

Piece Together:
The Quilts of
Mary Lee Bendolph

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
List Gallery, Swarthmore College



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Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
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Piece Together: Generosity, Serendipity, and Collaboration

It is especially fitting that this traveling exhibition and accompanying catalog began with a gift of art to the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (MHCAM). After all, the extraordinary artistry of Mary Lee Bendolph, like that of so many quilt makers from Gee's Bend, Alabama, was nurtured in a community where quilts were given as gifts to mark important rites of passage, including graduations, marriage, home-leaving, and childbirth. Such quilts not only serve as utilitarian objects, embodiments of resourcefulness, and paragons of design; they also embody the collaboration of many hands and a shared belief that generosity is essential to our humanity.

The gift that precipitated *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* came in 2012 from Renee Conforte McKee (Mount Holyoke Class of 1962). The two color aquatint etchings she donated to MHCAM, *To Honor Mr. Dial* (2005) and *Mama's Song* (2005), were among the first prints Mary Lee Bendolph made in collaboration with Paulson Bott Press (now Paulson Fontaine Press), in Berkeley, California. In 2016, when Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs Ellen M. Alvord began researching the prints for a newsletter article, online inquiries by MHCAM fellow Taylor Anderson connected her with the artist's youngest son and manager of her quilts, Rubin Bendolph Jr., and the idea for an exhibition was born. We are grateful to the Bendolph family for offering to make such a rich variety of quilts available for this exhibition. We also wish to thank Rhea Fontaine and Pam Paulson of Paulson Fontaine Press for lending additional prints, which allow us to more fully appreciate the breadth of Bendolph's accomplishments.

Serendipity prompted this collaboration between MHCAM and Swarthmore College's List Gallery. In early 2017, shortly after List Gallery Director Andrea Packard began researching a possible exhibition of Gee's Bend quilts for Swarthmore, she met MHCAM Associate Curator Hannah W. Blunt and discovered that she was already organizing *Piece Together*. Andrea offered to adapt a version of the exhibition for the List Gallery's smaller exhibition space and produce and edit this accompanying catalog. We agreed that our joint efforts would provide for broader interdisciplinary dialogue.

We wish to express our profound gratitude to Rubin Bendolph Jr., Mary Lee Bendolph, and Essie Bendolph Pettway, who generously hosted Andrea and Ellen in Gee's Bend, introduced us to community members, and supported our research. We are especially grateful to Essie B. Pettway for creating a sample quilt that can be handled by museum visitors and for providing such valuable information

and expertise. We wish to thank Mary Lee Bendolph's sons, Henry Bendolph and Peter Mosley, as well as Pastor Clinton Pettway for their support. We also greatly appreciate the generosity of Gee's Bend quilt makers who met with us in their homes and workspaces and showed us their current work, including Loretta Pettway, Lucy Mingo, China Pettway, Minnie Pettway, Tinnie Pettway, Nancy Pettway, and Mary Ann Pettway.

Once an exhibition becomes possible, it cannot go forward without institutional and staff support. *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* was organized by MHCAM and 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*. We gratefully recognize Florence Finch Abbott Director Tricia Y. Paik for leading this and related museum projects. The MHCAM curatorial and collections staff, including Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture Aaron F. Miller, Associate Curator of Education Kendra D. Weisbin, Collections Manager Linda Delone Best, Museum Preparator Jacqueline Finnegan, Curricular Preparator Samuel Lopes, and Preparator Bob Riddle, must also be acknowledged for their efforts in realizing the exhibition. Digital Assets Coordinator and Museum Photographer Laura Shea provided beautiful new photography for the catalog. Mount Holyoke's Costume Shop Manager Elaine Bergeron assisted in identifying the materials in many of Bendolph's quilts.

The William J. Cooper Foundation generously funded both the List Gallery's adaptation of the exhibition and this accompanying catalog. Additional support was provided by the Swarthmore College Department of Art and Art History and Swarthmore College Libraries. List Gallery Assistant Betsy Hinsey, Administrative Assistant Meghan Gebhard, Swarthmore College Librarian Peggy Seiden, and Visual Resources Initiatives Librarian Susan Dreher also supported this project in myriad ways.

Like quilts, exhibitions and catalogs take shape through many hands. We are especially grateful to the Swarthmore College and Mount Holyoke College faculty members, who contributed such insightful essays: Sarah Willie-LeBreton, Lucas Wilson, and Kimberly Juanita Brown.

All who have participated in this project continue to feel deeply moved by the beauty and ingenuity of Mary Lee Bendolph's quilts. We hope that the following essays honor her example, family, and community by sparking renewed appreciation, insight, and inquiry.

Andrea Packard

List Gallery Director, Swarthmore College

Hannah W. Blunt

Associate Curator, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

Ellen M. Alvord

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INTRODUCTION

Gee's Bend and the Art of Mary Lee Bendolph: Changing Perspectives

Andrea Packard, List Gallery Director, Swarthmore College

The exhibition *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* and this accompanying catalog call attention to the extraordinary achievements of one of America's most celebrated quilt makers. Born on August 25, 1935, in a pole cabin, Mary Lee Bendolph grew up in Gee's Bend, Alabama, 40 miles southwest of Selma. She learned aesthetic strategies and techniques from her mother, Aolar Carson Mosely (1912–1999), and an extended community of women who found quilt making essential. Aolar's influence, and the importance of quilt making as a language that has evolved for generations in Gee's Bend, are represented here by the one quilt that remains in the family's collection: *Pump Handle Spin Top (Log Cabin Variation)* (1954). Sadly, most of Mosely's quilts were destroyed by a house fire. Bendolph's only daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956), is one of the few women of her generation to remain in Gee's Bend and actively make quilts; several of her quilts accompany this exhibition, and her work deserves further study. *Piece Together* features 18 quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph as well as seven prints she created in collaboration with Paulson Bott Press (now Paulson Fontaine Press) in Berkeley, California. These beautiful and deeply moving artworks reflect communal traditions that have evolved over centuries, yet demonstrate an aesthetic that is distinctly Bendolph's own.

Strip Quilt (detail), 2006
Full image: page 72

Gee's Bend is a small peninsula of land surrounded on three sides by the Alabama River. Its location and history have profoundly shaped the quilts made by Mary Lee Bendolph and others in the close-knit community. Once primarily inhabited by members of the Creek Federation before they were forcibly displaced, the land is now home to several hundred residents, many of them descended from enslaved persons who grew cotton on the rich river soil granted to Joseph Gee in 1818.¹ In 1845, Gee's heirs sold the plantation to Mark Pettway, who marched more than 100 enslaved individuals to the area from North Carolina. After Emancipation, most residents remained in Gee's Bend and subsisted as tenant farmers, many working for the Pettway family until 1895 and, subsequently, for Adrian Van de Graaff, an absentee landlord.

While geographic isolation reinforced the depredations of Jim Crow laws, residents also established deep roots, developed self-directed religious practices, and maintained strong bonds of reciprocal support. Many residents retained the surname of Pettway and nearly half of the 40 women currently pictured on the Gee's Bend Quilt Collective website share that name.² Although state officials imperiously renamed the area Boykin in 1949 in order to honor a white state legislator with no ties to the area, residents continue to prefer the name Gee's Bend or the Bend.³ Developing a visual aesthetic

akin to the best works of jazz, Mary Lee Bendolph and other community quilt makers have made the names Pettway, Bendolph, and Gee's Bend synonymous with the highest levels of artistic accomplishment. In 2015, Bendolph was one of three Gee's Bend artists honored with National Endowment of the Arts National Heritage Fellowships.

The seventh of 17 children, Mary Lee Bendolph was born into conditions of poverty that had been exacerbated by the collapse of cotton prices in the 1920s and '30s. Gee's Bend farmers had been "advanced" seed and other supplies against expected sales by nearby Camden merchant E. O. Rentz. When Rentz died in 1932, his heirs foreclosed on Mary Lee's parents, Aolar and Wisdom Mosely, and more than 60 other families in Gee's Bend. Thugs on horseback with pistols swept in, raiding homes and terrorizing the community, taking everything from cookware, furniture, and bedding to mules, chickens, and crops still growing in the field. Such violent racism, usury, plunder, and other forms of oppression reinforced chronic poverty and kept wages to below-subsistence levels. As Mary Lee Bendolph's peer and neighbor Tinnie Pettway recalls, Gee's Benders often survived by foraging for wild plums, blackberries, squirrels, and turtles; they also developed strong habits of gift-giving and reciprocity.⁴

The famine in Gee's Bend was so dire in the 1930s that residents would have starved without food aid delivered by the Red Cross and others.⁵ In 1937, the Alabama Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (succeeded by the Farm Security Administration) intervened in Gee's Bend by purchasing land from the Van de Graaffs and others, eventually redistributing nearly 10,000 acres to 95 families by granting 40-year mortgages at low interest rates.⁶ Wisdom and Aolar Mosely were among those who purchased a plank shack and farmland and benefited from Farm Security Administration programs that established agricultural cooperatives, educational services, and other resources, including basic nursing.

In 1937, the Farm Security Administration sent photographer Arthur Rothstein to document conditions in Gee's Bend and promote its New Deal relief programs. Some photographs captured the dignity and presence of individual residents, including an image of Artelia Bendolph, a cousin of Mary Lee Bendolph's husband, gazing out the window of a log-and-mud cabin (page 11). Other photographs showed residents hard at work or highlighted the resourcefulness with which they covered gaps in wall boards with newspapers, magazine pages, or quilts. Many of Rothstein's images illustrated a long article in the *New York Times Magazine* published on August 22, 1937, which brought national attention to Gee's Bend (and the need for federal relief programs), an effort reinforced in 1939 by another notable FSA photographer, Marion Post Wollcott. As Nancy Callahan writes in *The Freedom Quilting Bee*, Gee's Bend has long been used as a case study to promote larger narratives or agendas.⁷

Although owning land and "Roosevelt homes" allowed residents to maintain greater stability and communal interdependence, healthcare remained limited, a local school offered substandard resources, and the damaging effects of segregation persisted. Growing up under such conditions, Bendolph became pregnant at 14 and had to leave school in order to raise her son Peter, the first of



Aolar Mosely
Pump Handle Spin Top
(*Log Cabin Variation*), 1954
Cotton, 89 x 75 inches

her eight children, one of whom died in childhood.⁸ Like other young women, she gave birth at home, a rough-planked Roosevelt house. As she juggled motherhood, subsistence farming, housework—and later, in the 1970s, garment factory work—quilt making served essential needs while creating much-needed space for beauty and individual expression.

Yet outside forces continued to disrupt Gee’s Benders’ efforts to establish stability. After World War II, increasing agricultural industrialization hurt many small farmers and they were still prevented from obtaining adequate education, fair loans, and other essential resources. In 1962, construction of a dam on the Alabama River led to a form of land grab by state officials—thousands of acres were flooded, obliterating one third of the area’s most fertile soil.

In the face of institutionalized racism and oppression, many Gee’s Bend residents, including Bendolph family members, were prepared to resist. In February 1965, as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were planning to march from Selma to Montgomery, Dr. Martin Luther King visited Gee’s Bend and preached to residents in the nearby Pleasant Grove Church. Inspired by Dr. King, Mary Lee Bendolph joined a voting rights demonstration in the nearby Camden Courthouse. She tells of watching Dr. King drink from a “whites-only” fountain and of following his example, noting with defiant humor that “it was no different, just colder.”⁹

Soon afterward, Sheriff Lummie Jenkins and other white officials retaliated not only with unjustified arrests and harassment but by terminating the ferry service that had connected Gee’s Bend to the courthouse and other resources in Camden.¹⁰ The elimination of the ferry lasted from 1962 until 2006, forcing residents of Gee’s Bend, most of whom didn’t own cars, to travel more than 40 miles over rural roads to conduct business or obtain healthcare and other essential services.

At the same time, a few outsiders attempted to assist Gee’s Bend residents and support their struggle for civil rights and economic stability. In 1964, Francis Xavier Walter, an Episcopal priest and Mobile native, visited the area and recognized the potential for women to earn extra income through quilt making. After finding out that the going price for a quilt was \$5, he offered several women \$10 for quilts, which he then sent to contacts in New York and elsewhere, hoping to generate future commercial opportunities that would benefit the community. Father Walter arranged for quilts to be sold at auction and collaborated with fashion moguls such as New York decorator Sister Parrish and *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland, who helped secure commercial contracts for the quilt makers. In 1966, he helped local women to establish the Freedom Quilting Bee in the nearby town of Rehoboth (also known as Alberta). Managed by Estelle Witherspoon, the cooperative attracted 150 women from Gee’s Bend and the surrounding area in its first year, including Aolar Mosely.¹¹

Mary Lee Bendolph briefly participated in the Quilting Bee. Members earned little, but benefited in other ways. Previously, women had relied on the inadequate supplies provided by itinerant peddlers. The Quilting Bee provided better scissors, stronger thread, higher quality fabric, and, eventually, a large and permanent space in which to meet and work. A succession of commercial contracts earned by the collective introduced new color palettes, patterns, and other resources in a creative dialogue that connected the quilters to each other and to the national economy. As Callahan notes, “Less than a year after the Freedom Quilting Bee was chartered, it received its first contract with a New York City interior design firm and attracted major attention in East Coast art circles. What resulted was

a national rebirth of interest in patchwork.”¹² Subsequently, Bloomingdale’s and Saks Fifth Avenue bought quilts to sell to their customers, and coverage by the *New York Times* generated additional opportunities, including a 1972 contract with Sears, Roebuck and Co. to create pillow shams. Such efforts led to greater exposure and enough money for some Gee’s Benders that they were able to assist their children with tuition and acquire appliances and other amenities.

As Gee’s Bend quilts became more generally known, both regionally and nationally, more outsiders found them inspiring and promoted their aesthetic. For example, in 1967, when the abstract expressionist artist Lee Krasner had a solo show of 20 paintings in the University of Alabama’s Garland Hall Gallery, Theodore Klitze, the head of the University’s Art Department, encouraged her to visit the community. Krasner was so impressed by what she saw that she purchased three quilts and showed them to curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Marlborough Gallery in New York City. However, her efforts to promote the quilts didn’t gain traction in an art market that privileged modernism, white male artists, and formalist theory.¹³

Whether enjoying increasing attention and acclaim for their work, experiencing setbacks, or enduring the entrenched institutions of racism, Gee’s Bend quilt makers maintained a close sense of community, shared values, and a reciprocal exchange of materials, labor, and ideas. Some, like Mary Lee Bendolph, maintained strong community ties but left the Quilting Bee for varied reasons, such as



Arthur Rothstein, *Girl at Gee’s Bend, Alabama* (Artelia Bendolph), 1937 negative, gelatin silver print photograph. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. Purchase with funds from Julie Herzik Desnick (Class of 1973). 2014.14.4.

logistical difficulties, the need for a more regular income, and preference for a more improvisatory approach.

Raising a large family throughout the '50s and '60s, Mary Lee Bendolph continued to quilt with scant space and resources. She didn't have indoor plumbing until 1972, when her youngest son, Rubin Jr., was 10 years old. A wooden stove heated their house, and he would sleep with his siblings on a corn-shuck mattress cushioned by three or four quilts, lying under several more quilts for warmth. Her quilts also provided a rare source of beauty while embodying communal labor and values. People would generally piece quilt tops during the winter months; each spring, they would hang their quilts on fences or clotheslines, comparing and admiring others' handiwork. As Rubin Jr. has stated, the quilts combined the need for family, beauty, warmth, prayer, and much more. "The quilts served so many purposes. Mom would piece the tops by herself and then her mother and other relatives, they'd come by to help, and while quilting, the ladies would be praying and singing. On some occasions, after everyone left, she would be sitting there alone sewing and singing, and praying to God, sayin' 'I got so much burden, I need your help, to let me bear this.' It would pierce your soul to hear this. It would stop you in your tracks. You would want to listen but not want to listen."¹⁴



As noted above, the beauty and importance of Gee's Bend quilts have been recognized for more than half a century, not only by the residents of Gee's Bend but by social change agents, influential artists, fashion leaders, nationally-known journalists, and entrepreneurs. It is not accurate, as some authors have suggested, that the quilts were first "discovered" in the early 1980s by William Arnett, a collector of Southern Black folk art and entrepreneur. However, when Arnett saw the quilts, he began collecting and promoting them on an unprecedented scale. Aided by former Gee's Bend resident Mary McCarthy, his sons Paul and Matt, and many others, his efforts have profoundly influenced the way the quilts—and Gee's Bend—are perceived. Marshalling the considerable financial resources of the Tinwood Alliance, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation based in Atlanta, he promoted the quilts and documented oral histories provided by artists in *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*—a traveling exhibition and accompanying 190-page catalog featuring some 70 quilts and representing more than 45 quilt makers.¹⁵ The exhibition premiered in 2002 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and traveled to 11 additional venues over three years, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the de Young Museum. Whereas initial reaction to *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* presented the works mainly in terms of their craft techniques or sociological context, dialogue about the quilts shifted after *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman reviewed the Whitney Museum's installation. Hailing the exhibition as "the most ebullient exhibition of the New York art season," he compared the quilts favorably to modernist masterpieces by Henri Matisse and Paul Klee.¹⁶

Tinwood Alliance again collaborated with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, to organize *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, an exhibition that opened in 2006 in Houston before traveling

to seven other American museums, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Such institutional approval, promotion, and publicity undoubtedly contributed to other developments. For example, in 2006, several Gee's Bend quilts, including one by Bendolph, were featured as part of the American Treasures postage stamp series. The quilts have subsequently gained greater attention and increased market value through numerous articles, essays, and blog posts as well as profiles aired on television, including *CBS News Sunday Morning* and *Martha Stewart Living*.

Amid the intense media attention of the past 15 years, the manner in which Gee's Bend quilts have been promoted, purchased, and exhibited has led to controversy and legal disputes—and the Gee's Bend quilt-making community, which is made up of individuals with distinct viewpoints, has often been painted with large sweeping strokes. As I researched Mary Lee Bendolph's life and discussed it with other contributors to this catalog, we reflected on how our particular cultural backgrounds and disciplinary training might provide both insights and limitations. We began by asking, "What stories have already been told, what has been left out, and why?" I was also reminded of the revisionist spirit and cautionary words of Leo Steinberg, the seminal critic and art historian, who observed that it is "amazing how often we pretend to be seeing what just isn't there, and how reliance on texts, or on approved hearsay, can make us miss out on the far greater rewards proposed to our eyes."¹⁷ Mindful of humanity's vulnerability to unconscious bias, we hope to challenge habitual assumptions and provide fresh perspectives. Collectively, these essays are not intended to be comprehensive. Instead, we hope that they provide a sampler of sorts, offering diverse modes of inquiry and topics for further study.

Amid the chorus of voices that have shaped our understanding of Gee's Bend aesthetics, Ellen Alvord's interview with Rubin Bendolph Jr. gives priority to an important voice from within the community. Her astute questions and his vivid descriptions demonstrate his own changing views of his mother's quilts over time. His stories reinforce the observation, made in different ways by all the authors, that the perceived meaning of the quilts can change dramatically as they are shown or studied in different contexts, as materials transform with age, and as we ourselves adopt new perspectives.

Hannah W. Blunt offers a detailed study of the objects' aesthetic and material structure within the changing contexts in which they were made. As the key organizer of the exhibition, she also offers keen insight into Mary Lee Bendolph's inspirations, creative processes, and evolving priorities.

Writing as a sociologist with expertise in Black Studies, Professor Sarah Willie-LeBreton explores quilts by Mary Lee Bendolph and her peers in relation to the writings of varied thought leaders, including W.E.B. DuBois and Pierre Bourdieu. She calls attention to the way they challenge our understanding of beauty and accepted hierarchies in an ongoing and reciprocal dialogue between the quilt makers, material culture, viewers, and commentators.

Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Economics Lucas Wilson also focuses on the communal value and meanings of Bendolph's quilts, but he does so through the lens of revisionist economic

models. In his essay, he critiques capitalist economic models and theories, arguing that their flawed assumptions have distorted our understanding of the “value” of the quilts. He proposes that we should instead consider the art of Gee’s Bend within the context of a local economy and culture governed by communal principles of barter and reciprocity—alternative economic strategies that often emerge in resistance to oppression.

Focusing attention on the currency of quilt making in African American literature, Assistant Professor of English and Africana Studies Kimberly Juanita Brown demonstrates the way quilts and the practice of quilt making provide metaphors for women’s creative empowerment both within African American culture and beyond. Comparing the quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph and other Gee’s Benders to literary masterpieces by Toni Morrison, Brown finds similar strategies at play, including unconventional patterns that prompt sustained attention; jazz-like syncopations of color, rhythm, and form; and formal strategies that appear circular, echoing past iterations and conveying limitless possibility.

As I studied the quilts, read the essays that follow here, and received the generous hospitality of Mary Lee Bendolph and her family, I was often reminded of Lewis Hyde’s observation that “a work of art is a gift, not a commodity...Works of art exist simultaneously in two “economies,” a market economy

and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: [A] work of art can survive without the market, but where there is no gift, there is no art.”¹⁸ Mary Lee Bendolph’s art moves and challenges us because of the way she combines so many gifts: her artistic sensitivity, patience, and disciplined work; her love of communal exchange; and her impulse to honor or commemorate others. Her quilts activate all of our senses, including sight, touch, smell, and hearing. Embodying both injustice and active resistance, they prompt empathy and inquiry. Bendolph’s prayerful spirit and playful, improvisational eye provide an aesthetic form of call and response. Her quilts can simultaneously spark our conscience, move us to tears, and prompt us to action. When we heed the call of such art, we join a more dynamic and generous circle.

Andrea Packard has directed the List Gallery at Swarthmore College since 1995 and curated more than 150 exhibitions for Swarthmore and other venues. She is also an artist who incorporates fabric into many of her mixed media works. *The Fabric of Nature*, a survey exhibition of her art, was presented by Walton Arts Center, Fayetteville, Arkansas in 2017.

Notes

1. There is scant information regarding the current population of Gee’s Bend. *The Encyclopedia of Alabama* states: “According to the 2010 Census, the population of the Boykin community was 275. Of that total, 95.3 percent identified themselves as African American, 4.0 percent as white, and 0.7 percent as Hispanic. Median household income was \$24,250, and per capita income was \$6,048....There are no schools in the Boykin Community.” <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1094>.

2. Gee’s Bend Collective website: <http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com/quiltmakers/index.html>.

3. Numerous sources address this name change including: <https://www.auburn.edu/academic/other/geesbend/explore/history.html>

4. Interview by Andrea Packard with Minnie and Tinnie Pettway, July 1, 2017.

5. Nancy Callahan, *The Freedom Quilting Bee* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 36.

6. Callahan, 39. See also: John Beardsley, “River Island” in *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*, (Atlanta: Tinwood Books in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2002), 26-27.

7. Callahan, 37.

8. The age when Bendolph became pregnant has been published previously as 13. Her son Peter was born in May 1951, making Bendolph 14 at the age of conception.

9. Interview by Andrea Packard with Mary Lee Bendolph, July 1, 2017.
10. Mary Lee Bendolph’s determination and resilience in the face of the elimination of the Gee’s Bend Ferry and other acts of racist oppression are the subject of a Pulitzer Prize-winning article by J. R. Moehringer, “*Crossing Over*,” published by the *Los Angeles Times* on August 22, 1999.

11. Callahan, 31.

12. Ibid., 50.

13. Gail Levin, *Lee Krasner: A Biography*, (New York: William Morrow, 2011), 377-378.

14. Interview by Andrea Packard with Rubin Bendolph Jr., May 2016, and email, October 6, 2017.

15. *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* was co-curated by John Beardsley, then a senior lecturer at the Harvard School of Design, and Jane Livingston, an independent curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Coordinating curator Dr. Alvia Wardlaw contributed insightful research and commentary to the exhibition catalog.

16. Michael Kimmelman, “Art Review: Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters,” *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 2002.

17. Leo Steinberg, synopsis description of his lecture titled “O! Say, Can You See?”, which was presented at Swarthmore College on October 23, 2007.

18. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), xvi.

From left: Mary Lee Bendolph, Rubin Bendolph Jr., and Essie Bendolph Pettway stand in front of quilts by Essie, *Sallie Gal* and *In Seam and Outer Seam* (both 2012), July 2017. Photo: Andrea Packard





Memories of Gee’s Bend: A Conversation with Rubin Bendolph Jr.

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

The youngest of Mary Lee Bendolph’s eight children, Rubin Bendolph Jr. has become over the last decade the family historian and a devoted memory collector. In an interview with Ellen Alvord, Rubin shares stories about his mother and his personal memories of growing up in Gee’s Bend, Alabama.

Dashiki (detail), 2003

Full image: page 57

Ellen Alvord: Your family is from Gee’s Bend, and your mother still lives there today. What was it like growing up in this tight-knit community in the 1960s and ’70s?

Rubin Bendolph Jr.: Growing up in Gee’s Bend was simple, everyone was equal. We all had the same thing, which was nothing. But we shared with each other to ensure no one went hungry or without. In the fall of the year around October, my parents would slaughter a hog or two, and my father would make sure that each relative in the community received a piece of the slaughtered animals. Of course, as a child I would be tasked with the delivery process, so Mom would package the meat and tell me who to take it to.

Sometimes, my parents would run short of items like sugar, flour, and meal, then they would have me go over next door or down the road and ask the neighbor if we could borrow a cup of sugar. So, away I go next door with cup in hand, and I would knock on the neighbor’s door and say “Con Sweet, Mom said would you let her borrow a cup of sugar until she can pay you back?” “Con” is a form of respect, it’s the same as saying “Mrs. Sweet.”

EA: What are your earliest memories of your mother quilting, and did she ever include you, as a child, in the process?

RB: When I was around six or seven years old all I wanted to do was play. But Mom had a different agenda for me. Preparing to make a quilt involved three ingredients—the pieced-together quilt top, the batting, and the quilt backing. Here is where my role came in: I had to go out to the barn to gather enough cotton to cover the quilt back. You would think this would be a quick and simple task, but I had to find creative ways to get past a nursing mother hog—usually in the doorway.

Once I got the cotton back to the house, I had to remove any seeds and debris from it prior to repeatedly beating it with a small stick to make it fluffy and clear of dirt. Now clear of the debris, I would

place the cotton onto the quilt back and beat it evenly over the entire area. Mom would then take one end of the quilt top, and I would take the other, and we would spread it over the top of the batting across two sawhorses. Once I threaded the needle for Mom and she felt like all was good, playtime was on.

EA: Quilt making is a practice that has been passed down through the generations. Why is the tradition of quilt making so strong in Gee’s Bend?

RB: In 1859, when Dinah Miller, Gee’s Bend’s earliest identified quilt maker, was brought to Gee’s Bend as a slave, quilt making was a necessity because none of the log cabins at that time were insulated. Having only a fireplace to keep warm, the women would make quilts in abundance. Most of the time, multiple quilts were used on the bed as blankets and one as a window cover to block the frigid wind at night coming through the holes of the log-and-mud cabins.

EA: I understand that your mom learned to quilt from her mother, Aolar Mosely, when she was young. Can you tell us the story of how your mom first learned to quilt?

RB: According to Mom, she started piecing quilts when she was just 12 years old. Her mother would sit out in the yard in the spring of the year, piecing quilts and patching clothes. So, she asked her mother to teach her how to piece quilts. Her mom gave her a needle and some scraps of cloth and she started piecing. It took her a very long time to make her first quilt because they had very little material. Sometimes, she would find a piece of a rag on the side of the road. She would take it home and wash it and hang it out on the fence to dry, then rip it up and make a block in her quilt.

EA: What are your memories of why your mother made quilts?

There were several reasons why Mom made quilts. Like the earliest quilt makers in Gee’s Bend, the main reason was to keep her children warm, and the second reason was to do something with the worn-out clothing she could no longer patch. The quilts were very heavy because the quilt tops were made mainly from scraps of old, heavy clothing, like coveralls, denim, and painter’s pants. Now, add the other two layers—the batting (cotton from the barn) and the flour/sugar-sack backing—and this combination made the quilts very heavy.

Mom would sometimes have three or four quilts on the bed, or even five, depending on just how cold it got. It was like you was buried. Because three to four of us were sleeping in one bed, the body heat was like being inside a cocoon. We didn’t have central heat or air. Our home was developed sometime around 1940 (as part of the Roosevelt Project houses built in Gee’s Bend), and it only had one fireplace to keep the entire house warm. It was a poverty-stricken community, and our family, like most others in Gee’s Bend, lacked money for general repairs and maintenance. So, once you come from underneath those quilts, then that’s when it got cold.

Mom was also making the quilts because she wanted beauty, something pretty to put on her bed. Sometimes she would visit the homes of other ladies she respected in the community, and they would have some of the most beautiful colors on their beds, so she wanted something pretty on her bed, too.

I once asked Mom, “Why would you take large pieces of cloth and tear them into many small pieces to make a quilt? Wouldn’t it take more time sewing the many pieces together versus one or two large pieces?” Mom’s answer was quite interesting. She said that as a young family, “We didn’t have a lot, so nothing was wasted. When your father and siblings’ clothing was worn out and patching them was not an option, I would take them and rip them up into pieces to make the look I wanted in a beautiful bedspread.” My mom would always say “You learn real quick to make do with what you have to get what you want.” As a child, I really didn’t understand what she meant, but as I grew older and reflected back, the saying made sense.

EA: So quilts had meaning within individual households both for their functionality and for their colorful decoration. How were they also part of the shared community in Gee’s Bend, especially for the women?

RB: In the fall, the ladies would have pretty much finished harvesting the cotton and the corn and would have more time for quilt making. Mom would say that she was going to “get rid of some of the rags in the house,” the old worn-out summer clothing that she wasn’t going to let us wear anymore, and start using it for piecing together new quilt tops through the winter.

Then in April, May, and June, the ladies would gather together to finish the quilts. My mom, her sister Lillie Mae Pettway, her sister-in-law Ruth Mosely, her mother Aolar Mosely, and sometimes her older cousin Ethel “Becky” Pettway, would come to Mom’s house and begin quilting her three or four quilts tops. Then they’d go over to Ruth’s house and quilt together her three or four quilt tops, then to Aolar’s house, and then Becky’s house, quilting until all the quilt tops were hand stitched. While quilting, they would share their troubles with each other, talking about their children or their spouses, giving comfort, singing, and praying for each other.



Bendolph family, 1968. Photo courtesy Rubin Bendolph Jr.

The other thing that happened in the springtime is that we would clean the house inside and out. This consisted of washing the quilts and sheets from the beds, and cleaning the house and window panes. We would take the quilts and wash them with a stick, boiling water, and lye soap in three-legged black pots over a fire. Then we would rinse, wring, and hang the quilts on the clothesline.

The houses in Gee’s Bend were not too close but close enough to see that multiple people were doing the same thing. In March and April, some ladies would literally walk the dirt roads, going house to house looking at the colorful quilts hanging on the clotheslines. They were often invited to come into the yard to get a closer look and admire each other’s designs.

EA: The creative process for both Mary Lee and her mother, Aolar Mosley, seems to be infused with music and spirituality. What is your perception of the role that music and spirituality played in their quilt making?

RB: Religion is a big part of Mom’s life. Many times when Mom’s quilting, it’s a lot like going to church. She would often break out with a song and begin praying to God, asking him to help her find a way to stay strong and keep her in her right mind so she can provide for herself and her family. Mom is full of grace and gratitude, laughing frequently, and almost singing while she speaks.

Mom said her mother would sit in the yard singing and praying with tears running down her face and she would wonder why she was crying. As Mom got older, she learned the reason why her mother would be crying, she had Jesus in her heart and she would always tell us never turn anyone away because you don’t know who you are turning away. My mother, like her mom, is a good person and loves people, no matter who they are.

EA: “Look Where He Brought Me From” is Mary Lee’s song, and it has an uplifting quality. Could you tell the story of how this song came to be?

RB: The Lord gave her this particular song in a dream and she woke up singing that song. This was in 2008, after she had a stroke and was in the hospital. She was having trouble speaking and she spent a lot of time praying. And then, in a dream, she asked the Lord about her children and the Lord told her, “All your children are doing well, but you need to tell two of them that they must pray. She had asked the Lord, “What about me?” and the Lord told her, “Well, look where I brought you from.” She said she woke up at that point thanking the Lord, singing that song. She woke up full of spirit and joy, singing, “You just look where he brought me from, oh yeah, look where he brought me from. Oh, he brought me out of the darkness into the Lord’s light. Just look where he brought me from.”

EA: I understand that your mom preferred to only use recycled materials and old clothing for her quilts. Could you tell us more about that?

RB: Where the younger generation of people like to use new materials, Mom was accustomed to worn-out fabrics because that’s all she had—clothing that was worn out. She felt like heavily-worn fabrics would sew better, rip better, and make much cleaner tears than you would get from the new material. With new material, the thread would just keep pulling out when you ripped it. She wasn’t going to use scissors unless it was something she couldn’t just rip. Then she would nip it on the edge a bit so she could tear it. That’s the only way she would use the scissors. Otherwise she would rip it.

One of her trademark designs is when she used long triangular shapes in her quilts. To get that triangular look, she often created those shapes from clothing that meant something to her. With worn-out clothing, the side panel of jeans or pants was part of the best portion of the clothing since it was not as worn out as the knees and fronts of the pants. In these triangular pieces, you can often see the seams. That triangular look is in quilts like *Husband Suit Clothes* (page 58), which she made with my father’s worn-out church clothes, and in *Grandpa Stripes* (page 70), which she made with her grandkids’ worn-out clothing. Pay very close attention to those triangular shapes, patches, or blocks, because those are made from clothing of someone that meant something to her.

EA: Mary Lee’s quilts were first displayed in major art museums starting in 2002 with the nationally acclaimed traveling exhibition, *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*. What was your first experience of seeing your mother’s quilts in a museum?

RB: Starting in 2002, there were quite a few exhibitions, but I had not gone to any of them. Mom told Matt Arnett [a collector and promoter of Bendolph’s work], “I wish Rubin would come see one of the shows, it would mean a lot to me to introduce him to what we all are experiencing.” In the beginning this was not something I wanted to be a part of. I really didn’t understand what the people saw in the quilts—they were just rags.

Well, in 2005, Matt asked me, “Why don’t you come to the show in Memphis? It’s just five hours away from Huntsville, and I believe you and your family would enjoy it.” Huntsville is where my family and I live. I said, “ok,” but I really didn’t want to go, and, at the same time, I didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. I told my wife and kids, “We are going to Memphis to see some of your grandma’s work being displayed at the Brooks Museum.” Off to Memphis we went, and when we arrived that night, they had a free room reserved for me and my family at a fine hotel. The evening of the exhibition opening, the bus came and picked up the ladies and took them to the museum, and we followed them. Arriving at this gorgeous building, I said “Oh my Lord, this is beautiful!”

When we walked into the museum, the facility was overflowing with people...but I’m still not understanding. I’m still thinking, “These are just quilts.” There were multiple choirs singing, eagerly waiting for the Gee’s Bend quilters to sing with them. The 12 to 15 ladies from Gee’s Bend went on stage, sang with the choirs, and then they spoke about what the Lord has done for them and the struggles he brought them through. To me, this proved my point—the quilts were not the focus, they were

just a source of transportation to get the ladies there so they could spread the Lord’s word with others going through the same struggles. The audience asked questions like, “What was your inspiration for making these quilts? Was it spiritual?”

Mrs. Nettie Young, who was in her 90s, answered, “These ain’t nothing but rags . . . but you know these rags was what we had when we was coming up to keep our children warm. The houses we lived in, they didn’t have nothing, they had holes in the floor, you could look down through the holes and see the ground. The walls had air coming in, we had to plaster newspapers on the wall to stop the air coming in. We didn’t have money, we had to pray to ask the Lord to carry us through these hard times. This is what we had. All we had was rags and shirttails, and we used what we had to keep warm.”

EA: Did this answer resonate with you?



Bendolph with two of her quilts hanging on a line outside her home, August 20, 2016. Photo: Ellen M. Alvord.

time I’m literally seeing more than colors. I saw shapes, I saw different patterns and figures, and I saw things that reminded me of what we went through growing up. Some people had quilts hanging up there of cotton plants, and some people had quilts of their rooftops or housetops. How did they come up with that? Then you start thinking about it, and you realize they’re laying in bed and looking up in the ceiling and that’s where they’re getting the patterns. They see a housetop, and then they start making different variations of the housetop. Then some of them had these pigs in the pen. Well, that’s what we had growing up was pigs in the pen. But it wasn’t a pig in a sense of an actual image of a pig, you just kinda got that idea: That’s a pig in a pen. These were the kinds of things I saw in 2005 at the Brooks Museum.

RB: Yes. When I first looked at these quilts, all I saw were struggles and hard times, I didn’t see art. You did have some people there who were in tune to the quilts, in tune to the art. Then you had some people there who were critics about it, just like me. I couldn’t see the art, I just saw colors. That’s what I saw growing up, just pretty colors.

Then, in the museum there was a lady staring at one of the quilts with tears running down her face. As I began to walk over toward her, I began to see it, the art, oh my Lord, it was awesome. I stood back and stared at what was hanging on the walls. I started seeing all these different shapes and patterns and like oh my God, I never looked at those quilts like this. This is the first

EA: The first artworks that the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum acquired by Mary Lee Bendolph were actually prints, not quilts. Can you tell us the story of how Mary Lee began making fine art prints?

RB: Pam Paulson of Paulson Bott Press [now Paulson Fontaine Press] had visited the Gee’s Bend exhibition at the Whitney Museum, and they invited Mom and a few other quilt makers to come out to Berkeley, California, to make quilt-inspired prints in 2005. Mom’s very first print published at Paulson Bott Press was titled *To Honor Mr. Dial* (page 73) as a tribute to the self-taught African American artist Thornton Dial, with whom she became friends.

EA: And *To Honor Mr. Dial* was one of two Mary Lee Bendolph prints given to MHCAM in 2012, which eventually led to our collaboration with you, and this exhibition of your mother’s work.

RB: Yes, it seems like this partnership was predestined.

EA: You work full time as an engineer, but since that pivotal moment in 2005 at the Brooks Museum, you have dedicated countless hours to preserving and documenting Mary Lee’s lifetime of work as well as making her artistic creations more widely available to new audiences. You’ve even talked about turning an original Roosevelt project house into a museum that would be dedicated to the remarkable history of the people and quilt making traditions of Gee’s Bend. Can you summarize why this work is so important?

RB: The world sees Mom’s quilts as art, but for me I see them as a reminder of what struggles my mom had to endure as a young woman trying to obtain just a small quality of life for her family. These quilts served many purposes—to help keep her family warm, to give a sense of beauty in the home for a wife who couldn’t afford a store-bought comforter, and as a means to release stress.

Mom, other family members, and neighbors would sit around the quilt and help each other sew their quilts together, because that’s what life is really all about—helping each other in their time of need. As long as I can remember, my mom has always opened her home to guests, visitors, and strangers. Just like Mom sharing her home with others, I felt it was fitting to preserve and share her stories and the love of her art with others before these stories, especially those of the older generation, are lost.

Ellen M. Alvord has worked in museum education for more than 20 years, primarily at teaching institutions. At the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, she manages and develops the Teaching with Art program for academic and community audiences, promoting object-based learning across disciplines.



Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph

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

Mary Lee Bendolph made her first quilt when she was 12 years old. Some 60 years later, she still recalled the challenge of gathering enough pieces of fabric to complete the project:

I didn't have nothing to piece the quilt with. It was some jeans pants, some overall pants, shirts, sleeves off the shirt—the good part I could find off of there—skirts, flour sacks, fertilizer sacks. Anything I could find—a scrap piece—I put it in the quilt if Mama wasn't using it. It didn't matter what it was, as long as it was something to go in. I remember picking a piece from out in the road; it was a raggly old shirt what the wagon had rolled over. And it was muddy. It was kind of blue, a gray-blue Indian-head cloth. I washed all the mud out of it and hung it on the wire. When it got dry, I put it in the quilt.¹

Ghost Pockets (detail), 2003
Full image: page 60

The parts of the shirt, the types of supply sacks, the mud from a wagon, the particular gray-blue of a piece of cloth: Bendolph's memories of these cast-off materials are all that remain of this quilt. In our mind's eye, this blanket is itself like a memory: a square of odd pieces, some in color, many faded and time-worn. The material truths of each piece become abstracted, flattened by distance: contextual, spatial, temporal. In the presence of Bendolph's dazzling, extant quilts—hung on museum walls and illustrating the pages of books—many of the textures and meanings created by time, place, and relationships are also elusive. The truths are subsumed into a quilted whole.



The community and quilt-making tradition that prompted a young Mary Lee to piece her first quilt are well documented. The quilts and quilt makers of Gee's Bend, Alabama, have been the subject of dozens of museum exhibitions, books, articles, and documentaries. These projects have explored definitions of Gee's Bend quilts as "miraculous works of modern art," as the products of a rich, highly localized craft tradition, and as utilitarian objects made to keep out the cold in an isolated, impoverished corner of the American South.² As a community memory keeper and the central link in three generations of esteemed Gee's Bend quilt makers, Bendolph's story and her marvelous quilts have received particular acclaim.

Like many of her peers, Bendolph learned to piece quilts from her mother and by observing female family members and friends when they gathered together to help each other turn individually



Mary Lee Bendolph's children, ca. 1958–59. Back row: Peter (b. 1951), Harrell (b. 1953); middle row: Essie (b. 1956), Russell (b. 1955); front row: Henry (b. 1957). Photo courtesy Rubin Bendolph Jr.

pieced designs into warm blankets. Her quilt making ebbed and flowed as different chapters of her life unfolded, and as her roles as a daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, farmer, factory worker, and caregiver demanded her time and energies. Bendolph estimates that she has made somewhere between 150 and 200 quilts during her lifetime.³ She remembers making four quilts between the years 1947 and 1955, and just two in the year of her marriage (1955). After the birth of five of her eight children in near succession between 1956 and 1962, she resumed more active quilt making.⁴ Bendolph's youngest child, Rubin Bendolph Jr., recalls of those years, "you [couldn't] be spending money on stuff that you can make yourself. . . so they did the best they could do with what they had, and that's why Mom would make these quilts. . . to put them on the bed to have something, a pretty bedspread."⁵ Then, in the early 1970s, Bendolph began working on and off in a number of nearby textile factories. Over the next 20 years, she was employed respectively by a silk mill in Camden, Alabama, the Selma Apparel Corporation (making military uniforms for the Vietnam War), Dallas Uniform, and Wallace Apparel. Her work brought both income to her family and access to discounted fabrics and clothing, but her time for quilt making was limited.

The majority of Bendolph's quilts were made after her retirement from factory work in 1992, and the highest concentration dates from the early aughts—the period when Gee's Bend was showered with the attention of museum curators and arts writers. Bendolph has acknowledged that the conditions of her quilt making shifted around this time. The positive response motivated her to quilt more. She began to understand the "value" of her work beyond the confines of her home and family—both its cultural significance and its interest on the art market. "I would go and make more by them looking at my quilts and saying they was pretty," she said, "And now my quilts have more feeling than they ever had, because the world can see and I can share them with the world."⁶

The mid-2000s was also when documentation of Bendolph's work became standard practice, as her son Rubin Jr. helped to manage the comings and goings of quilts for exhibition and sale. Before this era, Bendolph would sell her quilts to people for "what they want to give me."⁷ In 2005, along with several other Gee's Bend quilt makers, Bendolph began collaborating with Paulson Bott Press (now Paulson Fontaine Press) in Berkeley, California, on a series of prints inspired by quilts. She continued to make quilts well into her 70s, although she has only made about a dozen since suffering a stroke in 2008.⁸

Mary Lee Bendolph's quilts—from those we can imagine only from her descriptions to those that hang on museum walls today—span nearly three quarters of a century. As Andrea Packard outlines in the Introduction to this catalog, the context and material circumstances of Bendolph's quilt making have changed significantly during that time. Her earliest quilts were made mostly out of necessity,

from a scarcity of scraps. Bendolph has noted the difference between those blankets and the ones she created in more recent decades. "Back in the day, I had the idea but didn't have anything to use with the idea. If I'd had the material to work with my idea back then like I have now, I could have gotten my ideas shown in the quilts."⁹

To call Bendolph's quilts works of art or craft or utility is to simplify their meaning and significance. In "But a Quilt is More: Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee's Bend Quilts," linguistic scholar Vanessa Kraemer Sohan "reads" the quilts of Gee's Bend "as texts full of multiple, perhaps conflicting, meanings that communicate the quilt maker's particular experiences." She considers quilts, including Bendolph's, as a form of discourse that communicates "the material conditions of their lives."¹⁰ In the spirit of that ongoing process of recontextualization, the exhibition *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* examines one remarkable woman's quilts as hybrid objects. We strive to understand the pieces of these objects—the material truths—present in the whole. Each quilt contains references to the past—the DNA of earlier quilts—as well as innovations and differences. They not only merge together colors, shapes, and textures but also memories of people, observations of Bendolph's physical environment, visions, and dreams. They express complex emotional states and a basic commitment to salvaging and economizing with what is at hand. Some quilts warmed the bodies of her children, others dazzle the eyes of a nameless public, and some have done both.

By Bendolph's own definition, quilts encompass many disparate thoughts, experiences, and emotional truths. Quilt making, she says, "keeps your mind well together."¹¹



One of the earliest quilts in the exhibition dates from the late 1970s or early 1980s and implements a common quilt-making pattern aptly known as the "Bricklayer" (also called "Courthouse Steps"), for its escalating stacks of square and rectangular blocks (see *Bricklayer*, page 55). The quilt also represents a collaboration with Bendolph's sister-in-law, Ruth P. Mosely. While the specific allocation of concept and labor between the two women is not known, the shared creation of a quilt among family members and neighbors is a well-established tradition in Gee's Bend. Women would gather to stitch, talk, pray, sing, and weep, finding respite from their personal, familial, and economic challenges as they sat around a quilt frame.

The "avocado leaf" green and gold corduroy of *Bricklayer* connect it to a quilt-making trend that emerged as a result of the Freedom Quilting Bee. Established in 1966 by a white Episcopal priest, the Bee was a craft cooperative aimed at supporting struggling African American families in southern Alabama through the handiwork of local quilt makers. Initially, these women created and sold traditional patterned quilts, but in order to remain financially solvent, the Bee eventually took on contracts through Sears, Roebuck and Co. to sew corduroy pillow covers. Though briefly involved, Bendolph, like many of the quilt makers, left the cooperative when she saw little income. Many women felt



Advertisement for wide-wale cotton corduroy cushions, Sears, Roebuck and Co., winter 1974, p. 1494. Sears, Roebuck and Co. Catalog Collection (RB 020), Special Collections and University Archives, UMass Amherst Libraries.

stified by the rigidity of designs and the exhaustive, assembly-line stitching required. Yet the material “effects” of the Sears contract trickled into the local material culture as leftover lengths of corduroy began to circulate in the nearby quilt-making communities.

Beginning in the early 1970s, hundreds of documented Gee’s Bend quilts incorporate the distinctive material and its spectrum of rich golds, tans, oranges, and greens. The thick and velvety texture of wide wale corduroy lent itself to large-scale designs made up of basic geometric shapes. As Sohan points out, these corduroy quilts—made from “used and leftover objects from the impoverished social, material, and cultural conditions of [these] women’s lives—represent how “creativity can be forged out of difference.”¹² Bendolph’s and Mosely’s quilt emphasizes the lustrous, light-catching quality of corduroy, stacking slightly different shades of green and brown, and varying the direction of the stitches. The result is a sumptuous surface that ripples and undulates. A defining characteristic of Bendolph’s quilts—both old and newer examples—is her tendency to creatively implement materials at hand, especially cast-off, worn-out, or out-of-style clothing.

As Rubin Jr. noted, his mother made quilts to have something pretty and to keep her family warm—motivations that align with those of generations of quilt makers from Gee’s Bend and beyond. Yet quilt making was also a way to keep some of the few material mementos of her family. Known in her family by the title *Something Just For You* (page 54), the exhibition’s earliest quilt by Bendolph was made with the help of her children in 1965, and was later a gift to her son Russell when he bought his first house in 1976. (When Russell was complaining about how cold he was in his new house, Bendolph apparently said, “I’ve got something just for you,” and promptly made a gift of the quilt to him).¹³ It comprises simple blocks salvaged from clothes belonging to several members of the household. According to Russell, “the majority of the materials used on both sides of the quilt was our overalls, jeans and Essie’s denim skirts... I recall Mom taking our old worn-out clothing and putting them inside a pillowcase, saving them to use in quilt making.”¹⁴ As a form of family document, the quilt chronicles hard labor and heavy use, both through the clothing remnants and the wear and tear to the blanket itself.

Bendolph’s only daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway, remembers Bendolph using old flour- and sugar sacks to make clothing for her as a child: “Mama made some skirts and try and find a way to buy me a top. But if she couldn’t then [she] would make a white flour-sack top. Sometimes I didn’t like it, but I had to make do with it.”¹⁵ A 1980 “Housetop” quilt with a mosaic-like array of fabrics in bright colors and patterns suggests other, more conventional materials became available to the family, perhaps as a result of Bendolph’s factory jobs. Created when Essie was in her early 20s, the quilt, *Housetop Variation* (page 56), is composed entirely of dresses Bendolph had made for her daughter. Paul Arnett has noted

that the popularity of the “Housetop” quilt pattern in Gee’s Bend relates to its simplicity and potential for experimentation. The format—created by piecing rectangular strips such that short ends meet long ends to frame a central patch—“initiates visual exchanges between the work’s edges and what is inside” and also echoes the “call and response” tradition of African American music and religious worship.¹⁶

In Bendolph’s example, the center of the quilt is a composition of small, equally sized squares, which radiate out to larger and larger strips. In her description of the quilt, Bendolph noted that she put the pieces of these dresses together in a quilt “to keep from having to throw them away.”¹⁷ Here, making the quilt for its utility, or for its beauty, was not the principal goal. Rather, it was a practical way to hold on to a memory—a physical trace from an earlier time in her daughter’s life. In similar fashion, Bendolph made a quilt in 2003 that incorporates a favorite dashiki shirt from Rubin Jr.’s high-school days (see *Dashiki*, page 57). Other, more recent quilts, including *Grandpa Stripes* (page 70), bring together clothing belonging to her grandchildren, several of whom lived with her and Rubin Sr. in their home.

“Old clothes have a spirit in them,” says Bendolph. “They also have love. When I make a quilt, that’s what I want it to have, too, the love and the spirit of the clothes and the people who wore it.”¹⁸ One spirit that looms large in Bendolph’s life is that of her husband. Mary Lee married Rubin Bendolph Sr., a local farmer, when she was 20 years old, in 1955. At the time, she already had three children, two by him. “Rubin was the boss,” Bendolph recounted.¹⁹ In the 1999 *Los Angeles Times* Pulitzer-Prize-winning profile of Bendolph, *Crossing Over*, she recounted the beatings and attacks of violence she had to endure during her marriage. She also described a dream she had about him shortly after his death. In the apparition, Rubin ordered her not to sleep in their bed anymore, out of respect. The article described how in the dream he “lay down beside her, draped a heavy arm over her hip, and they slept together one last time in the bed they’d shared for 36 years. When the sun rose, he stood and walked out the door, dissolving into the white light.” Bendolph said, “And I ain’t never had no more trouble from him again.”²⁰ This vision, a mixture of male dominance and husbandly tenderness, seems to characterize Bendolph’s relationship with Rubin.



Rubin Bendolph Sr., ca. 1980s. Photo courtesy Rubin Bendolph Jr.

Three quilts preserve material traces of her husband. Created shortly before his death from a brain tumor in 1992, *Husband Suit Clothes (Housetop Variation)* (page 58) is made from remnants of Rubin’s dress clothes. Quilted a decade later, *Army Strong* (page 59) and *Ghost Pockets* (page 60) bring together pieces of his work clothing.

Husband Suit Clothes has a rich palette of purples, grays, and browns, interspersed with squares of a synthetic, red floral brocade. Strips of royal purple, white, black, and tan wide-wale corduroy mingle with houndstooth, twill, green and black velveteen, and gray flannel. Rubin Jr. recalls, “Loud,

unmatching, stripes, color...that was my dad...the pants never matched the coat, the coat never matched the pants...if we was going to church, you'd see him get up Sunday morning wearing all that crazy kind of stuff.”²¹ According to Rubin Jr., when moth holes and changing measurements rendered this collection of suit clothes irreparable, Bendolph surreptitiously grabbed some from the closet and cut them up to make a quilt. As a “strip and string” quilt, the blanket has a wobbly, rippling effect created by rectangular “strips” and triangular “strings” of fabric that have been torn freehand and interwoven to make a design. Bendolph’s keen eye for balancing colors, textures, and shapes brings the dissonance into a harmonious whole. The largest piece in the quilt is a “string” of black and red houndstooth, while one of the smallest is a tiny square of corduroy with blue and yellow flowers, almost dead center. Small, floral pieces like this one regularly appear in Bendolph’s quilts, even those with strong masculine colors and fabrics—a signature of sorts, or a playful “wink.”

Created in 2002 and 2003 respectively, *Army Strong* and *Ghost Pockets* fall within the “work-clothes quilt” tradition of Gee’s Bend. Until the middle of the 20th century, remnants of old work clothing—namely denim jeans and overalls from hard farm labor—were the primary materials used in blankets made by African American quilt makers. In the Jim Crow South, the “code of black subservience tolerated little open display of African American excess,” notes Paul Arnett in the catalog to the exhibition *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend*. “The Gee’s Bend women, quilting in the straits of chronic economic hardship, learned to see and exploit every subtlety of found cloth.”²² Bendolph’s early-21st-century quilts, however, employ her husband’s work clothes out of choice, not necessity, and with a pronounced interest in memory-keeping. In *Army Strong* (page 59), she created a quilt from work clothes she had purchased for Rubin Sr. at a discount, through her job at the Selma Apparel Corporation. She made the quilt ten years after her husband’s death, “to remind me how strong he was during his illness.”²³ With *Ghost Pockets*, she incorporated pieces of his jeans, complete with their faded and dirtied swathes and the still-saturated seam and pocket areas, with strips of fresh, near mint-condition fabrics in turquoise, pink, and creamy yellow.

According to Rubin Jr., *Ghost Pockets* also represents a resistance on Bendolph’s part to another tradition in the community. “During the time frame when we were growing up in Gee’s Bend, they would take the deceased’s clothing and pretty much burn them up...they didn’t want nothing reminding them of the deceased.” Consistent with her proclivity for old clothes, Bendolph wanted to do something different. “She decided she was gonna actually make a quilt with his work clothes so that way, ‘you always be with me’ she said. If that quilt is on the bed, and she is laying under the quilt, ‘you’re always covering me.’”²⁴ The back side of *Ghost Pockets* has a large strip of red flannel overlaying a multicolored, patterned piece, intentionally giving the illusion of a quilt on top of a quilt.²⁵ *Ghost Pockets* reflects Bendolph’s propensity—a shared human tendency—to recreate memories and traditions through the lens of present needs and desires. By cutting up her husband’s clothes and piecing them together anew, Bendolph becomes the sole interpreter of their relationship and she brings comfort to herself as well as others. Consistent with bell hooks’s oft-quoted discussion of African American quilt making as a form of “homeplace”—a built or embellished environment or

object that resists the oppressive political and personal circumstances of black women—Bendolph creates a safe space with these quilts, a space of affirmation and dignity.²⁶

Bendolph has explained how, after her retirement, she had the time and means to implement quilt ideas when they came to her—circumstances far different from those of her mother’s generation and from most of Bendolph’s own life. “I save [the material] up and put it on my shelves—so when my ideas come I can lay it out and put my idea together.”²⁷ Originally, the need for thrift and a desire to recontextualize specific articles of family clothing inspired Bendolph’s quilt making. Later in life, she had the freedom to explore and execute ideas without material limitations. Despite her access to new fabrics, old clothes—acquired from thrift stores, friends, and family—continued to be Bendolph’s preferred material. She pointed out that her quilts are now in museums, but “the way I make them is still the same way my mama taught me.” She acknowledged, “I can have any material I want now, but I still love to use the leftover and recycled-again cloth...I see the value of leftover cloth.”²⁸

Memory-keeping and documentation of Bendolph’s life and relationships remained at the heart of her creations, but many of her quilts from the last 20 years reflect different means and modes for doing so. She found inspiration for quilts in sights and things as disparate as crowds of people in church, men’s neckties, pictures on the wall in her home, the view of the earth from an airplane, the way the road was made, and how houses were put together. “Quilts is in everything,” says Bendolph. “Sometimes I see a big truck passing by. I look at the truck and say, I could make a quilt look like that...I see the barn, and I get an idea to make a quilt. I can walk outside and look around in the yard and see ideas all around the front and the back of my house... As soon as I leave the house I get ideas.”²⁹ Quilts such as *Farmhouse* (page 63), *Spool of Thread* (page 64), and *Water Jug* (page 65) incorporate imagery from Bendolph’s physical environment. All of these blankets adapt traditional designs which were also inspired by existing architectural forms, such as “Housetop,” “Bricklayer,” and “Roman Stripes,” into quilts that subtly reference everyday objects. Titling quilts—a 21st-century, market- and museum-driven phenomenon—helps a public audience differentiate one quilt from another; it has also prompted Bendolph to articulate the sources of her ideas.

In *The Architecture of the Quilt*, a lengthy transcript of Bendolph’s personal narrative reveals the pivotal role her mother, Aolar Carson Mosely (1912–1999), played in her life and quilt making. “She did things for me that I couldn’t do for myself... she [taught] me to love and to care about people. All of my quilts I make, it be kind of like her quilts.”³⁰ A local healer and beacon of generosity, Aolar’s spirit lives on in her daughter, who cared for her mother when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. Bendolph often sings a hymn Aolar used to sing, which begins, “The day is past and gone/The evening shades appear/O may I ever keep in mind/The night of death is near.” “I can hear that voice in my spirit,” said Bendolph.³¹

In 2005, six years after her mother’s death, Bendolph made a quilt in honor of Aolar. Another variation on the “Housetop” design, *Aolar* (page 61) has a somber palette of browns, purples, and greens.

This quilt is a far cry from her cacophonous clothing quilt from 1980; it reflects materials chosen for their aesthetic qualities as they relate to her memories and associations with her mother, rather than any physical relationship to Aolar’s body. Bendolph compared her design for *Aolar* to the disorientation and deep confusion caused by Alzheimer’s, but also emphasized the way the quilt conveys a sense of calm. She adapted the standard concentric “Housetop” pattern so a symbol emerges at the bottom of the quilt, outlined in narrow rectangles of lighter khaki. “If you look deep into the fabric maze of confusion you can see the letter ‘A’ in [memory] of my mother.”³²

Bendolph made a number of other works “in honor” of family and friends, using symbols, colors, and the overall mood of a design to reference important relationships. Her aunt, Louella Carson Pettway, whose quilts she observed as a child, is commemorated in a lush green and blue quilt with the initials “L” and “C” stacked vertically above the initial “P” within the long rectangular strips of a basic “Lazy Gal” design, another traditional pattern (page 62). In her more recent printmaking efforts, people in Bendolph’s life have been the primary source of inspiration. *Mama’s Song* (page 72), one of her first prints created in 2005 at Paulson Bott Press, is also a memorial to her mother. In her beautiful analysis of the print, Ellen Alvord describes “its stark black-and-white piano-key palette with four distinct syncopations of saturated red,” creating “a visual echo of the darkness and light embodied in the spiritual music of Bendolph’s upbringing.”³³ Artist Thornton Dial (1928–2016)—who was a friend and fellow Alabamian—is the honoree of another magnificent etching and aquatint from that year: a “Housetop” design dominated by purples, red, black, and white (page 73). Bendolph acknowledged how Dial, who was also African American, wasn’t “afraid to tell people what they need to know” with his art.³⁴ The two supported each other’s respective interest in salvaging and re-using materials. Dial would send Bendolph his family’s old clothes for quilts, and she sent back the zippers, belt loops, waistbands and other parts that cannot be used in quilt making for Dial to use in his mixed media paintings and assemblages.³⁵

Through a series of prints from 2006, Bendolph grappled with the declining health and absence of her close friend, Arlonzia Pettway, and her preoccupation with her own mortality. The etching and aquatint *Passing By* (page 75), represented “a burden lifted up off me,” after Bendolph worked through the cutting and piecing of the quilt design, a relatively simple “Housetop” and string variation in just red and white, that was translated into the print. In *Get Ready* (page 74), she used many more colors: red, green, black, yellow, purple, and white, among others. “It was time for me to get back to being myself . . . [Arlonzia] told me that she was going to keep on going as long as the Lord allowed her to go . . . It could happen to me one day too, but until then I just have to get ready and go on.”³⁶

According to Bendolph’s children, there is one quilt that has frequently been spotted on the quilt maker’s own bed in recent years. A bold design of triangles and long stripes in red, pink, pale purple, and a rainbow-printed fabric, the quilt dates from 2005. Some of the materials came from relatives in Stratford, Connecticut—clothes she attempted to give to local children, with little success. “I would go house to house trying to give [them] away . . . Now that the generation of children have changed,



Arrow (detail), 2005
Full image: page 69

they won’t take hand-me-downs. So, I used [them] to keep from throwing them away.”³⁷ When asked if there was something special about this quilt, Bendolph pointed out the prominent, directional sign created by two back-to-back triangles: These pieces were “torn to form [the] shape [of] an arrow,” she said. “This arrow points in the direction I am now taking on life . . . upward, no more looking downward.”³⁸ With its brilliant colors and uplifting spirit, *Arrow* (page 69) is a far cry from Bendolph’s first quilt, which exists only as a memory of scant and tattered pieces of cloth. Unlike so many earlier quilts, the origins of Bendolph’s materials are not always what is most significant to her. She also prioritizes the idea, the design, and what it communicates about her experience.

Like her mother, Aolar Mosely, Mary Lee Bendolph has a song she often sings. Sometime after her stroke in 2008, the words came to Bendolph as in a dream from God. They tell of her life’s challenges and injustices—of all that has come before—and an awareness of who she is, and what she has, now. “*Just look where He brought me from,*” Bendolph sings. In bold designs and bits of cloth, her life’s quilts sing a similar song.

Hannah W. Blunt has managed and curated exhibitions for more than 10 years on topics ranging from American weathervanes to contemporary photography. She oversees the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum’s exhibition program and assists with the research and care of the collection.

Notes

1. Mary Lee Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, ed. Paul Arnett, Joanne Cubbs, Eugene W. Metcalf Jr. (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 176.
2. Michael Kimmelman, "Art Review: Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters," *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 2002.
3. Mary Lee Bendolph, phone conversation with Rubin Bendolph Jr. transcribed in an email to Hannah Blunt, August 29, 2017.
4. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 177.
5. Rubin Bendolph Jr., transcript of an interview with Ellen M. Alvord, summer 2017.
6. According to Bendolph, she "started making better quilts because people started bringing things home. It was 2001 then, and that's when I made so many quilts." Mary Lee Bendolph, interview with Josephine Reed for the National Endowment for the Arts, September 30, 2015: <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/fellows/mary-lee-bendolph-lucy-mingo-and-loretta-pettway>
7. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 178.
8. Mary Lee Bendolph, phone conversation with Rubin Bendolph Jr. transcribed in an email to Hannah Blunt, August 29, 2017.
9. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 178.
10. Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, "'But a quilt is more': Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee's Bend Quilts," *College English*, vol. 77, no. 4, March 2015.
11. Mary Lee Bendolph, quoted in Joanne Cubbs, "The Art and Life of Mary Lee Bendolph," in *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 29.
12. Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, see note 10.
13. Rubin Bendolph Jr., phone conversation with the author, August 30, 2017.
14. Russell Bendolph, phone conversation with Rubin Bendolph Jr. transcribed for Hannah Blunt, September 2017.
15. Essie B. Pettway, phone conversation with Ellen M. Alvord transcribed in an email to Hannah Blunt, August 27, 2017.
16. Paul Arnett, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), 108.
17. Mary Lee Bendolph and Rubin Bendolph Jr., Condition Report/Description of *Housetop Variation*, 1980, provided to Hannah Blunt in 2016.
18. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 178.
19. Ibid., 177.
20. Mary Lee Bendolph, quoted in J. R. Moehringer, "Crossing Over," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1999.
21. Rubin Bendolph Jr., transcript of an interview with Ellen M. Alvord, summer 2017.
22. Paul Arnett, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2002), 60.
23. Mary Lee Bendolph and Rubin Bendolph Jr., Condition Report/Description of *Army Strong*, 2002, provided to Hannah Blunt.
24. Rubin Bendolph Jr., transcript of an interview with Ellen M. Alvord, summer 2017.
25. Ibid.
26. bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," in *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.
27. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 178.
28. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 176, 178.
29. Bendolph, quoted in Cubbs, see note 1, 9.
30. Bendolph, quoted in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, 178.
31. Ibid.
32. Mary Lee Bendolph, quoted in a photobook compiled by Rubin Bendolph Jr. on the occasion of Bendolph's National Heritage Fellowship, 2015.
33. Ellen M. Alvord, "Mary Lee Bendolph and the Artistic Legacy of Gee's Bend," *MHCAM Newsletter*, fall 2016, 26-27.
34. Mary Lee Bendolph, quoted in Matt Arnett, "Wrapped in the Blanket of Time," in *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 43.
35. Matt Arnett, "Wrapped in the Blanket of Time," in *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2006), 38.
36. Mary Lee Bendolph, quoted in an interview by Matt Arnett, *OKTP* (Berkeley: Paulson Fontaine Press, July 1, 2008), 2.
37. Mary Lee Bendolph, phone conversation with Rubin Bendolph Jr., transcribed for Hannah Blunt, September 2017.
38. Mary Lee Bendolph and Rubin Bendolph Jr., Condition Report/Description of *Arrow*, 2005, provided to Hannah Blunt.

Grandpa Stripes (detail), 2010. Full image: page 71



Many Colors and Directions: An Appreciation of Mary Lee Bendolph’s Quilts

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Such is Beauty. Its variety is infinite, its possibility is endless. In normal life all may have it and have it yet again.

—W.E.B. DuBois, 1926

... The essential lessons of the quilt: that people and actions ... move in multiple directions at once.

—Elsa Barkley Brown, 1989

Water Jug (detail), 2006
Full image: page 65



When slavery was outlawed in the United States, tenant farming arose as yet another unjust and cruel way to keep many African-descended people permanently indebted to their white neighbors. The people of Gee’s Bend survived this system and the one that preceded it, and they share a collective memory of hardship and resistance, flexibility and craftiness, creativity and perseverance. One window into their story is the creatively pragmatic work of quilting.

In her book *The Quilts of Gee’s Bend* (2017), Susan Goldman Rubin shares a piece of the story that chronicles the start of cross-cultural appreciation of Gee’s Bend quilts. Civil-rights worker Father Francis Xavier Walter visited Gee’s Bend, an inverted question mark of swollen Alabama River in Wilcox County, 50 miles south of Selma, Alabama, in 1965. He wanted to hear the stories of the people there and to discover if he could be of service to them. Seeing some of the marvelous quilts, he purchased several, sent them to New York City to be auctioned, and returned the proceeds to the Gee’s Bend community. Out of this initiative grew a 60-person collective, the Freedom Quilting Bee.

Mary Lee Bendolph is an original member of the Freedom Quilting Bee. For the Bee, the road would be neither straight nor without conflict. Auctions brought well-connected curators and entrepreneurs. Conflicts between those who were representing the quilters and the quilters themselves challenged their designs, their reasons for making quilts and even their sense of community. Not everyone agreed on how to navigate the newfound status of the quilters as cultural icons or the quilts as subcultural iconography, and resolutions have come slowly and unevenly. The experiences of the people of Gee’s Bend provide important lessons about cultural appreciation, exploitation, and more generally, the reminders that the cultural productions of subdominant peoples have been historically vulnerable and must be treated with care and compensation, respect and recognition.

One thing remained clear: The quilts were beautiful, unexpected, and emotionally evocative. And people outside of Gee’s Bend not only wanted to see them but were ready to appreciate the story of their makers. At once communal and individual creations of art and utility, the quilts suggested an aesthetic that deserved unique interpretation, and the quilters deserved the recorded context that narrated historical and sociological meaning to others. Both of these things began to emerge in the 1970s and ’80s.

In their essay “Aesthetic Principles of Afro-American Quilts” (1983), Maude Southwell Wahlman and John Scully argue that a “textile aesthetic... has been passed down for generations among Afro-American women, ... [and] Afro-American quilters do not seem [as] interested in a uniform color scheme. They use several methods of playing with colors to create unpredictability and movement Contrast is used to structure or organize.” And Elsa Barkley Brown follows in her essay “African-American Women’s Quilting” (1989) with the observation that African-American women’s quilts reveal to us multiple rhythms, off-beat patterns, and simultaneous “voices” or, as the Creole say, a *gumbo ya ya*: “[O]nly in the context of the whole can each individual contribution be understood and valued. One can stand alone only by remaining part of the group.”

It was this theme of seeking freedom for the group that was at the heart of W.E.B. DuBois’s essay, “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926). With deft skill and subtlety, DuBois begins by sharing a list of beautiful things created by humans—a list that includes art from Europe, Africa, and America. In so doing, he persuades his readers into the possibility of multiple authors of art, and he invites his readers out of the parochialism of Eurocentricity and into a wider world.

DuBois’s essay reaches a crescendo with his controversial argument that Black American art should be propaganda. But as Dustin Kidd and Christina Jackson remind us in their essay “Art as Propaganda: Bringing DuBois into the Sociology of Art” (2010)—before our lenses were colored by the extreme and nefarious uses of persuasion for unending hot and cold wars—propaganda meant any work that sought to persuade people to think differently. DuBois believed that all Black Art should be “directed toward racial conflict with the goal of pursuing and preserving the lives and liberties of Blacks in America.”

So what do DuBois’s ideas have to do with the quilts of Gee’s Bend and Mary Lee Bendolph?

The quilts in this exhibition are neither propaganda nor accidental in design, though one might say that, by their consistent work, the Gee’s Bend quilters preserved their own lives and liberties. It is the larger culture’s appreciation of them that is the shift. The people of Gee’s Bend made beautiful quilts; but as we are exposed to more than our own narrow ideas of what constitutes beauty and art, so too, even those of us steeped in a culture warped with ideologies of hierarchy and hate find our malevolent fictions challenged. Above all, the quilts in this exhibition are the utilitarian art of an African American woman who has been part of a community of workers and artists with traditions that combine scrappiness, creativity, and pragmatism. Made for comfort, survival and appreciation, they were also made with attention to craft and beauty, asynchronous as the art and survival of the African diaspora.

Of course, to take any material object out of its context for cross-cultural appreciation is risky business. Without context, we risk mis-recognition and the kind of cultural consumption that satisfies our own projections without a genuine sense of the artist, why she created what she did, and the meaning with which it was made. This exhibition, however, engages those questions, and its curators have reached out to build relationships with Ms. Bendolph and her family, to visit Gee’s Bend, and to understand the history and present of the artist, her people, and their home. They have reached out to scholars of African American Literature, Economics and Sociology; in short, they have worked hard to ensure that their audience has the context for thoughtful interpretation and appreciation of Gee’s Bend quilts.

In his preface to the English language edition of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1996), the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu insists that the scholar must look on what is familiar, what one has been deeply steeped in, to truly understand one’s group. If one is able to look upon what is both quotidian and holy with distance, one can compare one’s culture to those of others. What

emerges from such study is the insight that the architectures of our cultures are universal despite their apparent distinctions.

For me, the discovery of what is both everyday and sacred, what is unseen until it is seen, offers a moment that transcends both scholarship and art appreciation. In the story of Mary Lee Bendolph and her fellow quilt makers, what we come to know is both thrilling and heartbreaking: how social hierarchy—capricious and cruel—has been made and maintained; we come to see the unjust rewards of wealth and color and the relegation to poverty and low status, in short, the tragedy of our alienation from each other. But so, too, this discovery exposes previously elided stories of compassion, kindness and artistry, loyalty and commitment, and, to quote Wahlman and Scully, a unique textile aesthetic. Black American quilt-making, often color-filled and asymmetric, has survived and thrived.

Here, with this exhibition of the quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph, we have the opportunity to look at the material culture, the past, and the present of both an individual and a group of African-American women who stitched their way to warmth and communion, beauty and friendship. Eventually their utilitarian art was also recognized and acknowledged by the larger society. In the words of the biblical Isaiah, they made a way out of no way.

In this story, we learn again that we are all only ever mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, neighbors and friends, piecing together our lives, in ways brilliant and muted, honorable and mundane, fancy and plain-stitched. Mary Lee Bendolph, with her family and friends of Gee’s Bend, have created quilts for most of the last century, and we are all the better for their artistry and their willingness to share them with us.

I am particularly grateful to Swarthmore College colleagues Andrea Packard of the List Gallery and Dr. Yvonne Chireau in the Department of Religion and delighted for the opportunity to have worked with new colleagues at Mount Holyoke College and the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

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Whose Quilts, Whose Labor? Notes on Value in An Alternative (Community) Economy

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Mount Holyoke College



Aolar Mosley
Pump Handle Spin Top
(*Log Cabin Variation*), 1954
Detail, full image: page 9

In this essay, rather than offering an interpretation of the historic and contemporary meanings in/of the Gee’s Bend *quilts*, a task outside my expertise, I offer notes on the Gee’s Bend community as a local economy that is not accurately or adequately defined using terms and concepts of the conventional capitalist model. I discuss the social and economic relations of quilt making in Gee’s Bend and southeastern Alabama as part of a complex, overdetermined economic and social process that is undoubtedly an example of a marginal economic form known as a community economy.¹ The story I want to tell belies the conventional mythos of economic discovery, progress, and development in which the women of Gee’s Bend “got lucky” when the “more-knowing” and well-meaning folk art collector, William Arnett, brought the quilts and quilt makers to a broader national and international audience.² In the notes that follow, I criticize the economic modernism of this perspective and propose a noncapitalist perspective instead. Viewed in more “noncapitalocentric” terms, it becomes possible both to see the elements of an alternative type of economy in rural Gee’s Bend, and to identify better questions about the provenance of the quilts and quilt making tradition now that the world knows of the people who live and work in this place.

Why do I believe it would be helpful to reposition economic analyses of Gee’s Bend and the quilts and quilt making traditions rooted there? Briefly put, decisions about who owns the quilts (and their value) cannot be made justly without an adequate account of the cultural economy of their production and use. That is, the economic assumptions embedded within current cultural criticism—including past litigation over the ownership and provenance of the quilts originally “sold” to Arnett—are conceptually impoverished in ways that preclude justice. The tendency to treat the production and exchange (or sale) of the quilts as if fair and transparent business practices adequately characterize each of these processes, I argue, distinctly disadvantages the women of Gee’s Bend and contributes to the reproduction of poverty in this rural region of Alabama’s black belt.³ Two obvious consequences are: (1) the undercompensation of quilt making labor and (2) the alienation of that labor resulting from the removal of communal ownership of the quilts because of the way they have been removed. Put differently, Arnett’s “discovery” of Gee’s Bend quilts makes a signal contribution to the American art world. But the economic consequences of his “discovery” raise ethical considerations that have yet to be specified and addressed, especially if—and this is important—the Gee’s Bend quilts are understood as community economy goods and not capitalist goods. Those ethical considerations include but are not limited to fair labor practices and community development obligations associated with the forms his discovery has taken.

On what basis might such a bold recontextualization be defended? Following the Community Economies Research Network, (CERN), I argue that the answer to this question is fundamentally and doggedly theoretical and empirical—in the varied stories of diverse economic life at the local level. This essay about Gee’s Bend quilts and quilt making is an invitation to merge intellectual inquiry into the life and work of people in the rural black belt with the Community Economies Collective, a global organization of researchers who seek to *retheorize* the identity and actions of marginalized individuals. Resisting capitalocentrism—defined as the tendency to view all economic activity as a representation or form of advanced global capitalism, CERN collects local stories in which agents construct noncapitalist economic identities for themselves and organize alternative economic narratives of development in their communities. Typically, these “new economies” emerge where capitalism has produced poverty, joblessness, poor access to education, health care and technology, and multigenerational economic isolation. In the ideas that follow, I explore whether rural southern Jim Crow communities are places where community economies flourish and have done so since the end of the American Civil War.

A capitalocentric approach tends to portray Gee’s Bend quilt making as a form of primitive art craft, a poverty-survival strategy, and the quilts a kind of folk art. In the context of communal economic analysis, however, greater attention and value is given to self-employment, in-kind forms of trade, reciprocal capital and labor transfers, and other forms of pre- or non-market economic activities. The capitalocentric approach detaches quilts and quilt making from this vital cultural economic material and focuses only on value and price (realized in markets). CERN advocates insist that using hegemonic capitalist mapping to organize local economic activity is exploitive, and contributes to the

reproduction of impoverishment in places like Gee’s Bend. In the remaining sections of this essay, I seek to sharpen our appreciation of the nature of the making of “daily bread” in Gee’s Bend. My hope is that we can begin to move the debate away from the tendency to “see” only capitalism in the quilts and quilt making processes.

Recognizing that the capitalist map might be inappropriate as a guide for understanding Gee’s Bend quilts and quilt makers, rather than rushing to impose another map (the CERN approach is open-ended, nonprescriptive), I defend that negative undefined or open space and allow for local economic practices, relationships, values, and understandings to fill in the economic and social (and spiritual) map that links the local in Gee’s Bend to the “global” art world. Only in this way can the relationship of the quilts of Gee’s Bend *as a specific historical place* be equitably appreciated.

It is not enough to credit the poor, rural women of Gee’s Bend in the form of a wage for their authentic craftwork without also defending the nontransferable, place-based ownership of the quilts (and quilt making). Overlooking the importance of place in/of the quilts reproduces the hierarchical relations of gender- and race-inflected capitalist exploitation we are used to debating when it comes to folk commodities on the global market.⁴ Our habit of regarding Gee’s Bend in conventional economic terms merely extends racial and gender deprivation and subordination, not just of the individuals, but also of the place.



The history of Gee’s Bend quilt making—a form of craft labor—goes back to the early years after enslavement.⁵ After Emancipation, extensive economic uncertainty concerning the “freedom” of black skilled and semi-skilled labor posed a profound political and economic challenge for elite Southern landowners who faced a suddenly absent supply of free labor. In enslavement, the labor power of the enslaved had belonged to the slave owner. No more. Emancipation meant that the labor power and, more importantly, the value of the productive output of that labor power, now belonged to black workers themselves. Freedpersons became wage earners who jealously used freedom’s mobility to work “here and there,” hoping to make real the dream of economic autonomy and eventual landownership. New social relations of production had to be developed to govern daily life between poor blacks, poor whites, and wealthy landowning whites in the agricultural and urbanizing South.

As wage earners with the right to sell their labor wherever they wished, freedpersons competed in labor markets near and far. It is important to recognize that in the early years after Emancipation, freedpersons in many cases enjoyed a distinct skills advantage over poor whites. Indeed, this economic fact tends to be forgotten for its role as a rationale for black disempowerment and discrimination. Black men and women fought in various ways—often though not always alone—to claim, secure and protect rights of ownership of their means of production (labor, land, and capital). Enslavement meant that they possessed the skills to reproduce an agricultural economy. The 13th Amendment

meant that all they lacked was their own land on which to work. *The primary demand of freedpersons after Emancipation was a demand for their own land. Justice for them was fundamentally economic.* They understood that citizenship in capitalist (and industrializing) America began and ended with economic independence: During enslavement they acquired skills; the first goal of freedom was to use those skills in the marketplace to achieve more robust property rights and eventually establish autonomy and organize independent production for subsistence.⁶

A standard interpretation by economists and historians suggests that the *economic value* to agricultural producers of skilled and semi-skilled black labor was so high that, in the immediate years after the Civil War, black workers were in greater demand than non-landowning (and poor) whites. Elite white landowners in the South, after regaining land ownership rights they lost during the Civil War, turned their attention to creating a system to manage black and white wage earners. When emancipated black workers left plantations as refugees whose fate lay in the hands of the Freedmen’s Bureau, they took with them virtually all the skilled and semi-skilled labor available to restart the entire economic engine of the defeated South. The production of cotton, sugar, rice, tobacco, and other farm goods—all vital sources of revenue needed to build the New South—depended on *new* social relations of production governing the economic interaction between black laborers, white laborers, and white landowners. All they asked for in return was honest pay for honest work so that eventually they could own and work their own land.

In her recent book, *Known for My Work: African American Ethics from Slavery to Freedom*, Lynda Morgan argues convincingly against this conventional narrative. Her reconsideration of the ethos of free black labor offers a cultural context for thinking about quilt making and other forms of labor in Gee’s Bend. For black men and women, the freedom of Emancipation meant they could build families, communities, careers and, eventually a racial democracy based on the profound link between work and morality. Freedom was a reality to be made, not simply a right to be exercised. Black workers across the spectrum were so deeply committed to building a just society that they wished principally to be “known for their work.” The significance of this idea cannot be overstated.

However, from the standpoint of 2017, we know that Jim Crow triumphed. We know that it took less than a century for the economic advantages of freedpersons to disappear. White racial terrorism; social theft; racially restrictive covenants and the formation of ghettos; black disfranchisement; and limited or no access to education, well-paying jobs, craft apprenticeships, and health care—all conspired to turn black promise and potential into significant social and economic disadvantage.

But it wasn’t always this way, nor is our past—popularly characterized in the false notion that blacks were unprepared for freedom—the only possible outcome. Quite the contrary, black skilled and semi-skilled wage earners protected the worth of their human capital (a means to economic autonomy) by changing jobs, moving west or north or to an urban region. They continued to cultivate their crafts as best they could, creating community economies behind the racial veil. Morgan

reminds us that the “nucleus” of enslavement and white supremacy was economic: “theft of labor.”⁷ Then and since, black workers wished to be known for, by, and through their work. The historical record makes a convincing case that in the aftermath of the Civil War, political and economic elites identified the primary challenge in developing a new system of labor control as, in Gerald David Jaynes’s words, devising “a workable alternative that could utilize black and white labor in a reasonably efficient manner and preserve white supremacy, especially for disadvantaged whites.”⁸ The system of race-based class rule known as Jim Crow fulfilled the promise of “black dispossession.”



I want to end this essay with a few questions about Gee’s Bend quilt making in light of the historical and cultural context outlined above, in which the reproduction of black labor and black craft—despite relentless assault—was the basic expression of freedom. In other words, besides dispossession by Jim Crow capitalism and patriarchy, what else was happening in the economic life of denizens of places like Gee’s Bend? To answer this question I want to encourage that we look beneath market transactions such as the buying and selling and exhibiting of their quilts. In their 2002 article, “Theorizing the Third Sphere”: A Critique of the Persistence of the “Economistic Fallacy,” Fikret Adaman and Yahya Madra describe an economistic fallacy as “the practice of analyzing all economic systems through a theoretical gaze that presumes that the horizons of the economy are fully comprehended by a map that includes only market exchange and the calculative behavior couplet.”⁹ Extending Karl Polanyi’s work, they argue against this fallacy of economism by suggesting that in many communities there are *vital multiple and complex economic activities that are neither market- nor state-based*, but are located instead in a “third sphere.” Individual or institutional activities in this “third sphere” may be “associative, egalitarian, or solidaristic.” Forms of economic integration—what links individuals or institutions to each other—that we might observe in the third sphere could be described as barter, gift, reciprocity, sharing, or redistribution. Third-sphere social relations are maintained and reproduced over time by the fact that subjects are “situated symmetrically with respect to one another in a symbolic network.”¹⁰ The tendency of third sphere social relations to proliferate can be the result of geographic isolation, technology (and capital) gaps, or cultural custom such as caste. Third-sphere social relations may, as a result of a failure of economic integration, expand to incorporate more and more production and consumption in the life of the isolated community.¹¹ What was intended to be a dead-end outpost of Jim Crow capitalism and patriarchy becomes, through resistance and resilience, the site of meaningful community-based economic activity. Alternative economic forms and practices emerge in the detritus of capitalism’s places of desperation.

Words make worlds. The quilts and quilt-making tradition of Gee’s Bend can be thought of in terms of community economic activity. Gee’s Bend isn’t organized merely through a symbolic network of poor black families, most of whom are descended from slaves who lived and worked on the same few plantations. The network of quilt making in Gee’s Bend is organized as a vestige of the South’s racially segregated Jim Crow sharecropping system (black dispossession after Emancipation). Gee’s

Bend, then, must be analyzed not only as an outpost that hegemonic capitalism left behind, but more positively, as a place with its own distinct, highly local and largely independent noncapitalist economy. That economy is both an effect of Jim Crow economic, political and social constraints, and a set of economic arrangements that constitute an alternative community economy whose practices are not entirely reducible to the Jim Crow system. Gee’s Bend is a site where we find abundant evidence of the impoverishment of Jim Crow capitalism, but it is also a noncapitalocentric space where third sphere activities predominate, providing resistance and alternatives to racist capitalism. I believe that future study of the quilts and quilt makers of Gee’s Bend has to focus on third sphere economic activity, and abandon the deficit model of capitalocentric economic analysis.

As tenant farmers in the former slave South, the quilt makers of Gee’s Bend are descendants of the post-Emancipation project of ‘autonomy through labor’ described above. The value of their quilts and quilt-making expertise is integrally linked to their dreams of autonomy. They cannot be appreciated on individual terms, or as singular artists’ creativity. I have argued that using the apparatus of the conventional production and exchange is like imposing capitalocentric economic descriptors on a noncapitalist, quasi-communal social world. Indeed, the quilts themselves, as described in oral histories collected by Arnett, are partly communal goods.

To ignore the communal element in the quilts produces an imprecise—and ultimately exploitive—understanding of their value. A correct contextualization of *place* and its belongings suggests that the women of Gee’s Bend are the children and grandchildren of freedpersons who wished to be “known for their work.”¹² Skilled and semi-skilled labor expended in the reproduction of household and community life is the key economic activity used to establish and defend the meaning of freedom after enslavement. That was true both in the 1860s and in the 1960s for the women of Gee’s Bend. Their human capital was, if not a direct legacy of fully appropriated labor under enslavement, a collectively shared skill used to sustain family and community life in the era of tenant farming and sharecropping. Quilt making became a survival skill that was, simultaneously, a political activity with the potential to transform a marginal, underresourced community into an expression of caring, beauty, and human worth. In other words, because of the economic and social isolation of Jim Crow racial segregation, quilt making was one process among many others (economic and noneconomic) through which women constituted “non-capitalocentric” subjectivities.¹³

The debate between Anna Chave (2008) and Bernard Herman (2009) in the *Journal of Modern Craft* offers an illustrative case study of problems that arise when place is ignored for the sake of capitalocentric analysis.¹⁴ Both authors are deeply committed to and desirous of fairness and equity to both the quilt makers of Gee’s Bend and to art collectors William, Paul, and Matt Arnett, who have promoted the quilts via the Tinwood Alliance, a nonprofit corporation. Chave argues that fairer compensation to the quilt makers is warranted when the quilts are seen as craft worthy of a fair wage, and not as African American folk art suitable for high-end art markets. Herman, by contrast, uses interviews with quilt makers themselves to defend the conclusion that no one “feels” or ever “suggests they were”

exploited by Arnett family members or the Tinwood Alliance, and therefore the price paid by Arnett at the original point of sale is a fair price despite the fact that the value of the quilts has increased in value by over 70-fold.¹⁵ The error in both arguments, I believe, is their acceptance of a capitalist “map” for understanding the terms of fairness and ownership between litigating parties. The quilts, in this mapping, are capitalist goods whose value is “in exchange.” The quilt makers are wage earners who, not realizing the “hidden” value of the quilts, freely and knowingly sold them at a price they deemed fair exchange for their labor and materials. The growth in value of the quilts after Arnett’s marketing of them (and Gee’s Bend) as African American vernacular art products, is in the nature of a capitalist asset (in this case, a work of art). According to Herman, markets worked well, “efficiently.”

As products of a noncapitalist community economy, however, the quilts’ value can’t be quantified in this way. Instead, the quilts embody the women’s autonomy, labor, and skill in the service of strengthening and transforming their community. They are communal goods whose value should not be measured by their auction prices, but their role in the reproduction—and eventual transformation of—an impoverished community.

It has been an honor and a challenge to think about quilts and quilt making in the life and work of Mary Lee Bendolph. Her work is constitutive of community economics. Her life is of a piece with those who, since Emancipation, have worked to fulfill a dream of self-determination, autonomy, and creative transformation of the world around her, the dream of freedom.

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Notes

1. J. K. Gibson-Graham examines the nature of a community economy in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 79-99 and “Building Community Economies: Women and the Politics of Place” in Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar, *Women and the Politics of Place* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005), 134-42. Gibson-Graham readily concedes that there is no blueprint for a community economy. It’s too early for that. Rather, they defend the idea of a community economy—typically located in the margins of capitalist economic centers—as regulated by the convergence of (1) different kinds of transactions, including gift and barter, (2) different kinds of labor and labor compensation, and (3) different kinds of enterprise or different ways of organizing production. The irreducibility of these activities to individual labor, talent, effort, etc. is what necessitates the “communal” aspect in commodities. Community economies often form in the margins of spaces where capitalism is hegemonic, and are frequently forms of survival and self-reproduction that otherwise would not occur. Case studies of various community economy collectives can be found at www.communityeconomies.org, a site maintained by the Community Economy Research Network (CERN) and the Community Economies Collective (CEC).
2. Anna C. Chave, recounts and critiques the narrative popularized in numerous exhibition catalogs and press articles whereby William Arnett “discovered” the Gee’s Bend quilts and quilters in “Dis/cover/ing the Quilts of Gee’s Bend, Alabama” in *Journal of Modern Craft* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), 1, no. 2 (July 2008): 221-54.
3. Bernard Herman summarizes some of the issues that were litigated in “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend: How Great Art Gets Lost,” *Journal of Modern Craft* 2, no. 1 (March): 9-16.
4. Indeed, “fair trade” pricing has emerged as one solution to the often super-exploitation that occurs when vernacular products travel within global markets.
5. Even before Emancipation, enslaved women were forced to work as quilt makers and seamstresses. Many forged their own distinct modes of working after Emancipation but struggled in an economy that perpetuated oppressive (racist and sexist) economic relations. For an exploration of slave quilts in the antebellum period, see Gladys-Marie Fry, *Stitched from the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
6. For examples, see Lynda J. Morgan, *Known for My Work: African American Ethics from Slavery to Freedom* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2016); Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862–1882* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986);

Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America’s Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1992); and W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1935). Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1988), provides the most thorough and comprehensive history of the entire era of Reconstruction.

7. Lynda J. Morgan, *Known for My Work: African American Ethics from Slavery to Freedom* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2016), 28
8. Gerald David Jaynes, *Branches without Roots: Genesis of the Black Working Class in the American South, 1862–1882* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986), 261.
9. Fikret Adaman and Yahya M. Madra, “Theorizing the Third Sphere”: A Critique of the Persistence of the ‘Economistic Fallacy.’” *Journal of Economic Issues*, 36, no. 4 (December 2002): 1046.
10. Ibid., 1050.
11. Ibid., 1045-1078.
12. Lynda J. Morgan, *Known for My Work: African American Ethics from Slavery to Freedom* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2016).
13. Economic life in Gee’s Bend has changed somewhat since the 1970s. Sharecropping has given way to agribusiness. Many own their own homes, and children who migrated to Atlanta, Connecticut, and elsewhere return each year, creating a more blended economy and community. This has threatened the survival of the craft of quilt making in Gee’s Bend. Meanwhile, in Gee’s Bend, as in many of places around the U.S., gentrification is the new frontline of struggle against subordination and marginalization.
14. Anna C. Chave, “Dis/cover/ing the Quilts of Gee’s Bend, Alabama,” and Bernard Herman in “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend: How Great Art Gets Lost.” *Journal of Modern Craft* 2, no. 1 (March): 9-16.
15. The quilts Arnett family members collected are dispersed. Some were donated to museums, or to the Tinwood Alliance or Souls Grown Deep Foundation. How many quilts remain in Arnett family personal collections is unclear. As for the change in prices, Arnett bought a number of the quilts for an agreed-upon price of \$275. Sheila Dewan indicates that some of the quilts collected by Arnett and exhibited in Houston and New York have sold for as much as \$20,000 in “Handmade Alabama Quilts Find Fame and Controversy,” in the *New York Times*, July 29, 2007. Accessed online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/us/29quilt.html?mcubz=0>

See also: Vanessa Kraemer Sohan, “‘But a quilt is more’: Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee’s Bend Quilts,” *College English*, 77, No. 4 (March 2015): 294-316.

Piecing Artistry: Mary Lee Bendolph, Toni Morrison, and Black Women’s Circular Aesthetic Visions

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From a reservoir of deep texture, tonalities, and geometric structures a Toni Morrison novel emerges. Like the Gee’s Bend quilt makers, Morrison’s works pull from the tactile artistic environment of black America, the sights and sounds, the improvisatory arc of creation. Morrison’s novels stitch together black lives, loves, and familial endeavors. Mary Lee Bendolph’s quilt-making practices suture geometric symmetry and abstractions of form in order to create an aesthetic tributary that flows in many different directions.

Construction (detail), 2003
Full image: page 66



In the opening of Morrison’s third novel, *Song of Solomon*, a comparison is made between two women in the middle of a gathering crowd. One, Ruth Foster Dead, the daughter of the town’s doctor, is well off financially, and her clothes reflect this. The other, Pilate Dead, Ruth’s sister-in-law and her opposite, is “a singing woman” the narration positions as encased in this sartorial misalignment. “The singing woman wore a knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead,” Morrison writes. “She had wrapped herself up in an old quilt instead of a winter coat,” and from the back of a gathered crowd had come to watch a man fly from the top of a building, on his “own wings” as the quilt-coat woman “sang in a powerful contralto.”¹ Her performance is one of sated force and presence. It says, “Follow me, for I know where I am going.” And how else is one to read a woman who wears a quilt in the place of a winter coat, a hand-sewn cloak instead of the “proper” winter apparel? Pilate, the “singing woman,” emerges in the uniqueness of this expression of artistry and self-creation.

I wonder, then, if we might read Mary Lee Bendolph’s quilting practice along the same refrain, as an act of artistic recovery, creation, layering, and musicality. Beyond geometric shapes, tones, and textures, Bendolph’s quilts capture light and movement in a way that can easily be described as painterly (I’m thinking here of Kerry James Marshall’s paintings and Faith Ringgold’s “story quilts”) and melodic. More than this, Bendolph’s quilts articulate an improvisatory imperative that is inherent also in Morrison’s writing, a doubling echo of sight and sound, blending those tones and textures into a surprisingly cohesive unit. This “cohesive unit” is not legible as such unless the reader/viewer participates in the practice of deep looking. But deep looking is the mandate, and, if adhered to, the rewards are plentiful.

Toni Morrison deploys quilts in her novels with striking, yet subtle repetition. When Claudia MacTeer is feeling ill at the opening of Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she feels guilty and sad for being sick. “A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest,” Claudia remembers. “I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do—promptly.”² Claudia spends the next few hours in a fog of care, as her sister Frieda sings to her and her mother covers her skin with salve. She recalls, “in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.”³ Claudia’s mother’s intention is to get her daughter’s body out of its illness and into a space of health using her motherly determination and her hands. The quilts here are layered and stacked around Claudia’s small body, and she is wrapped tightly within their warmth.

In the African American quilting tradition, the figurative enactment of “hands” that tell stories, present art, and also “do not want you to die” happens with artistic material productions that “tell” through touch and sight. The combination of the practical and the artistic is tethered here, in acts of expression that have not always been legible beyond a narrow framework of material creators and their known recipients. This enclosure, before it is altered by the expansive reach of cultural productions, has allowed for a very particular aesthetic to survive and evolve. Gee’s Bend quilts look like no

others, for they come from a cultural tradition (African American quilting) shaped, in part, by the unique geography of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, that explains their singular nature.



Farmhouse, 2003
See also: page 63

Maude Southwell Wahlman’s book, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* marks a decidedly West-African-inspired extension that privileges quilts composed of strips of long fabric over the more traditional squares found in mainstream American quilts. “The use of strips is a chief construction technique, a dominant design element, and a symbolic form in West African, Caribbean, and African-American textiles.”⁴ In this way, the uniqueness of quilts from Gee’s Bend also performs a hybrid visual experience, and this uniqueness gives them a temporality that cannot be strictly demarcated. Bendolph’s *Farmhouse*, for instance, resembles the geometric symmetry of modernist painting, the tactile specificity of African American art practices, and the musicality of jazz improvisation.

Morrison’s literary characters, similarly, are unique configurations of cultural attachment, method, movement, and vigilant individualism. In *Sula*, Morrison’s second novel, young Nel Wright returns from a visit to New Orleans with her mother and has an evening epiphany of self-possession. “I’m me,” she says to herself in the mirror. “I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.” Morrison goes on to write, “Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear... ‘Me’, she murmured. And then, *sinking deeper into the quilts*, ‘I want... I want to be... wonderful’ [emphasis mine].”⁵ A source of confirmation or comfort, beauty or surrender, quilts occupy a space of ever-present importance for Morrison and are the material representation of a circular aesthetic vision. They often show up at moments of intense need for the characters in Morrison’s works, and it is there that these tactile instruments of joy and release offer the reader a way to create a circulatory extension of desire that can be carried from one place to another.

Rounding out this circular aesthetic vision, Mary Lee Bendolph’s quilts bring a textured symmetry to tactile fruition, blending colors and shapes that expand the narrative of black women’s creative production, temporality, and the vibrancy of the colors of the every day. Bendolph uses only existing fabrics to make her splendid quilted art productions, and this requires the precision necessary to draw out the lines and angles she imagines must emerge organically from the archive of textures

and fabrics already present in her home. In Morrison’s fifth novel, *Beloved*, Baby Suggs takes on the slow-paced task of stitching together a quilt. She wants to stay home and think about colors “that don’t hurt anybody” after her time as an enslaved woman on a Kentucky plantation and the violent aftermath of that enslavement. Her daughter-in-law, Sethe, visits the room where Baby Suggs lived for a time and lay dying for longer. Morrison writes:

*Kneeling in the keeping room where she usually went to talk-think it was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for color. There wasn’t any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-colored, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue, serge, black, brown, and gray wool—the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild—like life in the raw.*⁶

What Baby Suggs seeks in her final years are failed pursuits, for her quilt contains, at its end, only “two patches of orange” that “looked wild” against the drab colors located on the rest of the piece-made quilt. And as she has experienced “life in the raw,” with its unyielding pursuit of her life and labors (all of her children and most of her bodily integrity is given over to her time as an enslaved woman on a plantation), the slow making of her quilt is the only release she can claim, and this is only a temporary reprieve from near-totalizing weariness. In fact, in that keeping room where Baby Suggs sews and slowly dies, colors are her main source of something akin to joy.

Piecework, as a delicate artistic organizing motif, positions the distinctive mark of the individual quilter at the center of an art-making process that has come to define quilts from Gee’s Bend. Bendolph, an accomplished participant in the quilting circle, is one of the more well-known members of the quilting community. Beyond the sustained sophisticated artistry of her decades-long quilt-making career, there is the distinctiveness of her textile creations. This distinctiveness, the arc of Bendolph’s lines and shapes, is part of a pattern of black women’s material practices, which are imbued with the improvisatory cadence of geometric alignments. Viewing the quilts is like entering the overview of a glorious maze, where the goal is to turn each parallel/corner to discover the legible and illegible visual mechanisms embedded in each color, stitch, repetition, and return. Bendolph’s quilts riff off previous textures and textiles. They merge touch with sight while leaving room for the possibility of auditory accompaniment. Mary Lee Bendolph sings while she quilts, something she learned from her mother and something she shares with other quilt makers. The movement suggested by the structure of the quilts seems to be in conversation with the musicality of the makers and the ordering of the artistic world they have created.

In *Sula*, Morrison seems to imagine the figurative world of Mary Lee Bendolph when she describes Eva Peace’s self-designed domicile. We are told:

“Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding things: more stairways—there were three sets to the second floor—more rooms, doors, and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house; others that you could get to only by going through somebody’s bedroom. The creator and sovereign of this enormous house with the four sickle-pear trees in the front yard and the single elm in the backyard was Eva Peace, who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders.”⁷

Along with the biblical reference (John 14:2 “In my father’s house, there are many rooms”), it is obvious that contemplation and creativity come together for Eva Peace in the precise construction of a home she built for herself and her immediate family members. In the five years it takes her to piece together her master work, Eva brings together the earthly and the spiritual, the permanent with the ephemeral. The logic, order, and aesthetic vision of Eva’s home resembles that of Bendolph’s quilts, where colors burst through slits of space, surprising the eye and challenging expectation. To rupture these expectations is to utilize improvisation as the production of an aesthetic form of resistance and of survival—to say to the world, “This is how to orient your eye. Follow me.” Quilts assembled for a unique visual experience, one that is both three-dimensional and abstract, provide a symbiosis of perspectives for viewers, should they follow the map laid out for them.

Toni Morrison and Mary Lee Bendolph create works of intense circular aestheticism, heavily layered and culturally contingent. In the doubling echo of their connected artistic investments, they employ sight, sound, tone, and texture to bring their visions to fruition. To recognize the importance of quilt making is to broaden the understanding of the creativity black women produce as the interstices of artistic enclosures. It is to listen with the eyes and see with the ears. And in this practice of deep looking and listening, black women’s circular aesthetic visions thrive.

Kimberly Juanita Brown’s research engages the site of the visual as a way to negotiate the parameters of race, gender, and belonging. Her book, *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Duke University Press, 2015) examines slavery’s profound ocular construction, the presence and absence of seeing in relation to the plantation space and the women represented there.

Notes

1. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 5-6.

2. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 11.

3. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 12.

4. Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993), 25.
5. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 18-19.

6. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 46.

7. Toni Morrison, *Sula*, 30.

Quilts and Prints



Something Just For You, 1965, mixed fabrics, including cotton, wool, and denim, 91 x 72 inches



Collaboration with Ruth P. Mosley (1928–2006), *Bricklayer*, late 1970s/early 1980s, mixed fabrics, including corduroy, cotton, wool, polyester, and nylon, 89 x 82 inches



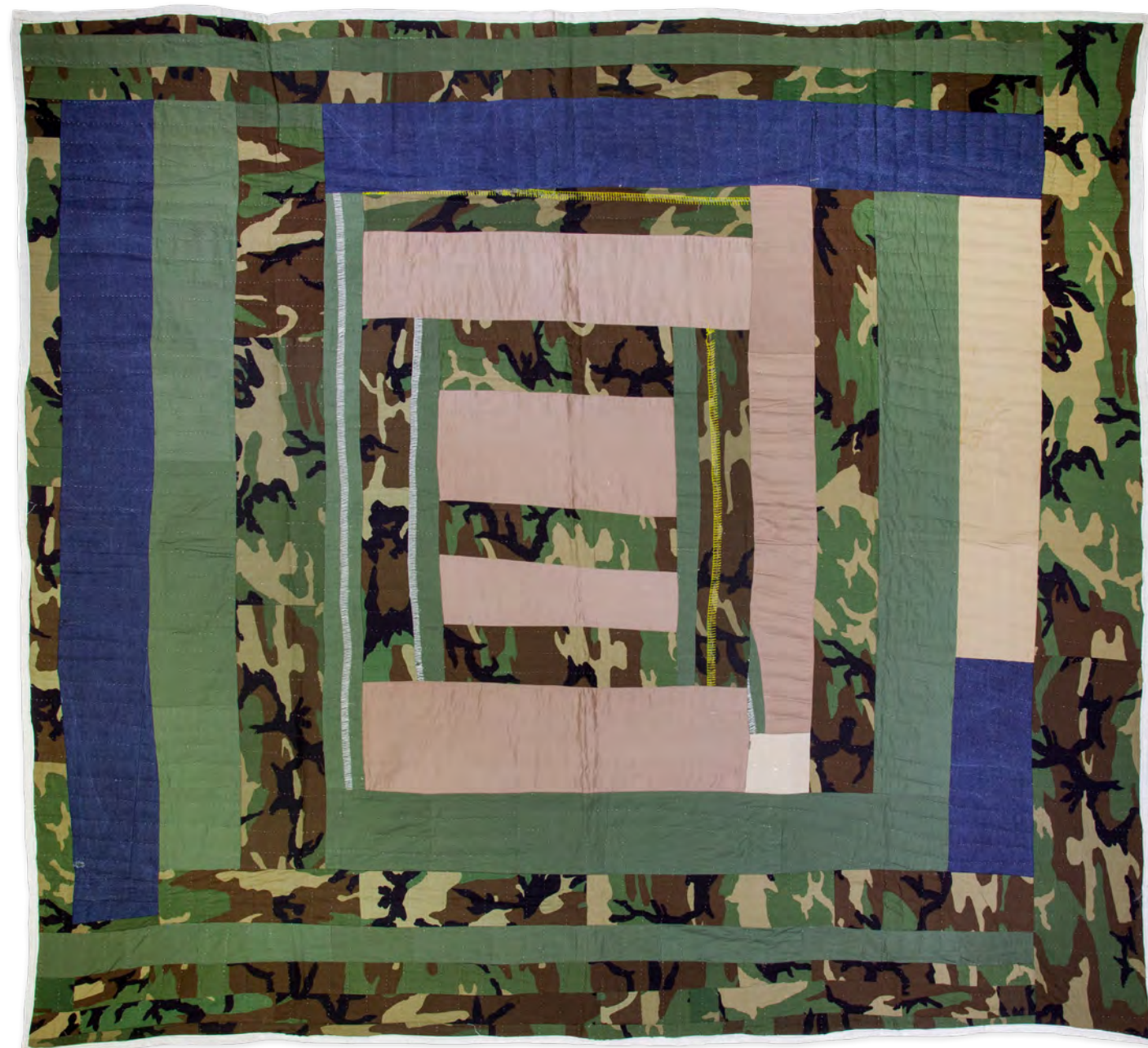
Housetop Variation, 1980, mixed fabrics, including cotton, polyester taffeta, and corduroy, 83 x 72 inches



Dashiki, 2003, cotton, 97 x 90 inches



Husband Suit Clothes (Housetop Variation), 1990, mixed fabrics, including corduroy, cotton, denim, velveteen, and synthetic brocade, 76 x 80 inches



Army Strong, 2002, cotton, denim and camouflage (from the Selma Apparel Corporation), 78 x 85 inches



Ghost Pockets, 2003, mixed fabrics including denim, cotton, polyester, and synthetic wool, 85 x 72 inches



Aolar, 2005, cotton, 71 x 83 inches



Honor Aunt (Louella) Carson Pettway, 2005, cotton and polyester, 80 x 82 inches



Farmhouse, 2003, corduroy and cotton, 88 x 80 inches



Spool of Thread (H-Quilt), 2003, corduroy and cotton, 84 x 70 inches



Water Jug, 2006, cotton, 73 x 75 inches



Construction, 2003, cotton and polyester satin, 83 x 83 inches



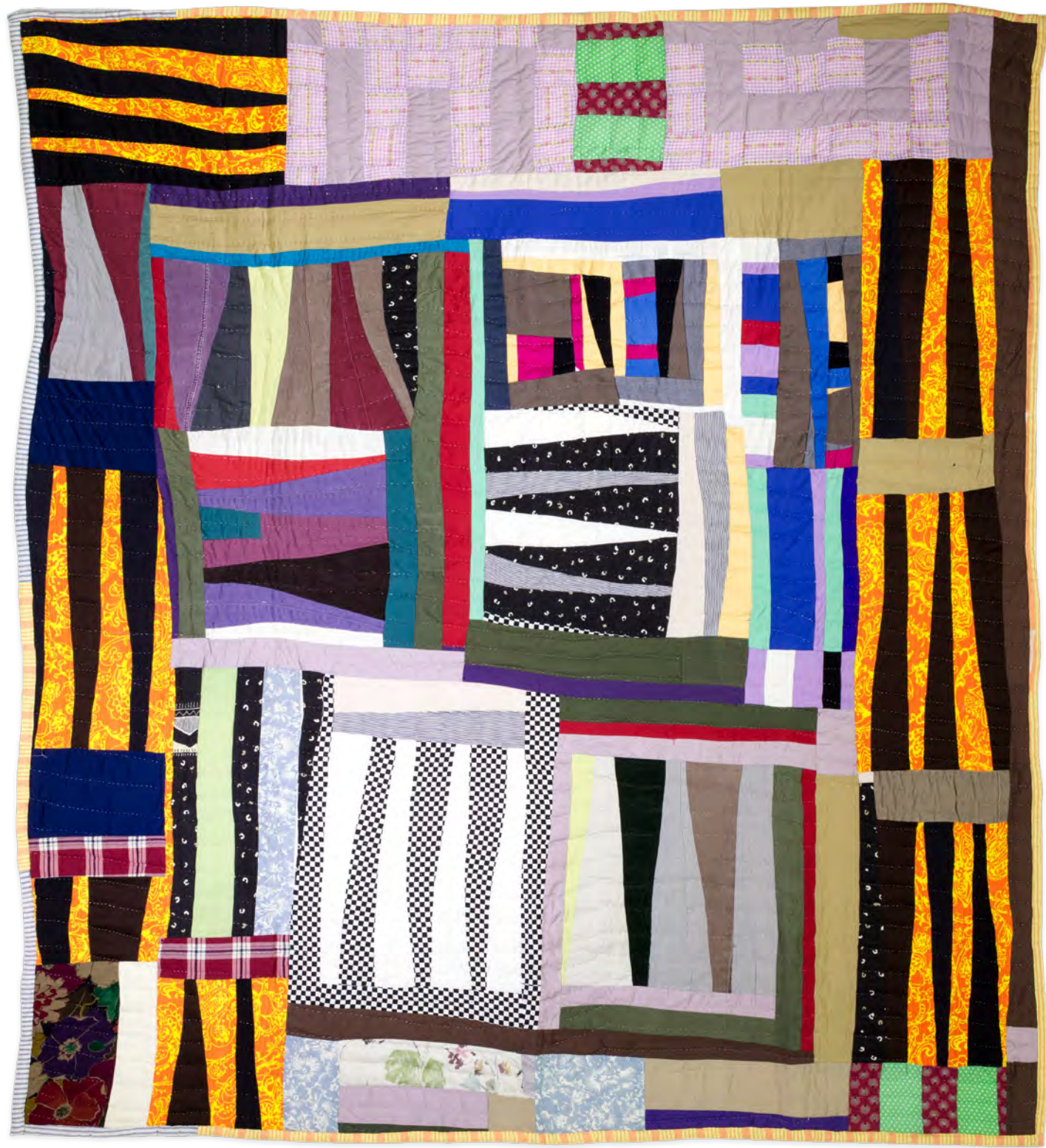
Cap Barbell Dumbbell, 2003, cotton, 78 x 72 inches



Fleet, early 2000s, cotton and denim, 90 x 78 inches



Arrow, 2005, mixed fabrics, including cotton and synthetic brocade, 84 x 79 inches



Strip Quilt, 2006, mixed fabrics, including polyester, corduroy, and cotton blend, 82 x 75 inches



Grandpa Stripes, 2010, mixed fabrics, including cotton, denim, polyester satin, synthetic brocade, 92 x 94 inches



Mama's Song, 2005, color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint, 41 1/8 x 32 1/8 inches



To Honor Mr. Dial, 2005, color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint, 55 in x 35 1/16 inches



Get Ready, 2006, color softground etching with aquatint, 36 x 43 inches



Passing By, 2006, color softground etching with aquatint, spitbite aquatint, and chine collé, 39 x 43 inches



Put Together, 2014, color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint, 52 x 41 inches



Patch, 2014, color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint, 23 x 53 ½ inches



Fields, 2014, color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint, 30 ¾ x 29 ½ inches

Exhibition Checklist

QUILTS

Unless otherwise noted, all quilts are lent by Rubin Bendolph Jr. in honor of Mary Lee Bendolph

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| 1. Aolar Mosley <i>Pump Handle Spin Top (Log Cabin Variation)</i> , 1954 Cotton 89 x 75 inches | 2. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Something Just For You</i> , 1965 Mixed fabrics, including cotton, wool, and denim 91 x 72 inches | 3. Mary Lee Bendolph and Ruth P. Mosley (1928-2006) <i>Bricklayer</i> , late 1970s/early 1980s Mixed fabrics, including corduroy, cotton, wool, polyester, and nylon 89 x 82 inches | 4. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Housetop Variation</i> , 1980 Mixed fabrics, including cotton, polyester taffeta, and corduroy 83 x 72 inches | 5. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Husband Suit Clothes (Housetop Variation)</i> , 1990 Mixed fabrics, including corduroy, cotton, denim, velveteen, and synthetic brocade 80 x 76 inches | 6. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Army Strong</i> , 2002 Cotton, denim and camouflage (from the Selma Apparel Corporation) 78 x 85 inches | 7. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Ghost Pockets</i> , 2003 Mixed fabrics including denim, cotton, polyester, and synthetic wool 85 x 72 inches Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Purchase with the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund 2017.16 | 8. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Farmhouse</i> , 2003 Corduroy and cotton 88 x 80 inches | 9. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Spool of Thread (H-Quilt)</i> , 2003 Corduroy and cotton 84 x 70 inches | 10. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Construction</i> , 2003 Cotton and polyester satin 83 x 83 inches | 11. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Cap Barbell Dumbbell</i> , 2003 Cotton 78 x 72 inches | 12. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Fleet</i> , early 2000s Cotton and denim 90 x 78 inches | 13. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Dashiki</i> , 2003 Cotton 90 x 97 inches | 14. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Arrow</i> , 2005 Mixed fabrics, including cotton and synthetic brocade 84 x 79 inches | 15. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Aolar</i> , 2005 Cotton 71 x 83 inches | 16. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Honor Aunt (Louella) Carson Pettway</i> , 2005 Cotton and polyester 82 x 80 inches | 17. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Water Jug</i> , 2006 Cotton 73 x 75 inches | 18. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Strip Quilt</i> , 2006 Mixed fabrics, including polyester, corduroy, and cotton blend 82 x 75 inches | 19. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Grandpa Stripes</i> , 2010 Mixed fabrics, including cotton, denim, polyester satin, synthetic brocade 92 x 94 inches | 20. Essie B. Pettway <i>Sallie Gal</i> , 2012 Mixed fabrics, including cotton, corduroy, and denim 89 x 78 inches Lent by Essie B. Pettway, courtesy of Rubin Bendolph Jr. | 21. Essie B. Pettway <i>In Seam and Outer Seam</i> , 2012 Mixed fabrics, including cotton, camouflage, and denim 88 x 86 inches Lent by Essie B. Pettway, courtesy of Rubin Bendolph Jr. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | 3. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Get Ready</i> , 2006 Color softground etching with aquatint 36 x 43 inches Lent by Paulson Fontaine Press | | | | | | | 4. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Passing By</i> , 2006 Color softground etching with aquatint, spitbite aquatint, and chine collé 39 x 43 inches Lent by Paulson Fontaine Press | | | | | | | 5. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Put Together</i> , 2014 Color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint 52 x 41 inches Lent by Paulson Fontaine Press | | | | | | | 6. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Patch</i> , 2014 Color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint 23 x 53 ½ inches Lent by Paulson Fontaine Press | | | | | | | 7. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Fields</i> , 2014 Color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint 30 ¾ x 29 ½ inches Lent by Paulson Fontaine Press |

PRINTS

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| 1. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>Mama's Song</i> , 2005 Color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint 41 ⅛ x 32 ⅞ inches Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Gift of Renee Conforte McKee (Class of 1962) 2012.52.1 | 2. Mary Lee Bendolph <i>To Honor Mr. Dial</i> , 2005 Color softground etching with aquatint and spitbite aquatint 55 x 35 15/16 inches Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Gift of Renee Conforte McKee (Class of 1962) 2012.52.2 |
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This catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph* at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts, January 23–May 27, 2018 and the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, September 6–October 31, 2018.

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Cover:
Husband Suit Clothes (Housetop Variation), (detail), 1990
Full image: page 58

Inside front and back cover:
Construction (detail), 2003
Full image: page 66

Frontispiece:
Arthur Rothstein, *Sewing a Quilt, Gee’s Bend, Alabama*, April 1937 negative, gelatin silver print photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

