

About the artists and art featured in the exhibition, *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond*

Written by Stephanie Burak

Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond explores a dialogue of aesthetic influence among four Alabama artists, focusing on the creative vision of master Gee's Bend quiltmaker Mary Lee Bendolph. She—along with numerous other Gee's Bend quiltmakers, including many of her relatives—participates in a tradition of African American quilting that stretches back into the nineteenth century. The genre of black quilting is likewise nested within a broader set of vernacular cultural practices that involve rituals of recycling and reuse, ancestor veneration, and the maintenance of philosophical and religious beliefs, all embodied in arts ranging from painting and sculpture to utilitarian crafts and the built landscape. Bendolph's aesthetic, a mix of community inheritances and her irreducible personal flair, has recently encountered a new set of influences from her contacts and friendships with a number of other African American artists working in different genres. The exhibition introduces a new chapter in the history of Gee's Bend quilts, personified by this postmodern quiltmaker, who has become aware of her place within overlapping, dynamic, and syncretistic traditions.

Like most people in Gee's Bend, Alabama, Mary Lee Bendolph descends from slaves who labored on the local cotton plantations. Following the Civil War and Emancipation, many ancestors of current-day Gee's Benders

stayed on the land and became tenant farmers. The name "Gee's Bend" both expresses the geographical feature that defines this community—a hairpin curve in the Alabama River that envelops a spit of Wilcox County—and connotes the denial of personal identity that was at the heart of African American bondage: Joseph Gee was the first white settler and the founder of the cotton plantation in the "bend" that bears his name. Later, the plantation became the property of Mark Pettway, who superimposed his name on Gee's slaves and brought in one hundred or so of his own. Today, Pettway remains by far the most common surname in Gee's Bend.



Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935). *Blocks-and-strips*. 2002. Cotton, wool, and corduroy. 98 X 86 in.

Names weren't the only identifiers taken from enslaved ancestors: their languages, religions, possessions, and anything else that would give a people spiritual strength, hope, and cultural cohesion were prohibited. Plantation slaves far outnumbered their white counterparts, but without these identifiers to remind them of who they were and where they came from, they were considered more vulnerable to white hegemony. A primary means these enslaved people developed to retain and pass down personal and communal identity was through finding expressive opportunities in acts of necessity.

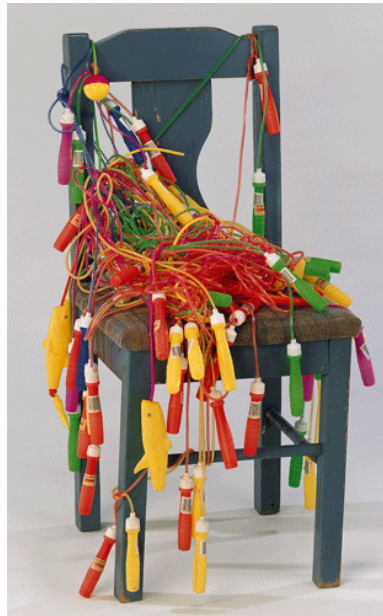
African slaves and their descendants were forced to adopt Christianity as their religion, which is why the songs they sang in the fields referenced the Bible. However, through their subversive choice of stories like Moses' freeing of the Hebrew slaves, they openly yet indirectly communicated their sorrows and hopes, and were able to express some sense of identity.

This was a form of spiritual rebellion that had to remain in disguise; exposing the truth was tantamount to a death sentence: even after the Civil Rights movement a black person in the South who expressed ideas with political overtones or critical social commentary was a target for racially motivated hate crimes. This was true of all perceivable expression, including art.

Thornton Dial, from Birmingham, artist and close friend of Mary Lee's, used to bury the art that he made for fear that white people might see it. Now he is seen as one of the greatest artists of this African American tradition. His paintings (which are really painted, multi-media high-reliefs) and sculptures, which have been shown in major national museums, incorporate objects he found and salvaged for the purpose of making art. Lonnie B. Holley, also an artist and friend of the Gee's Bend quilters, creates sophisticated and intellectual art made of abandoned objects and materials. The work of both artists are highly communicative, carefully designed and calculated assemblages that have deep meaning while utilizing artistic vocabularies not easily recognized or understood by people from outside the artists' cultural group. The two men are often labeled "outsider artists"—meaning that their art is made in a social, historical, and cultural vacuum—but are actually part of an artistic legacy that has survived for centuries in forms such as "yard shows," root sculptures, assemblages,

and, of course, quiltmaking. Since African American vernacular art can be as humble as a bottle hanging from a tree branch, or as quietly monumental as tree branches leaned against the trunk, to many onlookers these assemblages are cryptic, at best. To many other observers, they are unrecognizable as significant aesthetic expression. Invisibility or indirectness of meaning, which permeated the slave spirituals, lives on in the forms and techniques of many visual artists within the black community.

One becomes immersed in Gee's Bend's mixture of faith, music, and rituals of daily existence as one listens to Mary Lee Bendolph and her choir at Ye Shall Know the Truth Baptist Church thank Jesus for raising them out of hard times; as she and fellow quilters hum praises while quilting; or as Gee's Bend quilters sing with the spirit and vivacity of their enslaved ancestors at art exhibition openings and concerts performed around the country. The soulful energy of their ancestors' spirituals imbue these songs of praise. It is commonly known that African American song also led to the development of other forms of music with its first makeshift instruments being humble tools of labor: washtubs and broom handles—and eventually evolving into the pride of American music,



Lonnie Holley (b. 1950). *Early Beginner*. 1994. Chair and jump ropes. 34 1/2 X 20 X 21 in.



Thornton Dial (b. 1928). *Creation Story*. 2003. Clothing, carpet, steel, enamel, spray paint, and Splash Zone on canvas on wood. 67 X 91 X 5 in.

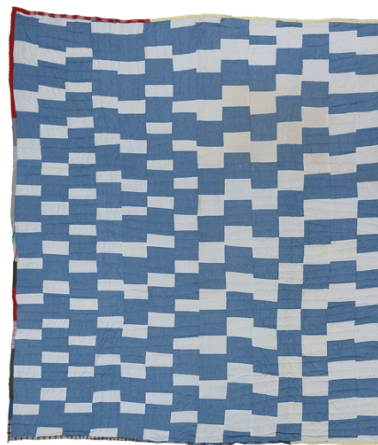
rock 'n' roll. However, the story of African American music has been widely told. The Gee's Benders' other fundamental means of expressing themselves and their heritage through acts of necessity was in their quilting. This story is still emerging into public awareness.

As virtually every elderly Gee's Bend quiltmaker says, they started quilting when they were between the ages of nine and twelve, and were taught by their mothers or other elder female relatives. Mary Lee Bendolph learned to quilt when she was twelve from her mother, Aolar Mosely; later Mary Lee taught her daughter, Essie B. Pettway, when Essie was approximately twelve. Now Essie is also an acclaimed artist, whose quilts are included in all the major Gee's Bend quilt exhibitions.

Quilting was an important skill for young women to learn in preparation for motherhood and in order to provide warmth and comfort to their families. Before the 1940s, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal relief program provided Gee's Bend with new "Roosevelt houses," many of the homes in Gee's Bend were constructed of wood planks and logs sealed with mud. The gaps in the walls and ceilings were covered by newspapers to keep the wind and rain out. Roosevelt's relief efforts also allowed Gee's Bend residents to purchase the land at low interest rates, which during the Great Depression and after was a godsend to a community deemed one of most impoverished in the United States. Despite this "leg up," things were by no means easy for the Benders: from the age of

twelve, Mary Lee and her peers would work in the fields, attending school only during agricultural off-seasons. Even Mary Lee's daughter-in-law Louisiana Pettway Bendolph recalls such a childhood, and she was not born until 1960. Electricity, central heating, indoor plumbing, television, washing machines, and other amenities common to most American households did not arrive until recent decades, and even today not everyone in the Bend has all of these amenities.

In Louisiana Pettway Bendolph's youth, only two locals owned cars, which explains why the sudden revocation of the ferry service to Camden, the county seat, during the Civil Rights movement was such a blow—the ferry had reduced to a handful of miles the eighty-mile roundtrip expedition overland to the voter registration site in Camden. Today, the quilters have cars and can access resources like Wal-Mart for new fabrics of their choice. However, some of the artists, including Mary Lee, only like to quilt with used clothes. As she states, "Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them." She finds beauty in recycling discarded things and wants that beauty to be seen and enjoyed by others. Her approach teaches the value of discarded things and how a resourceful person can surround herself with beauty by giving unique purpose to the possessions she already has.



Essie B. Pettway (b. 1956).
Two-sided quilt: Blocks [top] and "One patch" [bottom]. 1973. Cotton, polyester knit, denim. 88 X 80 in

By embracing and re-purposing cast-off things to create items of beauty, Mary Lee Bendolph, like other African

American artists, enacts a spiritual triumph over the hardships of life and the collective history of her community and culture. Her people, metaphorized in those discarded materials, have been cast off by the more dominant society, but find redeeming beauty and value in themselves and make those qualities visible to anyone willing to see them.

Mary Lee remembers enjoying watching her mother, her older sister Lillie Mae, and others quilt together. She has said in interviews that there is a little bit of her mother's quilts in each of hers.ⁱⁱ

Quilt tops are designed and pieced by individuals, whereas groups of women often come together to “quilt,” the process that marries together the quilt top, the backing, and the batting in the center (Batting could be excess cotton “lint” from the gin floor, old “raggly” blankets, or cloth scraps). While quiltmakers may pay homage to those they admire or even to specific quilts, a new quilt is always more of a response than a direct quotation; quilts reinterpret the styles and designs as a product of the maker’s personal aesthetic preferences. Whereas the European American quilting tradition often lauds the craftsperson that can faithfully duplicate a quilt pattern, African American quiltmakers often esteem the woman who diverges from the pattern or model in the most dynamic, original, and expressive way.

These aesthetic predilections are linked to those of recycling, asymmetry, syncopation, bold

geometric forms, abstract design, and divergence from perfect patterns. While these cannot be said to constitute a cultural aesthetic—African American experiences and expressive strategies are too diverse for that—they remain in wide practice, especially within the African American South, and are found within other forms such as assemblage sculpture and yard art environments. Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial have influenced, and are influenced by, Mary Lee Bendolph and the other Gee's Bend quiltmakers. Unlike the Gee's Bend quilters, who grew up in an all-black community where they

preserved and passed down traditions and philosophical approaches particular to African American artmaking, Dial and Holley began making art on their own, with no community support.

Mary Lee would spend her spring seasons going from house to house like a New York City gallery-hopper, looking at all her neighbors' quilts airing out on the clotheslines, gathering ideas for future quilts of her own, and singing the praises of quilts she admired. Dial, on the other hand, felt compelled to bury his art in his backyard for fear that it might invite violence from the white community. Holley actually suffered the loss of his art environment in 1997 when the Birmingham government declared imminent domain over his property and then bulldozed it for an airport expansion (which, as of this writing, has not taken place), offering him minimal financial recompense that paid no heed



Thornton Dial (b. 1928). Mrs. Bendolph. 2002. Clothing, bedding, carpet, enamel, and spray paint on canvas on wood. 84 X 50 X 4 in.



Lonnie Holley (b. 1950). The Gold at Grandmother's Post. 1988. Washboard, bedpost, quilt, wood, spray paint, house paint. 76 X 23 1/2 X 9 1/2 in.

to the value the property held as the art environment of a noted sculptor, nor to its value to the Holley family, who had occupied the land for generations.

Since their first encounter with Mary Lee Bendolph in 2001, Dial and Holley have created several artworks inspired by and honoring Mary Lee and the quiltmakers. Both artists were already influenced by the quilting tradition because the women who raised them quilted: Dial and Holley often made art from discarded cloth, and worked in ways similar to the processes of African American quilters. Holley eloquently expresses this idea in describing his piece, *The Gold at Grandmother's Post*: "When I find material that has been thrown away, having no more value to nobody, I try to understand what its first values were to the person that made it or used it."ⁱⁱⁱ When they met Mary Lee and learned about the community tradition in Gee's Bend, they had a renewed interest in exploring this concept further.

Holley often seems as if he is on a mission to discover and help other black vernacular artists (which is how he found the previously anonymous Dial). The recognition the quilters' have lately received brings him joy. In fact, he has accompanied the Gee's Bend quiltmakers on most of their trips to museum exhibition openings, and has created small-scale artworks from discarded

materials he has found along these trips. Many of these pieces honor woman: her roles, her strengths, her beauty.

Dial has also been inspired, creating several pieces that incorporate fabric materials alluding to the process of quilting. Dial and Bendolph have even exchanged materials: Dial's family would send her old clothes; she would use sections of the fabric for her quilts and then send him the leftover scraps, which he would use in his paintings. In 2005, when Mary Lee went with her daughter-in-law Louisiana P. Bendolph to create intaglio prints at Paulsen Press, in Berkeley, California, she titled one of them *To Honor Mr. Dial* and another *Lonnie Holley's Freedom*.

Dial and the elder women from Mary Lee's life aren't the only artists to have influenced her art. Bendolph's daughter-in-law has played an enormous role in her art career, most notably in the past two years. Louisiana made a few quilts in her youth, but says she

didn't continue the tradition into adulthood because quilts were no longer household essentials, and as a working wife and mother, she didn't have time for unnecessary hobbies. However, after she went with her family to see the first Gee's Bend quilt exhibition, in Houston, she began having visions of quilt designs. As her visions persisted, her motivation to continue this tradition passed to



Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935).
To Honor Mr. Dial. 2005.
Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint
and softground etching.
Image size: 46 X 28 in.



Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935). Lonnie Holley's Freedom.
2005. Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint and softground
etching. Image size: 32 X 36 in.

her by her predecessors grew, and consequently she became a leader of the next generation of Gee's Bend quilters. She is inspired by her elders, like Mary Lee, venerating and saluting them in her adoption of their patterns (she says that her quilts all Gee's Bend, and are abstracted from there.) She is developing and exercising her own style and method of artistic interpretation that challenges and builds upon the fundamental techniques, patterns, motifs and aesthetics of her elders. Mary Lee and Louisiana always had a good relationship, but became even closer when they went to California to make their first intaglio prints.



Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935). *Mama's Song*. 2005. Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint and softground etching. Image size: 33 X 24 in.

In an interview taken in 2006 by Matt Arnett, Mary Lee states: [Louisiana] gets the praise of her work and I get the praise of my work. But I praised her work and I got a little jealous. I said, She's young, and these patterns and ideas can fall in her mind because she is more willing and strong. That made me want to be strong. It kept me going awhile. Then I told her I was going to stop, but she said, “No, you can't. You can't teach me by stopping. You have to go one encouraging me.” And that encouraged me. I thank her for it... And the next print I made was *Mama's Song*, my favorite. I thank her for pushing me to go on. I have a long way to go.”

If it can be said that African American cultural practices such as quilting and found-object sculpture have always coexisted, in Mary Lee Bendolph and her circle of peers that coexistence has become a fully contemporary art form, with a formal and thematic dialogue of its own. Practitioners of

the sculpture and painting traditions—Dial and Holley—have begun to think openly and directly about their artistic cousins the quiltmakers—Mary Lee and Louisiana Bendolph—who have returned the favor. What was once a nearly invisible, and substantially undocumented, cultural continuum has now attained a place of prominence in the creativity and philosophy of four leading exponents of these traditions. For these artists, their sense of tradition, heritage, and common purpose has been immeasurably strengthened, as has their commitment to their art.

-
- i Mary Lee Bendolph, taken from interviews by Matt Arnett, 2006, quoted in Arnett, Cubbs, Metcalf Jr., eds., *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* (Tinwood Books: Atlanta) 2006, p. 176.
 - ii Mary Lee Bendolph, interview by Joanne Cubbs, June 2006
 - iii Lonnie Holley, quoted 1995, in Arnett, Metcalf Jr. eds., *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond* (Austin Museum of Art and Tinwood Books: Atlanta) 2006, p. 62

Stephanie Burak is the Manager of Art Collections and the Director of Educational Initiatives at Tinwood Alliance. She was an Associate Editor for the Tinwood Books publication, *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*, and is curator of the exhibition, *A Survey of Gee's Bend Quilts*.