

NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

NOW REPRESENTING GEE'S BEND QUILTMAKERS & MARY LEE BENDOLPH

OCTOBER 25, 2020



Aolar Carson Mosely, *Pump Handle Spin Top (Log Cabin Variation)*, 1954, Cotton, 89 x 75 inches; **Mary Lee Bendolph**, *Ghost Pockets*, 2003, Mixed fabrics including denim, cotton, polyester, and synthetic wool, 85 x 72 inches.

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is thrilled to announce New York representation of the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers, as well as direct representation of Mary Lee Bendolph, one of the Bend's foremost and nationally recognized quilters. The gallery will host Bendolph's first New York solo exhibition in Fall 2021, with a larger group exhibition featuring the Quiltmakers to follow in 2022.

In Wilcox County, Alabama, descendants of enslaved laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers have communed in Gee's Bend—a geographically isolated, rural Black community on the Alabama River (formally known as Boykin)—since the mid-19th century. Generation after generation, the women of Gee's Bend have made asymmetrical, provocative quilts noted for their stylistic ingenuity, bold materiality, and improvisational use of geometry; an endeavor passed down for both its utility and its rich visual culture. This textile tradition, taught by mothers to their daughters and families to their friends, is a well-practiced vernacular art form within Black communities across the American South. Quilting became a social pillar within towns and counties as woman gathered together to stitch, share stories, sing songs, and discuss politics.

Repurposing remnants of old work clothes, discarded choir robes, feed sacks, faded denim and found materials, the Quiltmakers stitch storied compositions, flaws and all, into handmade quilts with lively, syncopated patterning employed by the women with improvisation and individuality. As Mary Lee Bendolph has described, "Old clothes have spirit in them. They also have love." Stains, patches, and tears on these fabrics index tangible records of lives lived in the deep South, during the Great Depression, under Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, and the Vietnam War. Each quilt thus serves as a distinct

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marker of its time as told through fabric, the labor of its making, and the vision of those who brought it to life. Hailed and regarded as masterpieces of American Abstraction, these quilts inherently reflect and demonstrate the boundless iterations of the quilting medium.

In 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited the Bend, impressing upon residents the tenets of political enfranchisement and of the civil rights movement at large. Deeply affected, many Quiltmakers and their families registered to vote in nearby Camden and marched with Dr. King to Selma. Shortly thereafter in 1966, the Freedom Quilting Bee was formed in Rehoboth, north of Boykin, a hub that politically and financially mobilized quiltmakers across Wilcox County. Through the Bee, nationwide attention and markets for African-American quilts were established for the first time. Notable members of the Bee from Gee's Bend included Lucy Mingo (spokesperson in the Bend for the Civil Rights Movement), Nettie Young, and for a short stint, Mary Lee Bendolph.

Over 150 individuals from Gee's Bend have been identified as quiltmakers, and are survived today by an active collective of contemporary artists including **Mary Lee Bendolph** (b. 1935) and her daughter **Essie Bendolph Pettway** (b. 1956), **Lucy Mingo** (b. 1931), **Louisiana Bendolph** (b. 1960), **Marlene Bennett Jones** (b. 1960), **Lou Ida McCloud** (b. 1951), **Mary Leathe Pettway** (b. 1961), **Mary Margaret Pettway** (b. 1963), and **Stella Pettway** (b. 1952), among many others.

These women were taught and encouraged by those who came before them, including **Delia Bennett** (1892 – 1976), **Aolar Carson Mosely** (1912 – 1999), **Candis Moseley Pettway** (1924 – 1997), **Aestean Pettway Young** (1936 – 2001), and **Qunnie Pettway** (1943 – 2010).

Audiences across the United States and internationally were first introduced to the work of generations of Quiltmakers in the critically acclaimed exhibition *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, a survey organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which toured nationwide from 2002-2008. In his oft-quoted *New York Times* review of the exhibition's stop at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Michael Kimmelman remarked that the textiles are "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced." The 2006-2008 touring exhibition *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* (also organized by the MFAH) dove deeper into the formal nature of the quilts, concretizing the work of the Quiltmakers firmly within the canon of 20th and 21st century American art.

Textiles and prints by the **Gee's Bend Quiltmakers** can be found in numerous public collections, including those of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Birmingham Museum of Art, AL; Brooklyn Museum, NY; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; New Orleans Museum of Art, LA; Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, among many others.

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is working directly with a number of Quiltmakers and their families to further secure the vital legacy of Gee's Bend and African-American quilting. Furthermore, the gallery is pleased to be directly representing **Mary Lee Bendolph** (b. 1935), a master quiltmaker still living and championing the quiltmakers in the Bend today. Bendolph pieced her first quilt at the age of twelve, and has since developed distinct formal extensions of the "housetop" patterning style. Scholars have noted the self-referential nature of Bendolph's imagery. William Arnett has noted how "nearly any detail of a Mary Lee Bendolph quilt would work as a quilt unto itself. Her style is not, in itself, radical; it simply pushes the Gee's Bend tradition to one extreme of refinement."

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The 2007-2010 exhibition *Mary Lee Bendolph, Gee's Bend Quilts, and Beyond*, organized by the Austin Museum of Art, explored the centrality of Bendolph's vision as an artist within and beyond her community. Bendolph has since been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Georgia Museum of Art, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, and the List Gallery at Swarthmore College. Her quilts can be found in public collections across the country including the Dallas Museum of Art, TX; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM; Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, among others.

Nicelle Beauchene would like to extend deep gratitude to the Quiltmakers and their families for their trust and collaboration, with special thanks to Rubin Bendolph, Jr. and Mary McCarthy for their stewardship.

For further information, please contact gallery@nicellebeauchene.com