthetics of Gee's Bend.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph*, was organized by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts and was made possible by The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation and the gifts of individual donors in support of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum's Diverse Voices Initiative. The exhibition at Swarthmore College was made possible by the William J. Cooper Foundation and adapted for Swarthmore by List Gallery Director Andrea Packard. The Cooper Foundation also funded an 82-page catalog and public events at Swarthmore.



Additional support was provided by Swarthmore College Libraries, Swarthmore's Black Studies Program, and the Departments of Art and Art History, Sociology and Anthropology, and History.

We are especially grateful to Mary Lee Bendolph; Rubin Bendolph Jr., curator of Bendolph family quilts; and Essie Bendolph Pettway for their generosity and vision.

Left: *Husband Suit Clothes (Housetop Variation)*, 1990, mixed fabrics, including corduroy, cotton, denim, velveteen, and synthetic brocade, 76 x 80 inches. Collection of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum