


The Philadelphia Inquirer Art column: hard to define, a pleasure to behold.(Column)

Source:  Philadelphia Inquirer (Philadelphia, PA)

Publication Date: 24-JUN-07

Byline: Edward J. Sozanski

Jun. 24--For most of the American art world, Gee's Bend, Ala., didn't exist before November 2002, when an exhibition of quilts made by African American women living in that isolated cluster of hamlets near Selma opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

The exhibition hadn't generated any epiphanies several months earlier in Houston, whose Museum of Fine Arts put it together. Yet, when New York critics saw what the quilt artists of Gee's Bend had wrought from scraps of corduroy and faded work clothes, they were thunderstruck with admiration. The superlatives they used to describe this astonishing art apply equally to a new Gee's Bend show at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

The first show, which subsequently traveled to 11 other museums, was a landmark in American art history, and not only because the artists became instantly famous. (The U.S. Postal Service even honored them with a series of commemorative stamps.) The show revealed a basic truth that the bedazzled New York critics -- who evoked the names of such modernist luminaries as Matisse and Klee in praising the Gee's Bend quilts -- might not have fully recognized. It's simply this: that powerful, authentic art does not always conform to the arbitrary taxonomy used by critics, art historians, dealers, and the art market in general.

The Gee's Bend quilters are, in the purest sense, folk artists, in that they perpetuate a tradition that dates to the 19th century in a place that appears to be immune to outside influences. They're also craft artists in the sense that they have mastered a particular manual technique of making art from textiles.

Yet they should not be exclusively categorized by either of these labels, or by the mildly pejorative "quilter," as if all they were doing was furnishing and decorating their modest homes. The Alabama women are artists of the first rank who developed a powerful variant of two-dimensional abstract art under improbable circumstances.

Aside from the ingenious visual inventiveness that their best quilts display, their intuitive intelligence and audacious use of color and pattern must have come as a shock to art sophisticates weaned on the standard canon of modernism. The Gee's Bend artists represent a satisfying aesthetic authenticity that transcends art-historical cant and marketing hype.

What we see on the walls at the Walters is only the most visible part of a remarkable American story that begins in the waning years of plantation servitude. The quilts testify to the survival of a beleaguered community that passed from slavery to sharecropping to destitution and, finally, to redemption through art.

The new Gee's Bend exhibition was also organized by the MFA, Houston, and the Tinwood Alliance of Atlanta, a not-for-profit foundation that supports African American vernacular art. Collector and scholar William Arnett, who founded Tinwood with Jane Fonda, brought the Gee's Bend quilts to the attention of the museum world in 1998.

The Walters show features 45 quilts, some dating from the 1920s. A larger version of about 75 quilts is scheduled to come to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in early August 2008.

"The Architecture of the Quilt" includes work by 38 African American women. It addresses the broad question of how the distinctive Gee's Bend designs -- which emphatically shatter the stereotype of quilts as dainty, sentimental decorations -- evolved.

One factor is geography. Gee's Bend sits at the tip of a seven-mile-long peninsula bounded by a deep loop in the Alabama River. Only one road connects the tiny settlements to the world at large.

Family relationships and friendships also contribute. The most common surname among the show's artists is Pettway, which refers to a white family that purchased Joseph Gee's plantation in 1845. There are a dozen Pettways in the show, and seven Bennetts.

Some of the artists are descended from a slave named Dinah Miller, believed to have been Gee's Bend's first quiltmaker. Artist Arlonzia Pettway remembers her great-grandmother's stories about how slaves were treated.

Perhaps the most obvious influence on the Gee's Bend aesthetic is material. Some quilts are made from pieces of worn-out denim work pants, while others include generous passages of corduroy, which the quilters received from a local quilting cooperative that made pillow shams for Sears, Roebuck.

The most striking qualities of these quilts, however, are the range of improvisation on standard patterns; the bold, asymmetrical designs; the intense colors; and the frequency with which the artists disturb geometry and equilibrium. These quilts might have kept people comfortable on chilly nights, but visually they're provocative, sometimes even aggressive.

The quilts are hung thematically in blocks according to their general schemes. These include "Housetops," based on concentric squares (a design known elsewhere as "Log Cabin"); the stepped pattern called "Bricklayer, Blocks and Strips," often made from old trousers; and "Medallions," which feature a bold central motif inside a contrasting frame.

The "Medallions" scheme often produces energetic juxtapositions and contrasts of the kind common to modernist painting. For instance, Loretta P. Bennett created such a design from a stack of alternating bland and red wedges framed by heavy white bars against a black ground.

One shouldn't try to valorize one art medium -- in this case, textile -- by comparing it to a more prestigious one such as painting. Yet one can't help imagining how some of these quilts might be perceived if they were transcribed into pigment on canvas. I'm thinking particularly of a red, white and black masterpiece by Mary Lee Bendolph, the exhibition's signature image.

Most important, the Gee's Bend quilts put paid to the canard that abstraction is difficult or unnatural. For these academically untutored artists, abstraction is as natural as breathing.

They decant it from their surroundings, particularly architectural details of their houses and other structures (color photographs in the accompanying book illuminate this parallel). If abstraction can generate such crackling creative electricity in Gee's Bend, it ought to be common currency everywhere, not just in "high art" museums.

Art -- Homespun Genius

"Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt" continues at the Walters Art Museum, 600 N. Charles St., Baltimore, through Aug. 26. The museum is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays and to 8 p.m. Fridays. Admission is free. Information: 410-547-9000 or www.thewalters.org.

Contact contributing art critic Edward J. Sozanski at 215-854-5595 or esozanski@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/edwardsozanski>.

To see more of The Philadelphia Inquirer, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.philly.com>.

Copyright (c) 2007, The Philadelphia Inquirer

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.