

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Arts & Culture

## Quilts from the American South are on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Works by prominent Gee's Bend quilters and part of a collection newly acquired from the influential Souls Grown Deep Foundation, promoting contemporary African American artists from the South.



Artist Mary Lee Bendolph talks about her work in front of her quilt "Blocks, Strips, Strings, and Half Squares" during a press conference announcing the opening of "Souls Grown Deep: Artists of the African American South" exhibit at the Perelman Building of the Philadelphia Museum of Art on June 5.

By Bethany Ao | June 18, 2019

Growing up, Essie Bendolph Pettway was used to seeing the vibrant quilts her mother, Mary Lee Bendolph, sewed with the other quilters of Gee's Bend, Ala., hanging over the cracks in their house to keep the cold winds out in the winter.

"They had to do what they could to keep us warm," said Pettway, who learned how to quilt as a child from Bendolph. "That's how we kept warm, by quilts."

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Bendolph's quilts now hang in art museums around the country, including in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The museum recently acquired 15 quilts by artists from Gee's Bend and neighboring towns from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, an Atlanta-based organization focused on preserving the work of contemporary African American artists in the South.

All 15 are now on display as part of a larger exhibit — "Souls Grown Deep: Artists of the African American South" — that also showcases nine other works acquired from the foundation, including sculptures by Thornton Dial, and assemblages by Lonnie Holley and Bessie Harvey. (The museum first exhibited Gee's Bend quilts in a 2008 exhibition called "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt.")

Visitors can view the exhibition through Sept. 2 in the museum's Perelman Building.



Curatorial project manager John Vick speaks about artist Mary Lee Bendolph's quilts (one hanging and one spread out on a bed) during a news conference for "Souls Grown Deep: Artists of the African American South."

"These works enable us to tell a fuller story about American art," said John Vick, the Art Museum collections project manager who organized the exhibition. "They bring us into the present by advancing the conversation about who is called an artist and who is represented in art museums."

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The oldest quilts on display were made in the 1920s and 1930s, while the most recent ones were created by Bendolph and her contemporaries in the 2000s. The museum is also showing quilts made during the Freedom Quilting Bee in Rehoboth, Ala., near Gee's Bend. The Bee was significant because it allowed black women to support their families.

Most of the quilts were made from such salvaged materials as faded denim and cotton corduroy scraps from Sears, Roebuck and Co. But on the walls of the Perelman gallery, they are gorgeous works of art, filled with vivid red circles and bold yellow squares.

"Back in the time [my mom] was coming up, they didn't have very much," Pettway said. "Whatever little things they had, like clothes, when they wore out, they had to patch them. And when they could get some more clothes, they took the old clothes and made the quilts to help keep the family warm."

Bendolph first learned how to quilt from her mother. "I was probably about 5 years old, trying to learn some things about quilts," she said. "I made a block once and my momma told me, 'Just like that. That's good. Try and do another one.'"

Bendolph said that other families in the area used patterns to make their quilts, but her family did not — choosing instead to make "crazy quilts" that don't follow the rules.

One of Bendolph's quilts on display at the museum is *Blocks, Strips, Strings, and Half Squares*. Accompanying it is a related print titled *Mama's Song* that was inspired by how her mother used to sing while she sewed quilts. Bendolph conceptualized the design when she was invited to make the print at a fine-art press in California in 2005.

Despite Gee's Bend's rich history in quilt making, Pettway said that she's not sure whether the tradition will continue beyond her generation.

"I grew up under the old people, and in this day and generation, don't too many young people want to learn or pick up the artwork of quilting," Pettway said. "Some are doing it now, but not very many. Young people today aren't very interested in quilts. Now they got everything they need, they don't know the value of quilts."



CULTURE

# THE MASTER QUILTERS OF GEE'S BEND

Stitching together questions of race, art, and commerce through a quilting tradition borne in slavery.

Alex Ronan | OCT—16—2018



Members of the Collective pose with Amy Sherald (holding a quilt). Behind them is a painted mural based on a quilt Mary Ann Pettway's mother made.

There's only one road to get into and out of Gee's Bend. It's paved, but the dirt driveways and footworn paths that peel off of it reveal earth the color of Cheeto dust. I found Mary Ann Pettway, 62, at the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective. Just off the road, it's a one-story, two-room, peeled-paint wooden structure that once housed a daycare. Though we'd never previously met, Pettway — tall, broad, and short a few

bottom teeth — enveloped me in a hug. Pettway has been the manager of the Collective since 2006, a year after she joined it.

Despite their modest headquarters, the quilts made by Mary Ann and her neighbors [have been called](#) “some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced”; they rose to public prominence in the early aughts thanks to a series of museum shows. But exploitation by white art dealers who brought about the renewed interest is only the latest injustice the quiltmakers have faced. With a dwindling population, the quilting tradition that first emerged among slaves and has been passed down through generations of black women faces an uncertain future.

One room of the Collective was almost entirely filled with quilts. They were heaped on shelves, spread on tables, and hanging on the wall. Some of them were improvisational and abstract, while others followed patterns that became inverted or subverted. There were neatly color-blocked quilts and those that seemed inspired by '70s psychedelia. The quilts were made from old dresses and work clothes, simple colored cottons, patterned sheets, corduroy, or denim, basically any sort of fabric that could be used.

Tables, chairs, a sewing machine, and a quilting frame with a quilt Mary Ann was working on took up the other room. Her latest quilt featured geometric shapes in red, white, and black, plus a bit of chartreuse and the seat of a pair of old jeans, minus the pocket.



The Collective. Alex Ronan/The Outline





Mary Ann Pettway. Alex Ronan/The Outline

Growing up, Mary Ann said, the boys in her family learned to plow and farm, and the girls learned to quilt, clean, and can. After she graduated high school, Mary Ann moved to Mobile, but a few years later she got pregnant and returned to the Bend.

She worked at a sewing factory in Selma for 20 years, then another sewing factory that subsequently closed, then a nearby hardware store; that closed, too. She was feeling depressed and aimless. “I asked God [for] a job working at home,” she said, and the managing position came soon after. “This quilting can [technically] be done in the house, but then see, when you ask God for stuff you gotta be careful how you ask Him. You gotta just [ask] precisely.”

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Gee’s Bend — 45 miles southwest of Selma, population 275, and pronounced like the letter — was renamed Boykin in 1949, but most residents still call the hamlet by its original name, which dates to the 19th century. With the signing of the 1814 Treaty of Fort Jackson, the native Creeks were forced to cede 23 million acres of their territory (comprised of what’s now southern Georgia and central Alabama) to the federal government. White settlers began to purchase plots in the Black Belt region, a name that refers to the dark, fertile topsoil of the area. In 1816, Joseph Gee bought a 15-mile stretch of land surrounded on three sides by the Alabama River. He arrived with 17 slaves to establish a cotton plantation. Three years later, Alabama became the 22nd state in the union.

In 1845, Gee's heirs sold the area now known as Gee's Bend to Mark Pettway, a white landowner who moved from North Carolina with 100 slaves he forced to walk across four states. Today, Gee's Bend is still populated by Pettways, but they're not white. They trace their ancestry to the slaves Mark Pettway brought from North Carolina or those that Gee purchased.

In 1859, a woman named Dinah Miller was kidnapped somewhere in Africa and taken to America, 51 years after the Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves was passed by Congress. She has been identified as the Ben's first quilter. "My great-grandmother Dinah was sold for a dime," Arlonzia Pettway told *Smithsonian Magazine* in 2006. "Her dad, brother, and mother were sold to different people, and she didn't see them no more."

Mark Pettway died in 1861, two years before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. Over the following five decades, his property changed hands multiple times. Former slaves, working as sharecroppers, stayed. In unheated log cabins, women pieced together fabric scraps for quilts, which were layered on the floor as makeshift beds and hung on the walls to keep drafts out.

Gee's Bend sharecroppers became indebted to white merchants in nearby Camden when the price of cotton plummeted in the late 1920s. Over the next decade many families came close to starvation. The absentee landlord, Adrian Sebastian Van de Graaff, eventually sold Gee's Bend to the government; amid the New Deal programs, a cooperative pilot project run by a federal agency was set up there. Residents paid annual dues to the cooperative and shared the federally funded, newly built resources, which included a cotton gin, a general store, and a school whose initial class of first graders ranged in age from six to 22.

The government built simple houses and rented tracts of land to residents, eventually selling small farms to locals for a third of the purchase price from a decade earlier. Though they still lived in poverty, black ownership of land was extremely rare, so Gee's Benders who might have otherwise left stayed on.

"I came through a hard life," Arlonzia, then 83, told *Smithsonian*. "Maybe we weren't bought and sold, but we were still slaves until 20, 30 years ago. The white man would go to everybody's field and say, 'Why you not at work?' What do you think a slave is?"

Meanwhile, racial terror and white supremacy maintained a stranglehold on the area. The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) [found record](#) of four lynchings in Wilcox County during Reconstruction; all four occurred between 1893 and 1904. (The EJI's parameters for inclusion — a lynching carried out by two or more white Americans between 1877 and 1950 that was confirmable with at least two sources — suggests there may be more unaccounted-for lynchings.)

"There are still lynchings in this county," a Harvard student who spent a summer teaching college-bound black high school students [wrote](#) for the university's

newspaper in 1970. “Within the past two years, a black man has been castrated, a white woman has shot a black male child, and a white doctor who is a member of the KKK has plotted to have the county’s black [federally funded, anti-poverty program] director assassinated.”

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Mary Lee Bendolph, 83, is probably one of the most famous quilters to come out of Gee’s Bend. She’s got a scratchy voice and a cackling laugh; she’s prone to cracking herself up. She got pregnant at 13 and at 20 married her sons’ father, who abused her. In 1965, when Martin Luther King Jr. stopped in Gee’s Bend on his way to Montgomery, Mary Lee and her husband went to the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church to hear him speak.

“To come here to Gee’s Bend and to see you out in large numbers gives me new courage and new determination,” King. Jr said to the packed church, ignoring his security staff warnings about his safety in a county run by Sheriff P.C. “Lummie” Jenkins. It was three weeks before Bloody Sunday, when 600 nonviolent, unarmed protesters marching for civil rights were severely beaten and tear gassed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. King Jr. told the residents of Gee’s Bend, “I come over here to Gee’s Bend to tell you: You are somebody.”

Despite local efforts, not a single black person had successfully registered to vote in Wilcox County. Due to a strong KKK presence, segregationist and white-supremacist officials in office, and an array of voting taxes and literacy tests meant to make it not just intimidating, but effectively impossible. King urged residents to join him in Camden to march for voting rights. An old creaky ferry was the fastest way to get there and Benders lined up to cross the river. Others joined him on his march from Selma to Montgomery. Mary Lee recalled running through the fields to ask her husband for permission to go to Selma to hear King speak again. She told me:

*When he got through talking, he said he goin’ and he gonna get some water [from the whites only fountain] and I jumped up and said, ‘I’m gonna get some water too.’ Girl, there ain’t nothin for people to have anger about, but you know they was angry! They didn’t want you to drink their water. My sister didn’t want to let me go. She caught on me and hold me. And I turn my head and said, ‘You welcome to my coat, but I’m drinking that water.’ Martin Luther came and drunk that water and I did too.*

In retaliation for their organizing for voting rights, the local, white officials took away the ferry that connected Gee’s Bend to Camden at a time when few Benders had cars. “We didn’t close the ferry because they were black,” Sheriff Jenkins reportedly said at the time. “We closed it because they forgot they were black.” But the residents of Gee’s Bend were undeterred. Arlonzia later explained, “[W]e kept right on marching. Only difference was we had to load up in trucks and drive all the way around.”

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The car ferry at Gee's Bend, May 1939. White county government ended the ferry service in the 1960s to discourage voter registration.

When I arrived, the Ferry to Gee's Bend was closed. "PLEASE PARDON OUR PROGRESS!" A sign reads. "THE FERRY IS CLOSED WHILE IT IS CONVERTED TO AMERICA'S FIRST 100% ELECTRIC FERRY VESSEL!" After the local white officials took it away in the '60s, it wasn't until 2006 that a ferry was reinstated between Gee's Bend and Camden, 40 miles by car, but just seven by water. Now, it's often used by tourists visiting Gee's Bend to see the quilts and their makers.

The quilters were abuzz with news when I visited. Amy Sherald, the artist commissioned to paint a portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama for the National Portrait Gallery in 2017, would arrive in the morning. Mostly, they referred to her as "The Famous Artist."

On the day of her visit, old-time quilters showed up at the Collective in groups of two or three and sat around, chatting with one another. Sherald's extended family was there, too. "They really need some better signage on those roads," one family member said to me. "We got completely lost!"

Back in 1996, a white man named William "Bill" Arnett found his way to Gee's Bend after seeing a photograph of a local resident with a quilt she'd made in a book on Southern folk art. He offered to buy her quilts and asked her to introduce him to other

quiltmakers. China Pettway, 66, remembered the day well:

*She called her cousin Arlonzia and told her that a man was up there buying quilts and when [Arnett] called Arlonzia, she called my mother and my mother called me, and oh boy, I just felt like...we're not used to having nothing, you know and things like that just....a new life just opened up for me.*

China told me she's always been guided by the words of advice her fifth-grade teacher gave her: "She said, 'When the opportunity itches, scratch it.' Ever since that day, she's dead and gone, I've been trying to scratch it. When something comes up, that will help me, grab it, get it, make some use out of it, you know?"

She said she sold Arnett three quilts, first offering to give them to him, but accepting what she considered to be a fair price when he insisted on paying. She said she can no longer remember how much he paid her for them, but that it was enough to put gas in the tank and buy her kids some new clothes. Arnett spent years buying up around 530 quilts from the area; he has [said](#) the average price he paid was \$275 per quilt. Quilters have since said they were paid around \$100 for quilts, and some quilts sold for as low as \$40. (Through a representative, Arnett declined an interview request from *The Outline*.)

In 2002, when Arnett learned that the Museum of Fine Arts Houston had a last-minute show cancellation, he convinced them to showcase the quilts. The quilts received rave reviews and the exhibition traveled the country. "It is rare to find an exhibition that throws something totally unexpected our way, that forces us to carve out a meaningful chunk of historical space to make room for a new body of work," the critic Richard Kalina wrote in [Art in America](#), before conceding that the Gee's Bend show "does just that."

The exhibition was a surprise hit, breaking attendance records upon reaching the Whitney Museum in late 2002. One of those visitors in attendance was Sherald. "When I saw their show at the Whitney years ago, everybody went home and wanted to be a quilter," she said. "I was like, 'ooh, I'm gonna make a blue-jean quilt'...that didn't happen."

Ebullient in her signature cat-eye glasses, Sherald stood a head taller than everyone else in the room. "Visiting Gee's Bend is something I wanted to do within this lifetime," she told me. "It's a dream come true." Her boyfriend had organized the trip as a birthday surprise for her; he told me he paid the airline attendants \$20 to change the sign so that Sherald would only find out where she was going once aboard the plane. The quilters stood and sung hymnals for her. She signed photographs, doled out and received hugs, then posed for dozens of photographs. Mary Ann cut herself a slice of the otherwise untouched cake.

Later, away from the crowd, Sherald told me how the town's influence permeated her work. "When I was working with Michelle's [Obama] stylist, we were discussing different options, and when I saw that [Milly] dress I instantly thought of Gee's Bend," she said. "For me, it was a way to connect that painting to black history. Those

shapes have that meaning for me. I don't connect them to European art or anything like that... those shapes come from my Southern culture, quilt making, underground railroad maps, those kinds of things."

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In the years after the quilts became a national sensation, Arnett and his practices came under scrutiny. In 2007, he was [sued](#) by three Gee's Bend women who alleged that they weren't properly compensated for their art which, by that point, was being reproduced via licensing deals with Anthropologie and Kathy Ireland Worldwide and appearing on U.S. postage stamps, VISA gift cards, and pet-proof rugs. One quilter [said](#) she was tricked into signing a copyright document even though she couldn't read. Another said three quilts stolen from her were more than 100 years old. After the lawsuit was filed, the Arnetts [returned](#) the three quilts with an appraisal suggesting they were made between the '30s and the '60s. The suits were [settled out of court](#) for an undisclosed amount.

At the time, most quilters said they were happy with the deals they'd struck with the Arnetts, but a number of institutional figures expressed alarm. In 2013, Susan Krane, a museum curator who'd met Arnett decades before, explained her issues with his business practices to the *New Yorker*. "Curator, gallerist, advocate, promoter, patron — those are all categories that, in the art world, we try to keep barriers between," she said. "My concerns were how he functioned as a patron with artists who were, by and large, poor... Bill was creating art history around these artists while functioning as a dealer and promoting exhibitions. If you're a museum person, it raised every red flag you're taught to pay attention to."

In recent years, Arnett's narrative of discovery ("at the end of a dead-end road to nowhere," was how he [described](#) Gee's Bend to *The Washington Post* in 2004) and his framing of the quilters and their quilts has been criticized in [smaller news outlets](#) and [academic texts](#). In *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art From The American South*, the companion book to the Met exhibition of pieces from the collection that bears his name, the textile historian Amelia Peck [called](#) some of his opinions regarding the quilts "paternalistic and suspect." Meanwhile, Arnett has somewhat incoherently [compared](#) his difficulties in the art world to that of Holocaust survivors.

Peck also questioned the larger art world's positioning of the quilts in relation to abstract artworks. She cites *The New York Times* rave review of the Whitney show quoted at the beginning of this article, in which art critic Michael Kimmelman [wrote](#), "Imagine [Henri] Matisse and [Paul] Klee... arising not from rarefied Europe but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee's Bend was a plantation."

That kind of review and also the way the museums themselves have presented exhibits of these quilts became, as Peck writes, "something like a party trick — that is, 'Isn't it amazing that these untutored rural women were able to make something almost as good as our favorite paintings of the late twentieth century?'" Their value,



then, comes when they are de-gendered, transitioning from feminine craft to masculine art, and deracinated, or, more specifically, when the race and geographic origin of the creators serves only to suggest how unlikely it is that they'd create such pieces.

While it is isolated, Gee's Bend has long been subject to interest and attention from white people, which seems to ebb and flow every few decades. In the '60s, Father Francis X. Walter, a white preacher involved in the civil rights movement, bought some quilts and sold them at a New York fundraiser to the likes of Ray Eames and *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland to raise money for the Gee's Bend community. Painter Lee Krasner visited Gee's Bend in 1967 and bought three quilts for the home she shared with her husband, Jackson Pollock.

In 1969, Calvin Trillin wrote a spread for the [New Yorker](#) on the quilting collective Father Walter helped set up that same year in Wilcox County. Newly christened the Freedom Quilting Bee, the initial collective was reportedly the county's first black-owned business.

Even if they didn't see their quilts as high art, there was a sense of pride among the quilters that existed long before Arnett came along. Larine Pettway was 11 when she made her first quilt. "I was so, so proud of myself, that I had did it," she told me. "[My mother] always told us, 'The reason why I am showing you girls this because one day, you too are gonna have a family and y'all gonna have to do this to keep your family warm.'"

Larine still remembers when Arnett came through, but what upsets her is that the older generations weren't alive to experience wider recognition. "I hate they didn't live to see that what they taught us and what they were doing back then was art," she said. Many women I spoke to described the pure joy and disbelief they experienced in seeing their quilts hanging on the walls of museums.

But, even after seeing their quilts hanging in some of the country's best museums, the term artist is not an easy one to adopt. "I don't think of myself as an artist, I'm just making quilts," China said. "I don't call myself an artist; I'm just Plain Jane, Plain China."

China is old enough to remember when women used to hang their quilts out on a clothesline for the whole community to come and admire. "They had a day for all of the community to get together and just look at quilts. We used to be so glad to see them coming. I would run out and say, 'Mom, here they come!' My mama would always have a quilt for them [as they] came down the road."

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Art world attention moved on, but in 2014, Wilcox County made the news as the poorest county in the nation, with Gee's Bend noted as the poorest section of the county. The median household income in Gee's Bend is \$14,516, according to [Census data](#). A local historian reported in the '80s the community was

disappointed that interest in the quilts in the sixties hadn't translated into sustainable change. "Ain't nothing ever happened," was what the residents said.

It sounds remarkably similar to the words of the quilters interviewed by [The Washington Post](#) in 2007, who said they were disappointed the publicity hadn't translated into solid community improvements. "When the [tourists] come down here, they can witness the fact that we don't have decent roads," [one quilter said](#).

In 2013, Arnett told the *New Yorker* that he was broke. "I haven't made 50 cents total net profit on all that I've done on black culture in the past 25 years," [he said](#).

Without speaking to Arnett or accessing his financial records, it's impossible to determine how much he earned or spent. Still, he did sell quilts to museum collections for undisclosed sums that were certainly higher than what he'd paid for them and with his ownership of the intellectual property rights to the quilts that were licensed via major deals in the early aughts, it's hard to imagine he didn't even make a single dollar.

In 2010, after the lawsuits and ensuing negative publicity, Arnett founded the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which is "dedicated to documenting, preserving, and promoting the contributions of artists from the African-American South, and the cultural traditions in which they are rooted," according to its [website](#).

In 2014, the Foundation began a program to transfer most of its 1,100 works to the permanent collections of major American art museums. So far, 200 works by 75 different artists (quilters, painters, sculptors) have been acquired by a number of museums across the country.

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Just past Plantation Way in Montgomery, Alabama is a subdivision of nearly identical single-story brick homes. Though they're mostly surrounded by industrial supply shops, the streets are named for prettier things — "Valley Brook Lane," "Sweet Meadow Drive" — and on one such street lives the Smith family. Quinnard Smith, 37, answered the door when I rang the bell, but it was his sons I was there to see. The baby, Christian, was awake in a playpen; Alex, 11, played games on a computer nearby, and Julian, 10, emerged shyly from his room. DeShuan, 16, was taking a post-school nap; after few shouts from his dad, he too materialized in the living room.

Julian rooted around for a plastic bag containing the scraps and half-finished pieces he had been working on lately. Usually, the quilting skills are passed down from mother to daughter, but that's changing. Years ago, Mary Ann Pettway taught her daughter, Tabitha Pettway-Smith, but she had no interest in quilting, so Mary Ann moved on to the next generation. "I don't have any granddaughters, so I'm just teaching my grandsons," Mary Ann told me. "If the boys keep going, they'll be better'n me."

DeShuan, soft-spoken and a bit shy, leaned against the doorjamb while he talked to me, half in the room, half out of it. "It's been a long time," he said, when I asked him how many years he had been quilting. "I learned when I was maybe five or six years old."

Mary Ann taught him during one of the family's visits to the Bend, as they call it, but now he quilts mostly in his family's Montgomery home, where he has a sewing machine in his room. "Mainly, it's just me, sitting down, cutting up different patterns and putting them together," he said. "I'll put blue with green, or instead of green next to green, I'll put white in the middle, to make it look different."

The boys have already sold quilts and smaller patches through the Collective; they are allowed to since they are, by blood, half Pettway. When he is older, DeShuan hopes to be a professional baseball player, but still quilt on the side. It is Julian who wants to be a professional quilter. Right now he's not even considering any other vocations.

Membership in the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective has dwindled significantly over the years due to illness and death. The estimates I heard suggest 15 or so women still make quilts, but they are getting on in age too. Mary Lee stopped quilting after she had a stroke 10 years ago. "You know the babies used to be born and they eyes were closed for three days," she said. "Now they come into the world and they eyes open. They got more understanding than we had. They learn more things then we did."

But that doesn't mean they want to learn to quilt. Larine tried to teach her sons, but they were too busy chasing girls, she said. She's hoping to teach her two grandchildren when they're old enough to learn. Other quilters have tried to lure their own grandchildren with special Barbie fabrics, to mixed results. "I believe that it is a dying art," Larine said. "But if we catch the kids now and try to instill that into them now, they will get it; if we don't, it's gonna be forgotten."

In China's double-wide mobile home, she picked up the tape recorder I had set by her side and used it as if she was conducting an orchestra to describe the changes she's experienced during her lifetime. "I went to school barefoot in the winter time; I had one dress and my older sister had one dress. I would wear my dress one day and hers the next day. The children would be laughing, 'oh, you got on each other's dresses!'"

She was one of 11 children. "Sometimes four or five of us was in one bed and those quilts used to be so heavy we could hardly turn over but those quilts kept us so warm," she said. China tried to teach her daughter, who did not like getting stuck with a needle. She said:

*She sat back down on her bed and said, 'Mom, this ain't for me. This gotta be for you.' She didn't even finish [her first quilt], I had to finish for her. She said, 'Mom, I'm going to college; I'm going to get an education and I'm going to work in an office.'*



Like China's daughter and son, many children of that generation have left Gee's Bend, the children of those who stayed find themselves leaving too. "You know, there's nothing here in this community for them to do, and I want to see them get an education and a job," China said. "A lot of them get cars when they are 16 years old. When I was 18 years old I had never ridden in a car or truck, nothing." She worked for decades as a home health aide and now makes enough from her quilting to get by. Quilting profits funded home improvements that she's been thrilled with.

China got up to show me what she's been working on, unfurling quilt after quilt from plastic garbage bags, including one with scraps from her late mother's pink Easter dress sewn in. I asked her if she's worried about the future of the Collective. "It's gonna be around till the end of time," she said. But not because it'll last much longer, instead because the world itself is coming to an end. "Everything gonna be burning up but the word of God. The word of God gonna be still standing, but the collective, all these buildings, gonna be burning up."

Still cheery, she began folding up the quilts she had taken out to show me. Some are finished, and she'll bring those ones down to the Collective. Some are still half-done, and she'll work on them until the world ends or the quilts are finished, whichever comes first.

# American quilts hailed as miraculous works of modern art come to UK

**Turner Contemporary Margate to exhibit works by women from rural Gee's Bend, Alabama**

Mark Brown | 2 December 2019



Basket Weave Variation by Mary Lee Bendolph (c 1990).  
Photograph: © Mary Lee Bendolph/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

When the wildly distinctive quilts made by generations of rural women in Gee's Bend, Alabama, went on display in New York, one critic called them "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced".

The quilts have since been used on [a set of American stamps](#) and a series of them will travel to the UK for the first time next year for an exhibition showcasing art and artists from America's deep south.

The gallery [Turner Contemporary in Margate](#) announced details of a show that will shine light on work made by people as they lived through America's civil rights struggles, often in conditions of utter poverty.

"This work is not well known at all in the UK and has been very rarely seen," said Sarah Martin, head of exhibitions at Turner Contemporary. "Most of these artists and makers have not been exhibited in the UK or Europe at all.

"In the US the work that is in significant collections has always been bracketed or shown in the context of 'craft' or 'outsider art'. That is changing, but it has been collected and shown in that camp for many years."

The quilts of Gee's Bend, an isolated hamlet known today as Boykin, have become minor celebrities in their own right.

They were made from anything that was to hand – old blue jeans, strips of cloth, cornmeal sacks – and are vividly colourful and strikingly abstract.

Reviewing a 2002 show at the Whitney, which included the quilts, [a critic for the New York Times wrote](#): "The results ... turn out to be some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee ... arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural south in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee's Bend was a plantation."

The Margate show will include quilts, paintings, and sculptural assemblages by more than 20 African American artists from Alabama and surrounding states.

They include William Edmondson, usually called a folk art sculptor, who was the first African American to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern [Art](#) in New York; and Emmer Sewell, whose found object sculptures include Black-Panther-inspired scarecrows.

The show was the idea of the artist Hannah Collins, who came across the artworks and stories while working in the American south.

Photographs Collins took of the artists' working environments, Sewell's porch for example, will be included in the show.

Victoria Pomery, director of Turner Contemporary, said the aim of the exhibition was for audiences to see works, traditionally categorised as folk or outsider art, in a new light. They were "extraordinary works", she said.

"Bringing this exhibition to Margate, one of the most deprived areas of the UK, highlights the global importance of creativity and its power to provoke change ... fundamentally altering the course of an individual's life, challenging social inequality and inspiring vital debate."

*We Will Walk – Art and Resistance from the American South will run at Turner Contemporary from 7 February to 3 May.*



# Can You Copyright a Quilt?

*Long after their iconic American quilts caught the art world's attention, the Gee's Bend artisans are taking control of their legacy.*

*By Alexandra Marvar*

OCTOBER 29, 2018



Gee's Bend quilter Mary Lee Bendolph in front of one of her quilts in an exhibit at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, May 21, 2005. (AP Photo / Chitose Suzuki)

**I**n 1998, an art collector named William Arnett arrived in Wilcox County, Alabama. Over the next two years, he went door to door in the African-American hamlet of Gee's Bend, asking women if he could see their quilts: vivid, off-kilter assemblages of worn denim, outgrown school dresses and other salvaged bits of cloth, particular to Gee's Bend and nowhere else.

Most of the 275 residents of Gee's Bend are descendants of slaves from once-thriving cotton plantations. At the time of Arnett's first visit, a serious art collector was an unlikely presence on

their doorsteps, not least because Gee's Bend is so far off the beaten path—a tangle of red dirt roads and overgrown fields nestled into a deep arc of the Alabama River. There are no stores or offices; just trailers, retired barns, and houses built for a short-lived economic program by the Roosevelt administration, some 40 miles from the nearest pharmacy.

For years, Arnett, a native Southerner, collected Asian art, then African art, and ultimately, African-American art from the South. He saw quilts from the Bend in a Civil Rights-era photography book, and became determined to track down their makers.

To the women he would meet—Annie Mae Young, Mary Lee Bendolph, Lucy T. Pettway, and dozens of others—quilts were much loved, given as gifts on most every occasion, and made for everyday use: blankets, curtains, floor coverings.

To Arnett, they were graceful, honest works of art. They represented the hardship endured by that community, from slavery, to sharecropping, tenant farming, and the harrowing upheavals of the civil-rights struggle. History was spelled out in each one: in worn materials torn from old work clothes, in batting of cotton lint salvaged from the fields, in unexpected color palettes and their inspired riffs on traditional patterns, handed down and uniquely interpreted by hundreds of women across generations.

Over the coming years, he would purchase dozens of their masterpieces for \$200 to \$300 a piece—10 to 20 times the going rate, often a relative windfall for the makers, many of whom were seniors, subsisting on Social Security checks, and living well below the poverty line. He was determined to introduce their work into the existing narrative of contemporary American art.

And, to the extent that one man can affect the art world, he succeeded.

Throughout the mid 2000s, the quilts were shown around the country at the Smithsonian, the Whitney, and other major American art museums from Atlanta to Minneapolis to San Francisco. They were widely written about in the press, drawing frequent comparison to Klee, Rothko, and Mondrian, and emblazoned on a limited-edition series of United States postage stamps. The quilt makers, who had not previously thought of themselves as artists, rode buses from Alabama to the early New York openings, dressed in their Sunday best, to see the quilts that had once kept their children warm in the winters displayed before throngs of museum-goers.

Work by Young, Bendolph, and others appeared on coffee mugs, designer scarves, VISA Gift Cards, rugs and lampshades by *Sports Illustrated* model turned entrepreneur Kathy Ireland, and as replicas available for \$298 a pop at Anthropologie.

Some of the artists—and their children—saw the fervor around the quilts, and wondered why their share of a supposed fortune had not materialized. And if you've been to that tangle of red dirt roads on the Alabama River, you'd understand why.

Last year, Philip Alston, the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, visited the region, and told an Alabama news outlet that he had not previously been aware of conditions of this severity in the developed world. A number of homes are without septic systems. The post office was closed some years ago, after the postmaster became ill from black mold. It was from this disparate vantage that, in 2007, a small handful of women filed lawsuits against Arnett, challenging their history of handshake agreements—work exchanged for cash with no paperwork nor contract.

Funds that were set aside in escrow from the proceeds of the licensing and other activities, and that were intended to benefit the community at large, instead went to settling the lawsuits, benefiting only the plaintiffs and dividing the community.

Many were grateful for Arnett's efforts, and, satisfied with having sold the quilts to him in the first place, saw no need for litigation. "I have no real beef with [the Arnetts], other than the fact that they just wasn't organized in my sense," said Rubin Bendolph. He helps promote the work and legacy of his mother, Mary Lee Bendolph, now 83 and living beside her daughter—also a quilt maker—in Gee's Bend. "They brought [the quilt makers] out of the darkness," Mr. Bendolph said, "and into the light so that people could see who they are and what their stories were."

After the lawsuits, one change did take hold: Everyone in Gee's Bend had learned the term *copyright*—a set of rights inherent to the creator of an artwork that gives control over how images and reproductions of the work are used, and creates a pathway to licensing fees. "I sold quilts, I got paid for 'em. In that sense, I'm like Walmart," says Mary Margaret Pettway, quilt maker and lifelong resident of Gee's Bend. "The bonus is the copyright, which we did not know we had, or we were entitled to." Pettway lives in a worn trailer at the end of a steep, dirt driveway; when we spoke, she was quilting in the corner of a community center that serves a daily free lunch to seniors.

As a general matter, copyright is inherited, like any part of one's estate—an immaterial heirloom. In some countries, like Australia, artists receive royalties on a resale, so if a quilt were purchased for \$200 and next sold to a museum for \$20,000, the artist would benefit, receiving some percentage of the increase. In the United States, at least for now, there are no resale royalties; copyright can police only the most egregious instances of appropriation, paying scant dividends on use of images of the work. But at least, as Ms. Pettway puts it, "it acknowledges the quilter."

Many Bend residents have little to pass on to their children but their quilts. If those quilts were long ago removed to hang on the walls of a museum in a faraway city, the copyright attached means that they can still, in an abstract way, be handed down. In the absence of a final will and testament by the artist, copyright is inherited along pathways of descent that vary state by state. In Alabama, if someone like Ms. Pettway has no living descendants—children, grandchildren,



great-grandchildren—copyright transfers to her siblings. If all siblings are deceased, it rolls to their direct descendants. If no siblings, then it would be divided among grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and next to their descendants. If none of those people are living, claim of copyright is awarded to the state of Alabama until the work passes into the public domain, 70 years after the death of the artist.

Pettway leans over her quilting frame, hand-stitching a recreation of her mother Lucy's *Birds in the Air* (1981). "Basically," she says, "we're living history. We're being taught everywhere." Painter Amy Sherald, who created Michelle Obama's official presidential portrait for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, included a reference to that very quilt in the first lady's dress. This makes Pettway proud.

Even so, if we're talking about exploitation, she said, the quilt makers have never been more exploited than they are now. In an era of commercialization, globalization, and social media, there are plenty of imitations, and a veritable craze of quilts and goods that are #geesbendinspired across Instagram and Etsy. These are created by artisans who no doubt appropriate the aesthetic of Gee's Bend—but do so in a manner that is entirely disconnected from its origin.

Now, William Arnett is retired, and the William S. Arnett collection—more than 1,100 works of art by 160 African-American artists from the South, including 120 quilt makers—is managed by an Atlanta-based nonprofit formed by the Arnetts in 2010: the Souls Grown Deep Foundation. Since 2014, the foundation has been dedicated to placing the works, by gift or purchase, into the permanent collections of leading art museums.

More importantly for the artists, with each acquisition, the foundation's four-person staff takes steps to reconnect the quilt makers with news of and plans for their work, ensuring that they are set up to dictate how images of their work are used, and to receive any income, however modest, from such usage.

Of course, in a place like Gee's Bend, there are challenges in administering these benefits, not limited to long searches for some of the living heirs, sometimes even requiring the engagement of private investigators.

Consider the case of quilt maker Magalene Wilson, who passed away in 2001 at age 100. "Interestingly, up until last week," says Souls Grown Deep's Scott Browning, "we thought her name was 'Magdelene.'" That's how she was credited over a decade of exhibition and publication of work.

Mary McCarthy, who came to Gee's Bend with the civil-rights movement in the 1960s, works with Souls Grown Deep repairing quilts, and serves informally as the Bend's local historian. She recently sent Browning a picture of Wilson's headstone, revealing the error in the spelling of her name. He confirmed "Magalene" in census and Social Security records, but her date of birth remains unclear: "The Gee's Bend books list it as 1898," he says, "her grave marker as 1900, the

US Social Security Death index as 1897, while the US Social Security Applications and Claims Index has it as 1901.”

The next step is to track down Wilson’s heirs, which can be complicated for the same reasons, in many cases compounded by the nature of surnames in a community with roots in slavery. Historically, slaves took the name of the plantation on which they worked, and in Gee’s Bend, after the departure of Joseph Gee and the dispersal of his slaves, the Pettway family ran the largest plantation in the area. Of the 120 quilters on the foundation’s list, no fewer than 50 share the last name Pettway, though they may not be related by blood. You’ll find many Youngs and Williamsses in the Bend for the same reasons.

Accordingly, it has sometimes taken years for the foundation to locate all of the heirs who would divide one artist’s copyright between them. In this case, Browning was days from hiring a private investigator. It took him weeks, and the on-site help of Ms. McCarthy and Ms. Pettway, to locate Gwendolyn “Zu” Pettway, the granddaughter of Wilson’s brother, and seemingly her last living relative.

Zu Pettway is now aware that she owns copyrights. But those rights will require enforcement.

Few publishing houses, museums, and other institutions—however prestigious—are eager to pay for usage for an image. Enter the Artists Rights Society, which represents the intellectual property rights of over 80,000 artists and estates, from Frida Kahlo to Andy Warhol to Le Corbusier. Souls Grown Deep approached ARS to track requests, review contracts, process payments, and pursue usage opportunities for the artists in the Arnett collection. With the addition of Zu Pettway to the ARS roster, the rights of 61 of the 120 quilt makers on Browning’s list are now represented. But it is a constant, everyday battle to make sure that images aren’t used without permission, and that when copyright fees are owed, the artists get paid, and fairly.

**T**oday, Scott Browning is retracing William Arnett’s steps, knocking on quilt makers’ doors in the Black Belt’s sweltering late summer heat. He arrives at Flora Moore’s trailer, on a dirt lane not from far where she has lived since 1951.

Moore was one of many quilt makers who traveled with the Arnetts to the early museum openings—the Museum of Fine Arts Houston and Milwaukee Art Museum. “I was surprised and so happy to see my work on the wall,” she said over the roar of the A/C unit in her living room. “Really, to tell you the truth, now, we were so excited to see some of them. Started crying and talkin’ about, ‘Ooh, we took that and made that from nothing and now *look* how people got us up here.’ Made us feel *good*.”

Browning points to one of Flora’s quilts in a large hardcover book. “You remember that one right there.”

Moore pulls back and laughs, as if seeing an old picture of herself.

“So this is going into the permanent collection of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Then you probably recognize that one.” He points to another. “That we’re gifting to the Fine Arts Museum at Spelman College.” It’s a great honor, Browning tells her, so he was here to share that news, to make sure she knew where her work was going, “and another thing that we’ve been talking to people about,” he continues, “is copyright.”

Moore had heard the term before, when news of the lawsuits buzzed through the neighborhood. “Copyright this, copyright that.... One of my cousins tried to get me—you know those quilts you just got through showin’ me?—He told me, ‘You can put a lawsuit against this.’ I told him, ‘I ain’t puttin’ no lawsuit against [the Arnetts]; they’ve been too good to us to put a lawsuit against them.’”

“Now, it’s not a fortune,” Browning assures Moore. He walks her through examples of artists whose quilts appeared in the exhibition catalog at the de Young museum in San Francisco. They received \$75 each. Artists with work on coffee mugs at the gift shop received \$350. For deceased quilters, living heirs would be asked for their approval of the image use, and then would divide that sum among them.

“Well, I want to become a member.” Moore signs the contract Browning handed her, bringing the number of quilters represented by ARS up to 62. “Something’s better than nothing!”

While the dollar amounts are small, and unlicensed artifacts like “Quilts of Gee’s Bend” greeting-card sets are sold to this day at Black Belt Treasures gift shop right across the river, the significance of the contract Moore just signed is not. Copyright protection by the Artists Rights Society is the first time the quilters have had a lasting connection to the work they sold, or any agency in its usage, since it left their homes.

“I’m happy,” Moore said, “because you just sit down and just think all the things you have done that you can’t see no more. It’s nice to know somebody’s thinking about me and trying to bring some of my quilts back and let me look at them again.”

## ART REVIEW

### At the Met, a Riveting Testament to Those Once Neglected



Thornton Dial's two-sided relief-painting-assemblage, "History Refused to Die" (2004), also gives this Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition its title. His work is in conversation with quilts by, from left, Lola Pettway ("Housetop," circa 1975); Lucy T. Pettway ("Housetop" and "Bricklayer" blocks with bars, circa 1955); and Annie Mae Young ("Work-clothes quilt with center medallion of strips," from 1976). 2018 Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for The New York Times

**By Roberta Smith**

May 24, 2018

American art from the 20th and 21st centuries is broader, and better than previously acknowledged, especially by museums. As these institutions struggle to become more inclusive than before, and give new prominence to neglected works, they rarely act alone. Essential help has come from people like [William Arnett](#) and his exemplary [Souls Grown Deep Foundation](#). Their focus is the important achievement of black self-taught



# The New York Times

artists of the American South, born of extreme deprivation and social cruelty, raw talent and fragments of lost African cultures.

The foundation is in the process of dispersing the entirety of its considerable holdings — some 1,200 works by more than 160 artists — to museums across the country. When it is finished, it may well have an impact not unlike that of the Kress Foundation, which from 1927 to 1961 gave more than 3,000 artworks to 90 museums and study collections.

The Met was the first of the foundation's beneficiaries, [receiving a gift of 57 artworks](#) by 30 artists in 2014. Now, the museum celebrates its fortune with [“History Refused to Die: Highlights From the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift.”](#) A selection of 29 pieces, many of them rarely if ever shown, it is suffused by an electrifying sense of change.

The Met's curators (and conservators) took nearly two years and several trips to Atlanta to finalize their selection, and they chose astutely. The show seems nearly perfect in art, installation and irrefutability of greatness. It has been organized by Randall R. Griffey and Amelia Peck, curators, respectively in the Met's modern and contemporary department and its American Wing.

The effect is majestic. The show validates the art's stature, but even more it transforms the Met's encyclopedic footprint while also being of a piece of its longtime efforts to collect African art and American folk art.

Nine of Thornton Dial's characteristically fierce, self-aware works are here, mostly his rangy relief paintings as well as three extraordinary drawings that in wildly different ways commemorate Sept. 11, Florence Griffith Joyner and Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration. A dozen of the 18 geometric quilts in the gift are here. Both muted and boisterous, they challenge the conventional history of abstraction and reflect the talents of the [Gee's Bend collective](#), especially those of the Pettway family. There are also various assemblage reliefs and sculptures by [Lonnie Holley](#) and [Ronald Lockett](#). And the most extensive conversation — in their endless intricacies and shared uses of fabrics, textures and the grid — is between the works of Dial, [who died in 2016](#), and the quilters. The Dials start to seem like crazed, dimensionalized quilts, the quilts like flattened, more orderly Dials.

Nearly everything included is made from scavenged objects and materials, scraps redolent of the shameful history of black labor in the South — before 1865, of course, but also in the Jim Crow era — transformed by aesthetic intelligence and care into forms of eloquence and beauty. One of the most valuable lessons here is the works' inherent formal and material sense of defiance, and of beauty itself as an act of resistance.

# The New York Times



The bright colors and joyful asymmetry of Loretta Pettway's "Medallion," circa 1960, beckons visitors to this exhibition's galleries, where a selection of 29 pieces of the Met's gift from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation are on view. 2018 Loretta Pettway/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for the New York Times

The show's two hypnotic galleries have very different emotional and visual tones. After beckoning you from down the corridor with the bright colors and joyful asymmetry of Loretta Pettway's "Medallion" quilt (circa 1960), the exhibition starts with an elegiac room of works nearly devoid of color.

Dial's "Shadows of the Field" (2008) evokes haunted expanses of cotton plants with the help of strips of synthetic cotton batting. Along one wall, the "work-clothes" quilts of Lucy Mingo and four other Gee's Benders reflect lives of hard labor and scrimping; their fabrics are almost exclusively blues and gray denim whose worn textures and faded colors are masterfully played off one another.

Emma Lee Pettway Campbell's "Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt" from around 1950 may bring to mind Robert Rauschenberg's ["Bed,"](#) from 1955, which conspicuously incorporates an old quilt. Joe Minter's 1995 symmetrical arrangement of rusted shovels, rakes, hoes and chains, seems to bless the whole room. Regal and severely gorgeous, it suggests both a group of figures and an altar. Its title pulls no punches: "Four Hundred Years of Free Labor." Yet I also found myself thinking of the beguiling offering stand once called "Billy Goat and Tree," from Sumer around 2600 B.C., one of the first full-page color reproductions in H.W. Janson's "History of Art."

The second gallery erupts in color, delivered foremost by seven Gee's Bend quilts as brilliant in palette as in use of materials, especially Lucy T. Pettway's woolly full-spectrum interplay of the traditional "housetop" and "bricklayer" patterns in a quilt

# The New York Times

from around 1955. Annie Mae Young's 1976 work brings together the two quilt sensibilities here, surrounding a medallion of burning stripes of contrasting corduroy with a broad denim work-clothes border. It may evoke, rather fittingly, a small striped abstraction that Robert Motherwell made in 1941-44 and titled "[Little Spanish Prison.](#)"



A dozen of the 18 geometric quilts included in the Souls Grown Deep Foundation gift are here, including Lucy T. Pettway's "Housetop" and "Bricklayer" blocks with bars, left, and Mary Elizabeth Kennedy's "Housetop-nine-block 'Log Cabin' variation." 2018 Lucy T. Pettway/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Agaton Strom for the New York Times

Blessing the artworks here is a jaw-dropping Dial: a two-sided relief-painting-assemblage, and source of the exhibition's title, "History Refused to Die." One side shows a couple chained to, yet sheltered, by a white metal structure and surrounded by a turbulent expanse: pieces of fabric deftly knotted that seem to billow and blow like a stormy sea or clouds. The other side is a rough weaving of the straight stalks of the okra plant, which came to the United States from Africa during the slave trade. Its scattered colors are primarily the red, black, green and yellow of the 13-striped Afro-American flag and, at the upper right, the simple silhouette of a white dove of peace or freedom. At the top, a row of short steel angle beams, spray-painted with horizontal dashes of browns and black, flips in suggestion between good and bad, from a crown or headdress, to the top of a tall fence or chain-gang garb.

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Several other works here are similarly simply masterpieces. In “Locked Up Their Minds,” Purvis Young offers his own version of James Ensor’s [“Christ’s Entry Into Brussels in 1889.”](#) Young’s large painting on wood shows a group of black figures, some with halos, others holding up padlocks signifying their freed minds to flocks of angels, while two immense white possibly rampant horses add to the drama. The show’s coda is Dial’s ironically titled “Victory in Iraq,” a relief-painting from 2004. It hangs just outside the second gallery, its barbed wire and twisted mesh against a field of fabric and detritus defines and holds space as lightly and powerfully as Jackson Pollock’s [“Autumn Rhythm,”](#) displayed nearby.

It is de rigueur when writing on exhibitions of this kind to review the shortcomings of the terms used to allude to the vast body of art, emerging in the 20th century, created by people limited by racial inequities, poor education, mental or physical challenges, or poverty. “Outsider” was superseded by “self-taught,” which didn’t work since many artists are self-taught in some way. (Quilters, for example, learn their art from their female relatives.) The latest term is the more elastic “outlier” — put in play by [an enormous survey](#) seen recently at the National Gallery of Art in Washington that argued for the integration of such work with supposedly “insider” art while also undermining that position — since the outlier works often overwhelmed everything else.

At this point I think of the words of the little boy refusing to eat his vegetables in the famous New Yorker cartoon: “I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it.” Let’s just call all of it art and proceed.

Let’s see the rest of the Met’s gift. Let’s see Mr. Arnett’s foundation, now headed by the experienced museum director, Maxwell Anderson, complete its task. So far it has dispersed around 20 percent of its holdings to seven museums, with the most recent gift — 34 works to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond — [announced this week](#). By these numbers, another 40 or so museums should benefit. Every thinking American understands the suffering these artists and their ancestors have endured and should grasp the meaning of Dial’s poem of a title. History has indeed refused to die, and some of its greatest art is also very much alive.



# The Alabama Women Who Made Their Quilts a Part of Modern Art

Ryan Leahey | Apr 11, 2018



Quilter Loretta Pettway reading in her room, 1937. Photo by Arthur Rothstein. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



**Loretta Pettway (Gee's Bend)**

*Blocks and Strips*, 1980

Greg Kucera Gallery

As the Alabama River wends its way south and west, it meanders in a series of bends before emptying its muddy waters into Mobile Bay. Along the way, about 30 miles from Selma, one of those bends cuts deep into the land to form an isolated peninsula, which is filled by the hamlet of Gee's Bend.

Gee's Bend (now also known as Boykin) is home to generations of African-American families whose ancestors were brought to the area as slaves, back when the South was covered in plantations. The story of the people of Gee's Bend is, therefore, similar to many stories in the South: one marked by inequality, institutionalized racism, and poverty. But the history of Gee's Bend is also a story of community and creativity, the results of which stand as high-water marks in American art.

# ART SY

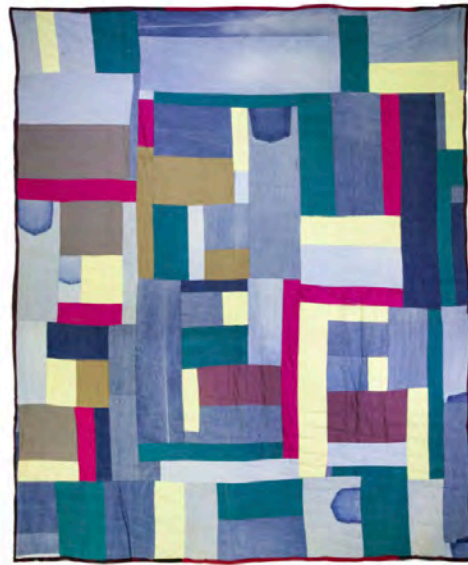
Quilts are the artistic treasures of Gee's Bend. Benders, as locals are called, have been stitching these exquisite textiles since the early 1900s, or perhaps even earlier (some date the tradition back to Joseph Gee's cotton plantation in the early 19th century). Eventually, as interest in the artworks spread, the quilts left the bend and traveled the country, becoming recognized as striking works of modern art featured in museums and galleries from Houston and New York to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

Initially, of course, the quilters of Gee's Bend—primarily African-American women—were not aiming for museum walls or international acclaim. Quilts were essential to daily life. In winter months, they were used to fight off the bitter cold in bed or to cover wood-slatted walls, thus keeping blustery drafts at bay. They were likewise spread out on the floor, where updrafts seeped in through creaky floorboards.

But the quilts of Gee's Bend aren't like typical quilts. Their distinct designs have a lot to do with the past and present of the place in which they were made, as if history seeps into the fabric.



**Mary Lee Bendolph (Gee's Bend)**  
*Arrow*, 2005  
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum



**Mary Lee Bendolph (Gee's Bend)**  
*Ghost Pockets*, 2003  
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

The settlement inauspiciously came into existence in 1816, when Joseph Gee made the trek from North Carolina to take over the land, slaves in tow. His white nephews inherited it, increased the slave holdings, then sold the people and land to another relative, Mark Pettway, who brought more slaves and built a grand plantation house on the property.

After the Civil War and emancipation, the freed slaves of Gee's Bend became sharecroppers (many kept the Pettway name). But with the economy in disarray and no local infrastructure, the area fell into poverty. Photographs from 1937—many taken by Arthur Rothstein, who was dispatched to the area by the New Deal federal government—show fallow fields and a smattering of ramshackle cabins.

# ART SY

Yet the photographs also show a tight-knit community, which is reflected in its quilting tradition. The list of surnames of Gee's Bend quilters reads like a family reunion—Pettway, Bendolph, Kennedy, Bennett—sometimes four generations deep. Mothers taught their daughters and granddaughters to gather fabric scraps sourced from sackcloth, old shirts, or pant legs, and patchwork pieces together. But there was always an emphasis on individuality—a sense of improvisation and originality known as “my way” quilting. Nevertheless, after decades of quilting, it's clear the thousands of wildly different quilts still fit into a family.

As with some other arts, however, quilt-making has traditionally struggled for recognition as a fine art. Like weaving and embroidery, quilting is often seen as merely a craft, or “women's work,” as opposed to painting and sculpting, which were traditionally considered more manly, high-art forms. In terms of art world acceptance, the women of Gee's Bend had an added disadvantage: their blackness.

Calling these quilts “outsider art”—with their imperfections, improvisations, and untrained creators—only serves to shine a light on the walls the art world builds around itself and, by extension, the people and traditions that are being excluded.

Yet on visuals alone, the quilts of Gee's Bend feel right at home next to great works of modern art. Their colors, designs, and entrancing emotive qualities reflect ideals of modern abstract art movements. There are undeniable flashes of Frank Stella, Paul Klee, and Piet Mondrian, and hard-edge painters such as Ad Reinhardt. In fact, many Gee's Bend quilts predate like-minded works by their more famous abstract art cousins.

The quilter Gloria Hoppins, for instance, seems to have similar geometric fascinations as Josef Albers, while the mystique and calm depths of Pearlie Pettway Hall call to mind the meditative mind of Agnes Martin. These comparisons, however, tend to overshadow the quilts' less-heralded links to West African art and weaving traditions.

Recently, art forms traditionally associated with craft—textile arts in particular—have enjoyed greater exposure and popularity in the art world, a development for which the quilts of Gee's Bend also played a large role. In 2002, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in collaboration with the nonprofit Tinwood Alliance, presented a seminal exhibition of 70 Gee's Bend quilts. The show became a national hit, traveling to 11 other cities and launching an explosion of interest in the quilts, the artists, and their community.

The exhibition was the brainchild of Bill Arnett, a white art dealer from Georgia, who, through his Tinwood Alliance, took a liking to what he called “black vernacular art.” Soon, Gee's Bend quilts that had sold for a few bucks (if they sold at all) were going for tens of thousands of dollars. Jane Fonda gave Tinwood a million dollars in support, and Kathy Ireland licensed the quilt designs for a home goods line of furniture, lamps, and bric-a-brac.

Gee's Bend hasn't changed that much, though. Money—some of which got entangled in legal disputes with the Arnett family and other outsiders—found its way to many of the quilters, but over 50 percent of the community's population still lives below the poverty line. Women in Gee's Bend still quilt, though, and their works continue to tell an American story that's still being sewn.



# The New York Times

## Gee's Bend Quilts in 2 Shows at Lehman College



**The Gee's Bend Tradition** Loretta Bennett's "Broken Housetop" (2008), foreground, is part of this Lehman College Art Gallery exhibition of work by quilters in Gee's Bend, Ala. Mary Lee Bendolph's "Camo" (2005) is at bottom left. Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

**By Martha Schwendener**

Feb. 19, 2015

Many people are familiar with the Gee's Bend quilts by now. Made by generations of African-American women who were the descendants of slaves, and later sharecroppers, the quilts developed on an isolated peninsula carved out by the Alabama River southwest of Selma. Over the last decade and a half, however, the art world has discovered Gee's Bend, and the quilts have been exhibited in museums nationwide. A small show at the Lehman College Art Gallery of 14 quilts by seven artists, all made since 1990, and an accompanying exhibition of photographs, offers an update.



# The New York Times

What makes this tradition so compelling is that unlike most quilts in the European-American tradition, which favored uniformity, harmony and precision, Gee's Bend quilts include wild, improvisatory elements: broken patterns, high color contrasts, dissonance, asymmetry and syncopation. Aesthetically similar to modern geometric painting and West African textiles, the quilts came into being alongside gospel, blues and jazz. Originally made from feed sacks and castoff work clothes, they were not just for private use: Displaying your work on a clothesline showed the whole community your artistry, skill and ingenuity.

In the current work at Lehman College, the textiles look more contemporary: Recycling is still favored, but sometimes the fabric is bought from thrift stores — and the earlier quilts, made after picking cotton, between chores and child-rearing, have a slightly more breathless quality. (Gee's Bend quilt makers were historically prolific: Some historians have suggested that as many as 10,000 quilts were made there during the 20th century, piled six or seven high on a bed for warmth in wood-plank houses. The earliest surviving examples are from the 1920s.)

Several quilts here are by Mary Lee Bendolph and include denim and bright, almost Day-Glo colors. Since Gee's Bend quilters came to the attention of museum curators, they've also begun adding simple titles. Ms. Bendolph's "Camo" (2005) uses camouflage-pattern fabric, and "Arrow" (2005) has triangles of fabric that form an arrow pointing to the right.

Loretta Bennett favors sly, humorous titles. In "Broken Housetop" (2008), the traditional housetop composition of squares-within-squares falls apart in the middle into a fabulous jumble of red and blue rectangles. In "Log Cabin With Cracks" (2014) she also plays with the log cabin pattern, which typically uses rounds of different colored bars of fabric; her composition is cracked into a fantastically minimal half-yellow, half-red quilt, divided diagonally by a zigzag border and marked with splashes of black and blue, almost like brush strokes. Leola Pettway's quilts feature the pulsating stars associated with Gee's Bend.

The other newish element here is a wall of prints made in collaboration with Paulson Bott Press in Berkeley, Calif., which started making Gee's Bend textile patterns into etchings in 2005. While the colors and scale are not as vibrant as in the quilts, they are pleasing fragments. Louisiana Bendolph's "American Housetop (for the Arnetts)" (2005) is dedicated to the family who connected Gee's Bend with the museum world (although their role has sometimes been criticized), and Loretta Pettway's gorgeous "Lazy Gal" (2006) and "Old Beauty" (2006) use sinuous lengths of color, reminiscent of Bauhaus textile masters like Anni Albers, but jazzier.

Photographs trace the often depressing history of Gee's Bend. After emancipation, freed slaves lived on the former Pettway plantation (hence the predominance of the name Pettway among quilters). After the stock market crash drove the price of cotton down

# The New York Times

and merchants out of business, Gee's Bend residents were left so destitute that at one point, many were surviving on wild fruits and berries.

This made Gee's Bend one of the poorest communities in the country, and attractive to the New Deal's Resettlement Administration, later the Farm Security Administration. Roy Stryker, of that agency, sent photographers to document the area, both before and after federal aid. Photographs from 1937 by Arthur Rothstein show the interiors of Gee's Bend homes, with walls papered in newsprint to cover the gaps and Jorena Pettway sewing a quilt, with two girls assisting. Marion Post Wolcott's photographs from 1939 depict the new school built with federal aid, as well as the river ferry to Camden, whose service was terminated after the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Gee's Bend in 1965, and Benders followed him across the river to march from Selma to Montgomery. (The ferry was also stopped, presumably, to halt voter registration.)

Linda Day Clark — assigned by The New York Times in 2002 to photograph the women of Gee's Bend for the House & Home section — shows a different view of the region, capturing the red clay soil, laid bare in a dirt road, so rich in color that it seems digitally tweaked but also linked to the rich colors in the quilts.

A Freedom Quilting Bee founded in 1966 employed a number of quilters; for a time they had contracts with Bloomingdale's and what was then Sears, Roebuck, mostly for corduroy pillow covers and baby quilts. But the mass production of Gee's Bend quilts wasn't a lasting success. It was resented by some of the quilters and embraced by others. The women in Ms. Day Clark's photographs are older; children and grandchildren have moved to Mobile, Ala., and Atlanta, and even Bridgeport, Conn., a center for migrants from the Bend. And the conditions that fostered such an extraordinary aesthetic tradition have changed. There are distractions like television and the Internet. In 1963 the Army Corps of Engineers built a dam that flooded around 2,500 acres of farmland, changing the topography of the region.

The dire need for warmth and comfort that drove these women to create innovative designs and pass them along as family heirlooms is happily a thing of the past. As much as this exhibition is a record of the present, it also suggests that the soulful stitching tradition from the bottomlands may be near the end of its run.

*"The Gee's Bend Tradition" and "Linda Day Clark: The Gee's Bend Photographs" continue through April 24 at Lehman College Art Gallery, Lehman College, 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West, the Bronx; 718-960-8731, [lehman.edu/gallery](http://lehman.edu/gallery).*

# Mary Lee Bendolph, Lucy Mingo, and Loretta Pettway

## Quilters of Gee's Bend

2015 NEA National Heritage Fellow

Boykin, Alabama

The community of Boykin, Alabama, known to many as Gee's Bend due to its proximity to a bend in the Alabama River, is home to some of the most highly regarded quilters in America. These include Mary Lee Bendolph, Lucy Mingo, and Loretta Pettway, three of the chief quilters from the oldest generation of quilters who represent this profound cultural legacy. Described by the *New York Times* as "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced," the quilts are known for their improvisational and inventive quality, often being compared to 20th-century abstract paintings.



Mary Lee Bendolph, born in 1935, learned to quilt from her mother. She split her time as a child between working in the fields and attending school. While quilting, Bendolph prefers to use fabric from old clothing to avoid wastefulness, and her style of quilting tends to mix geometric shapes, like rectangles and squares, with abstract designs.

Loretta Pettway, born in 1942, made her first quilt when she was 11 years old with guidance from her grandmother, stepmother, and other female relatives. Pettway tends to use the bricklayer pattern in her quilts, which resembles a pyramid or set of steps. Two quilts by Loretta Pettway and one by Mary Lee Bendolph were in the group chosen for the U.S. Postal Stamp Collection issued in 2006. Today, paintings of these quilts are part of the Quilt Mural Trail, leading visitors around the cultural and natural landscape of Gee's Bend.

A homemaking educator who was born in 1931 and worked for the extension service for more than 20 years, Lucy Mingo has served as a leading quilting instructor,

mentoring apprentices and students all over the country. In 2006, Mingo received a Folk Arts Apprenticeship grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts to teach quilting to her daughter, Polly Raymond.

The quilting tradition of Gee's Bend dates back to the early 19th century when female slaves used strips of cloth to make bedcovers. Gee's Bend's quilts were first noticed nationally in the 1960s when the women were members of the Freedom Quilting Bee which was organized during the Civil Rights movement to help produce a much-needed income stream into the community. The quilts made by the quilting bee were sold throughout the U.S. In the early 1980s, the staff from the Birmingham Public Library revisited the area as part of a photography and oral history project. Mary Lee Bendolph, Lucy Mingo, and Loretta Pettway's quilts have been on exhibit all across the nation, including exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

### ***Interview with Mary Lee Bendolph and Lucy Mingo by Josephine Reed for the NEA***

#### **LEARNING TO MAKE QUILTS**

**NEA:** Who taught you how to make quilts?

**MARY LEE BENDOLPH:** My mother taught me. She started me off piecing quilts. I wanted her to let me piece quilts with the machine but she wouldn't do that. She gave me a needle and some little pieces. Well, we had nothing to start making the quilts with because at that time we didn't have much clothes and things.

**LUCY MINGO:** My mother taught me how to make quilts. I started making quilts when I was 14 years old. She would sit up by the fireside at night and make quilts, and I said, "Mama, teach me how to do this." I thought it was fun just to sit down and get in there and make quilts. The first quilt I made was crooked. She said, "Uh-uh, you've got to do better than this. You can't have a crooked quilt." Well, I kept on and kept on until I was taught how to do it real well. I make quilts real well now, and I thank God for it.

**NEA:** Can you tell me about the tradition of using material from old clothes for your quilt?

**MINGO:** Just like this shirt I got on. Now, the front of this shirt is worn out but the back is good. We always got the back. And just like these pants I got on, the front would be white but we [could] always get from the back. We used what we had. We weren't able to buy material like we're doing now, but we still made quilts.

**NEA:** How long does it take you to make a quilt?



**MINGO:** If it's not a fancy quilt, I can make it in a day-and-a-half. But on a fancy quilt, you know, you can't sit there and sew every day. You sew so much each day. It would take me about four days to do that. But just a regular quilt it doesn't take me that long.

**NEA:** And that's just for the top of the quilt?

**MINGO:** Just the top. But when you make the quilt you've got to get a lining. And when you get the lining, it's got to be a little larger the quilt top. Then when you get the lining, you've got to buy the cotton. But we didn't have to buy cotton. We always picked cotton from the field. And my husband would save me two sacks of cotton every year. Then you get a stick and beat the cotton out very thin and spread it over the quilt. When you get it on the quilt, that's the line that you put it on first. Then you put the top on second. Then you put a frame on this side and one on that side and one crossed and another one crossed. Then you tack the quilt on that. You'd bring the quilt down every day and sit there and quilt the quilt until it was time to get the lunch ready for the kids to come from school. Then you roll it back up in the top of the loft. When the children came home, they had to study their lesson. You couldn't get it done until they got back to school, and that's the way I did it.

**NEA:** Now, when you started you were quilting by hand. You didn't sew with a machine, is that right?

**MINGO:** We didn't quilt with a machine.

**BENDOLPH:** No. They wouldn't let you do it with the machine. No. That was Mama's; that's hers. And she would give me some things to sew with, but she'd never let me use that machine. That's what I really wanted to do. She said, "No, you're not supposed to sew on my machine."

**NEA:** Do you remember the first time you did a quilt on a machine? Was it like, "This is so easy?" Did you feel like you were cheating?

**MINGO:** I felt like I had to do it right, because if I broke Mama's machine I know she would never let me get on it again. And so I took my time and sewed slowly, not too fast. When I got my quilt finished, I told my mother—I said, "Mama I'm finished with my quilt." She came and looked at it and she said, "You did a good job this time." And from then on she taught me how to sew on the machine.

**BENDOLPH:** Well, Mama still wouldn't let me stay on the machine. If she wasn't at home I got on the machine and sewed while she gone. I told you I was already smart. And then if I thought she was going to come back, I put the machine back and got out of the way. I didn't tell her a thing but she just knew exactly what I did. She said, "The next time you do [that], I'm going to give you a whipping." I didn't borrow it no more until she gave it to me to let me to do it. I wouldn't do no more on my own.

**NEA:** When you were younger would you plot out the pattern of the quilt before you started sewing? Or did you do it as you went along?

**MINGO:** I wasn't making any fancy quilts. I was just making string quilts. You get this long strip and sew it together. You get another long strip and sew it together, and you did that until you got the quilt all over the bed. We were just making string quilts at that time. The first quilt [my mother] taught me how to make was a Z, and a Z was very easy to make. And she said, "You got it, and I'm going to turn you loose and let you do it. You're on your own." That's what I did, and I started doing them on my own because I had a lot of children. I had to make quilts to keep them warm.

**NEA:** And what about you, Ms. Bendolph? When you were young did you plan out what you were going to do? Or did you just let the cloth tell you what it was going to do?

**BENDOLPH:** Well, I didn't have anything to do. I just used what little rags I could find. My mama had 17 children. We didn't have big material or nothing. The only thing I had was the rags I wore. And I knew it wasn't going to be very good, but when I made them they were beautiful to me.

**NEA:** When did you start really doing patterns?

**MINGO:** I started doing patterns after I was married for a long time. I used to go to the Quilting Bee and do a little work, but it wasn't very much because I was in the lunchroom in Boykin High School. I would watch other people's patterns. I had a mother who could make [a quilt from] anything you drop on the ground. And I would go to her house on Saturdays and be around there watching her make quilts. And once I began to make quilts, I said, "Mama, I want to make quilts like you." She said, "You do?" So she came down there one Saturday, and she got on the machine. She said, "I'm going to cut your pattern out," and that was a Z. And she started from there. And from there on I just went on doing my own thing. I can make any kind of quilt. I made one that's got 23,580 pieces in it.

**NEA:** So during that time when you were quilting, when were you able to go out and buy material and decide on a pattern before beginning? What was that feeling like?

**MINGO:** It was fantastic for me because I loved to sew. And when I could buy material to make quilts, I just went crazy buying material and making quilts. I made lots and lots of quilts.

**NEA:** Were you in Gee's Bend during the Freedom Quilting Bee? Can you tell me a little bit about that, Ms. Mingo?

**MINGO:** Well, I worked at Freedom Quilting Bee for a long time. A guy named Francis X. Walter, he got together the ladies who he thought could do a good job of quilting with Estelle Witherspoon. Mary Lee Bendolph and a lot of people from Boykin were there, and I was from Boykin too. And we all worked and worked and worked so we could get paid. We began to get paid. We worked a long time without any money, but when the Lord blessed us we began to get paid. And I got a job at the school. I quit working there, and I began to make my quilts at home. And when I always made them I sold them at the Quilting Bee.

## RECOGNITION AS AN ART FORM

**NEA:** Quilts are so practical. You make them because you want to keep your family warm. You give them as gifts to family but they're for use. And then somebody comes along and says these are art. What did you think when you were told that?

**MINGO:** Well, I'll tell you, with the work I had put in mine, I knew it had to be something because we made rows by a finger. And we quilted the stitches so you could hardly see them. We would do that from about ten in the morning until about 2:30 in the afternoon. See, when the children went to school, then you started quilting. And by the time you had to get their dinner ready for them, you had to stop. And so we'd do that [everyday] because we didn't have anything else to do. Later on down through the years I got a job.

**NEA:** In the late 1990s, William Arnett came to Gee's Bend and suddenly your quilts were exhibited in museums in Boston, New York, Houston, Philadelphia... and I'm only naming a few cities.

**BENDOLPH:** Yes, I sold four. And they were all I really had. And then I started making better quilts because people started bringing things home. It was 2001 then, and that's when I made so many quilts. I enjoyed it.

**NEA:** Well, did you go to any of the museums where the quilts were? What did that feel like to walk in and see your quilt?

**MINGO:** I don't know how I felt. I just felt like I was somebody. I had made quilts, you know, and then museums had them. I really enjoyed that.

**NEA:** Did it make you think about your quilts differently?

**MINGO:** Yes, I did. What made me think about mine so differently was that I made them, and I was just making them for the kids to sleep on them. When I began to sell quilts, someone always wanted one. I really enjoyed that. And going off on trips, I just enjoyed it to death because I had met so many people and so many people had gotten my quilts. I have quilts all over the world.

**NEA:** And you do too, Ms. Bendolph.

**BENDOLPH:** Yes. Yes. I thank the Lord for that. I said that I could do my best, and then when the people came to talk to me about it, I did the best I could. And I thank the Lord that my quilts could be out there in the world where people could enjoy them. And they would tell me how much they love the quilts that I had made.

**NEA:** Now, do you still make quilts to keep you warm?

**BENDOLPH:** Yeah, that's what the quilt is for—to keep you warm. When you lay down, you have the quilt to cover up.

## “Quilts Is in Everything”

By Laura M. Addison | Spring 2015



**Mary Lee Bendolph**, *Blocked Out*, 2009. Quilted fabric (corduroy, cotton, velvet), 86 × 85 inches. Museum of International Folk Art, IFAF Collection (FA.2014.60.1). Photograph by Blair Clark.

“The most miraculous works of modern art America has produced” is how Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times* described the quilts by African American women from Gee’s Bend, Alabama, that were exhibited in 2002 at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

He continued with superlatives, stating that the Whitney show was “the most ebullient exhibition of the New York art season.” Seen in the context of one of the country’s mainstays of modern and avant-garde art, the visually arresting textiles were compared to paintings by some of the most celebrated American and European



modern artists: Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Barnett Newman, Frank Stella, Agnes Martin, Josef Albers.

There is much more at play in this “miraculous” transformation than the quilts’ remarkable aesthetics and the compelling biographies of their makers. Through these quilts, we can come to better understand a place and its inhabitants as they lived through the legacy of slavery, racism, the Great Depression, the civil rights movement, and beyond. The Museum of International Folk Art’s recently acquired quilt *Blocked Out* (2009), by Gee’s Bend quilter Mary Lee Bendolph, allows us to access these watershed moments in American history through the complex experience of one African American community and an enduring tradition of quilting. Nearly every account of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, begins with its isolation, which has at times been by design and at other times imposed from the outside. This seclusion is due in part to this forty-square-mile peninsula’s geography, nestled within a pronounced U-shaped bend in the Alabama River, and for many years accessible only by a single road and an unreliable ferry to the town of Camden. But as J. R. Moehringer wrote in his 1999 *Los Angeles Times* article “Crossing Over,” “Some of their isolation owes to geography. ... Some of their isolation owes to personality. ... But most of their isolation owes to white folks across the river, who have done everything possible to make Gee’s Bend lonelier than a leper colony.”

At times, isolation has come to characterize Gee’s Bend in a romanticized way, as if they were a lost society removed from “civilization” and only recently “discovered.” “Gee’s Bend represents another civilization. Gee’s Bend is an Alabama Africa,” the Reverend Renwick Kennedy wrote in a 1937 *Christian Century* article, referring to the fact that Gee’s Bend residents, or “Benders,” were almost exclusively African American descendants of slaves. Couched in the rhetoric of “progress” and “development,” Rev. Kennedy’s comment drew a picture of a community that was as socially anomalous as it was physically isolated. More recently, Gee’s Bend and its quilters have been portrayed as anachronisms, as evident in the proposed subtitle of a 2002 publication on Gee’s Bend quilts: “Masterpieces from a Lost Place.”

The unspoken implications of such characterizations — that is, the “miraculous” quilts from a “lost” place — are various: the recognition of American masterpieces hidden in plain sight; the accidental artistry of individuals lacking formal art schooling; and the potential for the economic transformation of a poor, rural community through the patronage of the art establishment. Gee’s Bend was not lost for those who lived there. At the various moments when Gee’s Bend was “found,” it served as an expedient example of one political agenda or another. Indeed, this community has come in and out of the public eye with some regularity.

As storied as Gee's Bend's history has been, there was nothing romantic about the racism and poverty Benders experienced. Gee's Bend was established as a plantation in 1816 by Joseph Gee and worked by the labor of slaves. After Emancipation, the freed slaves stayed at Gee's Bend as sharecroppers and tenant farmers, eventually gaining ownership of their lands through a 1930s federal pilot program. This program was prompted by national attention to the dire poverty and starvation in the community after the widow of a Camden merchant settled debts with the Benders by taking everything they owned, from tools and animals to food and furniture. The Red Cross provided emergency food and supplies, and President Roosevelt authorized low-interest loans so that residents could buy land and live in the modest "Roosevelt homes" that the government built.

Gee's Bend became a New Deal poster child when two photographers were assigned to document conditions there, also in the 1930s. Farm Security Administration photographer Arthur Rothstein came through in 1937, creating images of the conditions there as part of a larger project to expose poverty in the United States and the federal government's programs to alleviate it. Two years later, Marion Post Wolcott returned to photograph the changes in Gee's Bend after residents had received assistance from the federal government. These two bodies of work were intended to serve as a before-and-after testimonial to the success of FDR's programs in dealing with poverty during the Great Depression.

Later, in 1962, the contours of the Gee's Bend landscape were literally altered by the damming of the Alabama River just south of the community, flooding their farming lands and changing the means by which Benders could financially sustain themselves. Several years later, the civil rights movement came to Gee's Bend when Martin Luther King Jr. visited in 1965, encouraging Benders to cross the river to register to vote. Which they did. Shortly thereafter, ferry service was discontinued. Camden's notorious sheriff, Lummie Jenkins, famously explained the ferry's closure after the King visit in this way: "We didn't close the ferry because they were black. We closed it because they *forgot* they were black." The ferry didn't reopen until 2006.

What did this isolation mean for the quilting tradition of Gee's Bend? Discussions of the segregation of Gee's Bend from society at large have often implied that these quilts somehow manifest a "pure" or "authentic" aesthetic that developed untainted by outside influence. Of course, no place or artistic practice exists in a vacuum and, though often struggling with adversity, the quilters routinely interacted with the towns that lay beyond the river's bend. More importantly, the women had the camaraderie of quilting as a collective activity. "Piece by yourself; quilt together," Mary Lee Bendolph said in an interview published in *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their*

*Quilts* (2002). She often speaks of the mutual influence among Benders and how they get their ideas for compositions from looking at each other's quilts.

Significantly, the various Gee's Bend exhibitions of the early 2000s were not the first time Gee's Bend quilts took New York by storm. These "miraculous works of modern art" had made their debut four decades earlier, capturing the attention of art and design cognoscenti such as artist Lee Krasner, designer Ray Eames, interior designer Sister Parish, and *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland. In the mid-1960s, an Episcopalian priest and civil rights worker, Francis X. Walter, saw some quilts hanging outside of homes and, aware of how the river dam project had negatively impacted the area farms, ventured to suggest quilting as an alternative revenue stream. He encouraged the women to form a collective, named the Freedom Quilting Bee, and helped them market their work in the Northeast, including to Bloomingdale's and, later, Sears. The Freedom Quilting Bee also served as an awareness campaign to draw attention to the social injustices taking place in the South. Thus, the series of Gee's Bend exhibitions at the turn of the twenty-first century followed a pattern remarkably similar to the "discovery" of these quilts and their makers in the 1960s. Born in 1935, Mary Lee Bendolph was the seventh child of seventeen children. In her youth, she worked in the fields, and later worked in a variety of textile-related industries, including sewing uniforms for the army. She counts among her family members who practice or practiced this quilting tradition her mother (Aolar Mosely), various aunts and in-laws, her daughter (Essie Bendolph Pettway), and her daughter-in-law (Louisiana Bendolph). While she learned quilting by watching her mother, she said in the 2002 interview, "I mostly take after my aunt Louella, but I never make a quilt altogether like anybody. I watched Mama back when she could work, but she was slow and careful more than me." In a 2014 interview conducted by her son, Rubin, she recalled her first two quilts. They took her two years to complete because she didn't have enough pieces of fabric, which she picked up here and there, including pieces found along the road. She entirely hand-stitched them because her mother was using the sewing machine. Bendolph left school at age fourteen when she became pregnant and was no longer permitted to attend. Eventually, Bendolph would have eight children.

When Martin Luther King Jr. came to Gee's Bend in 1965 and encouraged the Benders to cross the river to register to vote, Bendolph, inspired, crossed. She even attempted to follow King's lead in drinking from a whites-only water fountain, until her sister — out of fear — held her back. She joined the Freedom Quilting Bee at first, but when she wasn't getting paid for her work, she stopped participating. Her own isolation was compounded by her reliance upon her husband to drive her anywhere. Quilting threaded its way through all of these moments in Bendolph's life.

Quilts were made to be functional and practical, stitched together from cast-off clothes and other fabrics to keep people warm as they slept and to block the drafts from old windows. They were not for display or for sale; they were a necessity. And that they were made from used clothing has always been a point of pride, as Mary Lee Bendolph explained in a 2006 interview with Matt Arnett published in *Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt*: "It hurts me to see people waste up things. ... It makes me feel good when I take old clothes and make something beautiful. And old clothes have spirit in them. They also have love."

There are some characteristics that Gee's Bend quilts share — most significantly an improvisational quality that has in part been shaped by the limited availability of materials and a tight sense of community. Whereas European quilting is typically distinguished for its precision and strict adherence to established patterns, the African American quilters of Gee's Bend may begin with a traditional pattern but depart from it to make each quilt unique. "I never did go by a pattern," Bendolph said in the Arnett interview. "Didn't none of us." Whenever asked how she makes decisions about the composition of a quilt, her answers alternate between matter-of-fact pragmatism and divine inspiration. What's available, what fits, and what feels right — those are her primary criteria. Her ideas for her quilts come from looking and everyday scenes: the back of a truck, a barn, the objects in a yard, the view from an airplane window, the photos from the newspapers and magazines that have been plastered to the wall of her home for decades. "Quilts is in everything," she told Arnett.

She delights at the idea that these quilts, which she and her ancestors have made all these years to stay warm, are now classified as art. "They didn't know nothin' 'bout no art," Bendolph quipped. "Didn't know what art was." At the same time, as she noted in a gallery talk at the Addison Ripley Gallery in 2009, "Prayer and singing have a whole lot to do with these quilts." Her memories of her mother quilting include prayer, singing, and tears. The singing of hymns by the quilters have been part of every Gee's Bend quilt exhibition opening reception, and Bendolph acknowledges God for the gift of quilting. "The biggest thing I know is the Lord is the one who fix it [the quilt] to go together for me," she said in her son's interview.

The Museum of International Folk Art's quilt, *Blocked Out*, is one of Mary Lee Bendolph's later quilts, which she made before ceasing work altogether. She began it in 2008, but her work was interrupted when she suffered a stroke. She finished it a year later. It is made almost exclusively of corduroy, with the exception of some strips and squares of cotton and a single golden-yellow patch of velvet that provides a visual entry point to the composition. The different fabrics are laden with their own respective meanings. Corduroy, for example, has at various times over the centuries



been associated with royalty, the working class, academics, and hippie counterculture. Moreover, corduroy has a particular history with respect to the Freedom Quilting Bee and, hence, the region including Gee's Bend. In 1972, when the collective contracted with Sears & Roebuck to sell their quilts, the department store supplied the quilters with a huge quantity of corduroy to use, and the material has been used by quilters in the area ever since. Bendolph's use of corduroy, then, harkens to Gee's Bend's own history.

Overall, *Blocked Out* has a quilt-within-a-quilt design, all radiating outward from the golden-yellow velvet rectangle. The small squares and rectangles that immediately surround this velvet block suggest a more conventional quilt pattern such as "Postage Stamp." Yet as the quilt expands from this off-centered center, it departs from the square-based orderliness of a traditional quilt into improvisation. Perfection is not the objective for any of these quilts. In fact, it is the imperfections — the worn areas, the tears, the irregularities of the stitches, and the bleeding of colors from one square to the next—that gives *Blocked Out* and other quilts like it their "spirit."

*Blocked Out* offers many lines of inquiry and layers of meaning, including a door onto the often troubled narrative of an American place bound to land and legacy. Of the many chapters in Gee's Bend history, this latest — of the Gee's Bend quilt once again breaching the wall of High Art — is the most celebratory, and the most attentive to the history of a place and the agency of its inhabitants. It is also the most fluid, as only time will tell if the appreciation of Gee's Bend quilts will be lasting this time and if the promises of art patronage are accompanied by economic and social equity.

**Laura M. Addison** is the curator of North American and European collections at the Museum of International Folk Art. She is developing the museum's collection of folk art from the American South in preparation for an upcoming exhibition.

## ART REVIEW

### Like Watching Paint Thrive

By Roberta Smith

June 28, 2012



Installation view, *Context Message*, 2012 at Zach Feuer Gallery, New York

Painting is a lot of things: resilient, vampiric, perverse, increasingly elastic, infinitely absorptive and, in one form or another, nearly as old as humankind. One thing it is not, it still seems necessary to say, is dead.

Maybe it appears that way if you spend much time in New York City's major museums, where large group shows of contemporary painting are breathtakingly rare, given how many curators are besotted with Conceptual Art and its many often-vibrant derivatives. These form a hegemony as dominant and one-sided as formalist abstraction ever was.

But that's another reason we have art galleries. Not just to sell art, but also to give alternate, less rigid and blinkered, less institutionally sanctioned views of what's going on.

# The New York Times

Evidence of painting's lively persistence is on view in Chelsea in five ambitious group exhibitions organized by a range of people: art dealers, independent curators and art historians. Together these shows feature the work of more than 120 artists and indicate some of what is going on in and around the medium. Some are more coherent than others, and what they collectively reveal is hardly the whole story, not even close. (For one thing there's little attention to figuration; the prevailing tilt is toward abstraction of one sort or another.) A few of the shows take a diffuse approach, examining the ways painting can merge with sculpture or Conceptual Art and yield pictorial hybrids that may not even involve paint; others are more focused on the medium's traditional forms.

All told, these efforts release a lot of raw information into the Chelsea air, creating a messy conversation, a succession of curatorial arguments whose proximity makes it easy to move back and forth among them, sizing up the contributions of individual artists as well as the larger ethos.

## Context Message

The robust, even wholesome physicality of Mr. Higgs's show finds its complement in "Context Message," at [Zach Feuer](#), a rather more barbed presentation of what I would call painting, quasi-painting and anti-painting. With works by about 40 artists (including some collectives and collaborations), the show has been organized by Tyler Dobson and Ben Morgan-Cleveland, two young artists who run the small, forward-looking gallery Real Fine Arts in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

It starts off winningly. At its center hang two beautiful quilts, one by Lola Pettway, the other by Mary Lee Bendolph and Ruth P. Mosely, all from the acclaimed quilters' collective of Gee's Bend, Ala. The works surrounding these two amazing pictorial objects oscillate erratically among the ironic, the sincere, the subversive and the snarky.

R. H. Quaytman, known for cool photo-based works, contributes a small, sweet but rather generic oil portrait of her husband. The great blues guitarist and self-taught painter John Fahey (1939-2001) is represented by a lively gestural abstraction.

The canvasses of Merlin Carpenter, Bjarne Melgaard and Michael Krebber all add fairly obvious twists to ironic art-world self-reference with images and texts copied from the Internet. In between, paintings by Alistair Frost, Margaret Lee and Michele Abeles, David Diao and Martin Kippenberger all reward attention.

This show never quite comes together, but that may be its point. Its scrappy waywardness gives a vivid picture of the general unruliness in and around painting right now.

## Quilters Serenade McCain

BY ELISABETH BUMILLER

APRIL 21, 2008 3:17 PM



Members of the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective and John McCain. (Photo: Mary Altaffer/Associated Press)

GEE'S BEND, Ala. — Senator John McCain was serenaded with old Negro spirituals by the quilters of Gee's Bend, Ala., on Monday as he and his campaign entourage made a slow-moving trip by ferry in this isolated, overwhelmingly Democratic pocket of the state.

In a made-for-a-political-commercial scene that was recorded by his traveling campaign camera crew from an accompanying pontoon boat, Mr. McCain stood on the prow of the Gee's Bend ferry as it crossed a part of the Alabama River. Under a hot morning sun, a dozen African-American quilters surrounded him and, as Mr. McCain looked vaguely embarrassed, sang "Old Ship of Zion."

At least one, Mary Lee Bendolph, said she was learning toward supporting Senator Barack Obama, but she praised Mr. McCain for turning up in Wilcox County, which locals say has never before been visited by a presidential candidate.

"He came here and he did something, and you know what, nobody else did," Mrs. Bendolph said. "He showed himself that he wanted to help us, and that made me feel good."

Mr. McCain's visit with the women, a striking contrast to the fast-moving political drama playing out between Mr. Obama and Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton in Pennsylvania, began at the quilting center in Gee's Bend. There one of the quilters had grabbed Mr. McCain's hand and danced awkwardly with him while the others sang. Mr. McCain then invited the women to the back of his campaign bus, where they kept up the serenade.

The Gee's Bends quilts, in vibrant geometric patterns made from scraps at hand, became famous after they were exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2002 and 2003.

On Monday, Mr. McCain wrote a check and bought three of them, all large in size. His campaign declined to say what he paid, but quilts of similar size in the Gee's Bend center had price tags of \$2,500 each.



# Smithsonian MAGAZINE

## Fabric of Their Lives

**There's a new exhibition of works by the quilters of Gee's Bend, Alabama, whose lives have been transformed by worldwide acclaim for their artistry**

By Amei Wallach | OCTOBER 2006



It was Annie Mae Young's 1976 work-clothes quilt that caught collector William Arnett's eye and led to the Gee's Bend exhibitions. (Annie May Young's 1976 work-clothes quilt, Collection of the Tinwood Alliance)

Annie Mae Young is looking at a photograph of a quilt she pieced together out of strips torn from well-worn cotton shirts and polyester pants. "I was doing this quilt at the time of the civil rights movement," she says, contemplating its jazzy, free-form squares.

Martin Luther King Jr. came to Young's hometown of Gee's Bend, Alabama, around that time. "I came over here to Gee's Bend to tell you, You are somebody," he shouted over a heavy rain late one winter night in 1965. A few days later, Young and many of her

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friends took off their aprons, laid down their hoes and rode over to the county seat of Camden, where they gathered outside the old jailhouse.

"We were waiting for Martin Luther King, and when he drove up, we were all slappin' and singin'," Young, 78, tells me when I visit Gee's Bend, a small rural community on a peninsula at a deep bend in the Alabama River. Wearing a red turban and an apron bright with pink peaches and yellow grapes, she stands in the doorway of her brick bungalow at the end of a dirt road. Swaying to a rhythm that nearly everyone in town knows from a lifetime of churchgoing, she breaks into song: "We shall overcome, we shall overcome...."

"We were all just happy to see him coming," she says. "Then he stood out there on the ground, and he was talking about how we should wait on a bus to come and we were all going to march. We got loaded on the bus, but we didn't get a chance to do it, 'cause we got put in jail," she says.

Many who marched or registered to vote in rural Alabama in the 1960s lost their jobs. Some even lost their homes. And the residents of Gee's Bend, 60 miles southwest of Montgomery, lost the ferry that connected them to Camden and a direct route to the outside world. "We didn't close the ferry because they were black," Sheriff Lummie Jenkins reportedly said at the time. "We closed it because they *forgot* they were black."

Six of Young's quilts, together with 64 by other Gee's Bend residents, have been traveling around the United States in an exhibition that has transformed the way many people think about art. Gee's Bend's "eye-poppingly gorgeous" quilts, wrote *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman, "turn out to be some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I'm wildly exaggerating, see the show), arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South." Curator Jane Livingston, who helped organize the exhibition with collector William Arnett and art historians John Beardsley and Alvia Wardlaw, said that the quilts "rank with the finest abstract art of any tradition." After stops in such cities as New York, Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Boston and Atlanta, "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" will end its tour at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's de Young Museum December 31.

The bold drama of the quilt Young was working on in 1965 is also found in a quilt she made out of work clothes 11 years later. The central design of red and orange corduroy in that quilt suggests prison bars, and the faded denim that surrounds it could be a comment on the American dream. But Young had more practical considerations. "When I put the quilt together," she says, "it wasn't big enough, and I had to get some more material and make it bigger, so I had these old jeans to make it bigger."

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Collector William Arnett was working on a history of African-American vernacular art in 1998 when he came across a photograph of Young's work-clothes quilt draped over a woodpile. He was so knocked out by its originality, he set out to find it. A couple of phone calls and some creative research later, he and his son Matt tracked Young down to Gee's Bend, then showed up unannounced at her door late one evening. Young had burned some quilts the week before (smoke from burning cotton drives off mosquitoes), and at first she thought the quilt in the photograph had been among them. But the next day, after scouring closets and searching under beds, she found it and offered it to Arnett for free. Arnett, however, insisted on writing her a check for a few thousand dollars for that quilt and several others. (Young took the check straight to the bank.) Soon the word spread through Gee's Bend that there was a crazy white man in town paying good money for raggedy old quilts.

When Arnett showed photos of the quilts made by Young and other Gee's Benders to Peter Marzio, of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), he was so impressed that he agreed to put on an exhibition. "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" opened there in September 2002.

The exhibition revived what had been a dying art in Gee's Bend. Some of the quilters, who had given in to age and arthritis, are now back quilting again. And many of their children and grandchildren, some of whom had moved away from Gee's Bend, have taken up quilting themselves. With the help of Arnett and the Tinwood Alliance (a nonprofit organization that he and his four sons formed in 2002), fifty local women founded the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective in 2003 to market their quilts, some of which now sell for more than \$20,000. (Part goes directly to the maker, the rest goes to the collective for expenses and distribution to the other members.)

Now a second exhibition, "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt," has been organized by the MFAH and the Tinwood Alliance. The show, which opened in June, features newly discovered quilts from the 1930s to the 1980s, along with more recent works by established quilters and the younger generation they inspired. The exhibition will travel to seven other venues, including the Indianapolis Museum of Art (October 8-December 31) and the Orlando Museum of Art (January 27-May 13, 2007).

Arlonzia Pettway lives in a neat, recently renovated house off a road plagued with potholes. The road passes by cows and goats grazing outside robin's-egg blue and brown bungalows. "I remember some things, honey," Pettway, 83, told me. (Since my interview with her, Pettway suffered a stroke, from which she is still recovering.) "I came through a hard life. Maybe we weren't bought and sold, but we were still slaves until 20, 30 years ago. The white man would go to everybody's field and say, 'Why you not at work?'" She paused. "What do you think a slave is?"

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As a girl, Pettway would watch her grandmother, Sally, and her mother, Missouri, piecing quilts. And she would listen to their stories, many of them about Dinah Miller, who had been brought to the United States in a slave ship in 1859. "My great-grandmother Dinah was sold for a dime," Pettway said. "Her dad, brother and mother were sold to different people, and she didn't see them no more. My great-grandfather was a Cherokee Indian. Dinah was made to sleep with this big Indian like you stud your cow.... You couldn't have no skinny children working on your slave master's farm." In addition to Pettway, some 20 other Gee's Bend quiltmakers are Dinah's descendants.

The quilting tradition in Gee's Bend may go back as far as the early 1800s, when the community was the site of a cotton plantation owned by a Joseph Gee. Influenced, perhaps, by the patterned textiles of Africa, the women slaves began piecing strips of cloth together to make bedcovers. Throughout the post-bellum years of tenant farming and well into the 20th century, Gee's Bend women made quilts to keep themselves and their children warm in unheated shacks that lacked running water, telephones and electricity. Along the way they developed a distinctive style, noted for its lively improvisations and geometric simplicity.

Gee's Bend men and women grew and picked cotton, peanuts, okra, corn, peas and potatoes. When there was no money to buy seed or fertilizer, they borrowed one or both from Camden businessman E. O. Rentz, at interest rates only those without any choice would pay. Then came the Depression. In 1931 the price of cotton plummeted, from about 40 cents a pound in the early 1920s, to about a nickel. When Rentz died in 1932, his widow foreclosed on some 60 Gee's Bend families. It was late fall, and winter was coming.

"They took everything and left people to die," Pettway said. Her mother was making a quilt out of old clothes when she heard the cries outside. She sewed four wide shirttails into a sack, which the men in the family filled with corn and sweet potatoes and hid in a ditch. When the agent for Rentz's widow came around to seize the family's hens, Pettway's mother threatened him with a hoe. "I'm a good Christian, but I'll chop his damn brains out," she said. The man got in his wagon and left. "He didn't get to my mama that day," Pettway told me.

Pettway remembered that her friends and neighbors foraged for berries, hunted possum and squirrels, and mostly went hungry that winter until a boat with flour and meal sent by the Red Cross arrived in early 1933. The following year, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration provided small loans for seed, fertilizer, tools and livestock. Then, in 1937, the government's Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration) bought up 10,000 Gee's Bend acres and sold them as tiny farms to local families.



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In 1941, when Pettway was in her late teens, her father died. "Mama said, 'I'm going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love.'" There were hardly enough pants legs and shirttails to make up a quilt, but she managed. (That quilt—jostling rectangles of faded gray, white, blue and red—is included in the first exhibition.) A year later, Arlonzia married Bizzell Pettway and moved into one of the new houses built by the government. They had 12 children, but no electricity until 1964 and no running water until 1974. A widow for more than 30 years, Arlonzia still lives in that same house. Her mother, Missouri, who lived until 1981, made a quilt she called "Path Through the Woods" after the 1960s freedom marches. A quilt that Pettway pieced together during that period, "Chinese Coins", is a medley of pinks and purples—a friend had given her purple scraps from a clothing factory in a nearby town.

"At the time I was making that quilt, I was feeling something was going to happen better, and it did," Pettway says. "Last time I counted I had 32 grandchildren and I think between 13 and 14 great-grands. I'm blessed now more than many. I have my home and land. I have a deepfreeze five feet long with chicken wings, neck bones and pork chops."

The first exhibition featured seven quilts by Loretta Pettway, Arlonzia Pettway's first cousin. (One in three of Gee's Bend's 700 residents is named Pettway, after slave owner Mark H. Pettway.) Loretta, 64, says she made her early quilts out of work clothes. "I was about 16 when I learned to quilt from my grandmama," she says. "I just loved it. That's all I wanted to do, quilt. But I had to work farming cotton, corn, peas and potatoes, making syrup, putting up soup in jars. I was working other people's fields too. Saturdays I would hire out; sometimes I would hire out Sundays, too, to give my kids some food. When I finished my chores, I'd sit down and do like I'm doing now, get the clothes together and tear them and piece. And then in summer I would quilt outside under the big oak." She fingers the fabric pieces in her lap. "I thank God that people want me to make quilts," she says. "I feel proud. The Lord lead me and guide me and give me strength to make this quilt with love and peace and happiness so somebody would enjoy it. That makes me feel happy. I'm doing something with my life."

In 1962 the U.S. Congress ordered the construction of a dam and lock on the Alabama River at Miller's Ferry, just south of Gee's Bend. The 17,200-acre reservoir created by the dam in the late 1960s flooded much of Gee's Bend's best farming land, forcing many residents to give up farming. "And thank God for that," says Loretta. "Farming wasn't nothing but hard work. And at the end of the year you couldn't get nothing, and the little you got went for cottonseed."

Around that time, a number of Gee's Bend women began making quilts for the Freedom Quilting Bee, founded in 1966 by civil rights worker and Episcopalian priest Francis X. Walter to provide a source of income for the local community. For a while, the bee (which operated for about three decades) sold quilts to such stores as Bloomingdale's, Sears, Saks and Bonwit Teller. But the stores wanted assembly-line quilts, with orderly,

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familiar patterns and precise stitching—not the individual, often improvised and unexpected patterns and color combinations that characterized the Gee's Bend quilts.

"My quilts looked beautiful to me, because I made what I could make from my head," Loretta told me. "When I start I don't want to stop until I finish, because if I stop, the ideas are going to go one way and my mind another way, so I just try to do it while I have ideas in my mind."

Loretta had been too ill to attend the opening of the first exhibition in Houston. But she wore a bright red jacket and a wrist corsage of roses to the opening of the second show last spring. Going there on the bus, "I didn't close my eyes the whole way," she says. "I was so happy, I had to sightsee." In the new show, her 2003 take on the popular "Housetop" pattern—a variant of the traditional "Log Cabin" design—is an explosion of red polka dots, zany stripes and crooked frames within frames (a dramatic change from the faded colors and somber patterns of her early work-clothes quilts). Two other quilts made by Loretta are among those represented on a series of Gee's Bend stamps issued this past August by the U.S. Postal Service. "I just had scraps of what I could find," she says about her early work. "Now I see my quilts hanging in a museum. Thank God I see my quilts on the wall. I found my way."

Mary Lee Bendolph, 71, speaks in a husky voice and has a hearty, throaty laugh. At the opening of the new exhibition in Houston, she sported large rhinestone earrings and a chic black dress. For some years, kidney disease had slowed her quilting, but the first exhibition, she says, "spunked me to go a little further, to try and make my quilts a little more updated." Her latest quilts fracture her backyard views and other local scenes the way Cubism fragmented the cafés and countryside of France. Her quilts share a gallery with those of her daughter-in-law, Louisiana Pettway Bendolph.

Louisiana now lives in Mobile, Alabama, but she remembers hot, endless days picking cotton as a child in the fields around Gee's Bend. From age 6 to 16, she says, the only time she could go to school was when it rained, and the only play was softball and quilting. Her mother, Rita Mae Pettway, invited her to the opening in Houston of the first quilt show. On the bus ride home, she says, she "had a kind of vision of quilts." She made drawings of what would become the quilts in the new exhibition, in which shapes seem to float and recede as if in three dimensions.

"Quilting helped redirect my life and put it back together," Louisiana says. "I worked at a fast-food place and a sewing factory, and when the sewing factory closed, I stayed home, being a housewife. You just want your kids to see you in a different light, as someone they can admire. Well, my children came into this museum, and I saw their faces."

To Louisiana, 46, quilting is history and family. "We think of inheriting as land or something, not things that people teach you," she says. "We came from cotton fields, we

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came through hard times, and we look back and see what all these people before us have done. They brought us here, and to say thank you is not enough." Now her 11-year-old granddaughter has taken up quilting; she, however, does her drawings on a computer.

In Gee's Bend not long ago, her great-grandmother Mary Lee Bendolph picked some pecans to make into candy to have on hand for the children when the only store in town is closed, which it often is. Then she soaked her feet. Sitting on her screened-in porch, she smiled. "I'm famous," she said. "And look how old I am." She laughed. "I enjoy it."

# The Boston Globe

## *With These Hands*

A group of Alabama women, descended from slaves, took the scraps of their lives and pieced together American treasures

By Linda Matchan, Globe Staff | May 15, 2005



Mary Lee Bendolph, 69, poses with several of her quilts at her home in Gee's Bend, Alabama. (Globe Staff Photo / Michele McDonald)

GEE'S BEND, Ala. -- It is just after sunrise, and the quilters of Gee's Bend are getting on another bus, this time to Memphis.

Unknown three years ago, they are celebrities now. Dozens of women from a poor, isolated, almost-forgotten African-American community whose quilting, now recognized as a remarkable artistic achievement, has propelled them to national acclaim.

On this February morning, they're headed to the opening of an exhibition of their quilts at a Memphis art museum. Soon, they'll be on their way to Boston, for the June 1 opening of their show at the Museum of Fine Arts.

When they depart Gee's Bend for Boston, pastor Clinton Pettway from Ye Shall Know the Truth Baptist Church plans to do what he always does when the women get ready to leave: "Pray them off and pray them back."

"Lord been so good to us," Mary Lee Bendolph tells the pastor this morning, as some three dozen of the quilters, ages 43 to 87, climb aboard the bus, many with their hair freshly curled, Bendolph with her Bible, as always.

When everyone is seated, she leads the women in singing a favorite spiritual, and pastor Pettway begins to pray.



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"Thank you Lord for waking us up in the morning," he says.

"Thank you Lord," the women respond, and bow their heads.

"Thank you God for another opportunity," he says. "Thank you Lord for what you are doing for this community. Thank you Lord for finally beginning to bless their labors."

"Amen," the quilters say, raising their heads again, their voices lifted together as the bus disappears toward Wilcox County Road 29, away from the place you can't find on a map.

Just a few years ago, the quilts of Gee's Bend were all but forgotten, stashed under beds and in closets, given away, some of them so "raggly," as they say here, they'd been torn up or burned. Most of the women, dispirited and uninspired, didn't even quilt anymore.

Now their quilts have hung in major museums around the country, including New York's Whitney Museum of American Art; The New York Times called them "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced." They've gone to Washington, and Houston, even Kazakhstan and Armenia. The quilters have been on "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" and have met Laura Bush and Jane Fonda. A host of retail products is on the market, inspired by their work.

Legions of visitors have flocked to museums to see the quilts, even setting new attendance records. They're lured by their raw, bold beauty, to be sure, but also the story behind them -- how practically everyone in Gee's Bend is descended from slaves; how the quiltmakers are part of an unbroken tradition of generations of quilters there; how their quilts were pieced together from scraps of fertilizer sacks, shirttails, worn-out overalls, tobacco pouches, and stuffed with the cotton they'd picked in the fields.

How somehow, incredibly, the hurried work of their hands turned into hundreds of bold, abstract, idiosyncratic, and joyous quilts that critics have compared to the work of Matisse, Mondrian, and Rothko.

It still seems unreal, no matter how many times Bendolph, 69, is asked to tell the story, no matter how many cities she visits or autographs she signs.

"All we knew was we was making quilts to keep warm," she keeps saying. "We didn't know it was *art*."

There is many a place you can visit in this country and never get a hint of its past life, its ghosts, its soul. Gee's Bend isn't one of them.

To get here from Atlanta, you pass through Selma, a center of the civil rights struggle. Generations of "Benders" subsisted as sharecroppers and tenant farmers for absentee white landlords, and you constantly bump up against vestiges of the region's history, which is not always pretty.

An area 5 miles across and 7 miles deep centered at the town of Boykin, 50 miles southwest of Selma, Gee's Bend sits at an abrupt U-shaped bend of the meandering Alabama River. It also owes its name to Joseph Gee, the area's first white settler.

The majority of residents bear the surnames of the white people who once owned their forebears -- Pettway, Young, Bendolph. "We all got slave master's names," quilter Arlonzia Pettway explains. "We all was something else."

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About 700 residents live in the community, in a county in which 40 percent of the people live below the federal poverty line and the 16.4 percent unemployment rate is the highest in the state.

The fields alongside the long 18-mile stretch of road leading into Gee's Bend are littered with empty lots, rusted-out cars, the charred shells of houses on rubble. A ramshackle house trailer, with a hole in its sagging roof, has yet to be patched after a tree fell on it last year during Hurricane Ivan.

Much of the landscape is just emptiness interrupted by homes, and the occasional cow or goat. A lot of the dwellings are the tiny "Roosevelt houses" built after the Depression when Gee's Bend was declared one of the poorest places in the United States and singled out for federal relief.

The town center, such as it is, is an intersection with a post office; the only evidence of the quilting here is an unevenly lettered sign, "Gee's Bend Quilt Coll." marking the building that houses the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective, founded in 2003 to represent the quilters and market their work.

Yet Gee's Bend, which has four churches despite its tiny population, is a rich artistic and spiritual universe. You hear it in the music of the morning mockingbirds and the woodpeckers -- or "peckerwoods," to use Bendolph's more lyrical phrase. You hear it in the poetry of the names of the people who live here, or are buried here -- Creola, Mariah, Aolar, Wisdom, Arcola, Revil, Arlonzia.

You see it in the random tableaux you come across in unexpected places. A set of perfectly formed, fresh buzzard tracks embedded in mud. A rusty wash basin on a hook on Bendolph's woodshed, hanging with such precision and simplicity it could be a Walker Evans photograph.

Stories -- of racial politics, of poverty, of hard times, of faith -- are close to the surface, and spoken of frequently, especially now that outsiders are interested and ask.

There's the story of the ferry, for one. Decades ago there was a ferry that went from Gee's Bend to the white town of Camden, on the far side of the Alabama River, so that Benders could buy their groceries and borrow money.

But in 1965, the service was cut off when the people of Gee's Bend crossed over to vote and participated in civil-rights marches. After that they had to drive the 56 miles around the river to Camden, assuming they had a car, which few did.

"They cut off their own noses to spite their own faces," says Arlonzia Pettway. "People still don't go to Camden to shop, they go to Selma."

Nettie Young, who is 87, tells about growing up in a house "with a hole in the middle" and planks laid across the floor, and 20 people living inside. The wind blew so fiercely in the winter they would line the walls with pieces of newspaper, catalogs, whatever they could find, to keep the cold out. "The first shoes I put on my feet, I was 12 years old," she says.

Babies came early to women in Gee's Bend, and often. Bendolph, who "didn't get no further than sixth grade" had her first at 14, and seven more followed. Young had 11. Lola Pettway had 12; during one pregnancy, she barely managed to hold off delivering until she got her two sacks of cotton picked for the day.

And everyone remembers the midwives who were frequent visitors, and how hard it was to afford them, given they had so many babies and so little money. How did they pay?

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"With a hog," says Lola Pettway.

"With a quilt," says Arlonzia Pettway. "Anything."

Mary Lee Bendolph's first quilt wasn't made under such pressure. She started it when she was 12 and finished when she was 13 because it took her a whole year to find enough rags to piece it together.

"Any kind of piece you found, you picked it up and washed it," says Young. "When they started putting flour in sacks, and fertilizer, we took those sacks and made clothes. That was a big help."

"Old clothes, that's all I had," says Annie Mae Young, 75, mother of nine children. "I just took the raggy parts off."

Ideas for quilts could come from anywhere. Nettie Young made a quilt about 35 years ago -- a searingly beautiful collage of celestially inspired geometric forms that she called "Milky Way" -- and says, "I just got the idea from the sky."

Arlonzia Pettway's quilt stories reach back the furthest. Pettway is one of four women who meet several mornings a week at a senior center to make quilts, and also to sing -- sacred hymns and spirituals that were improvised decades ago on plantations and got passed along.

They make the quilts much the same way they always have, except now they stuff the insides with batting from Wal-Mart in Selma, not cotton from the gin mill. Quilters make their own designs, and hand-stitch the layers together, stretching the quilt over a large rectangle of wood supported by two crude sawhorses. With well-used nails, one of the women hammers the edges of the quilt into the wood to hold it tight.

A tall, regal-looking woman born in 1923, Arlonzia Pettway has a story that seems so sorrowful even Bendolph has said, "When she first started telling me that, I thought she was wrong."

Pettway says quilting started in her family with her great grandmother Dinah, who was born in Africa and was captured at 14 -- she was lured onto a slave ship, which was decorated with red ribbons and red lights because "they thought African people liked the color red." The ship landed in Mobile in 1859.

"She was told she was bought for a price. She cost one dime," Pettway says. "One ten-cents."

Pettway was 7 when her great grandmother died, but she remembers Dinah's stories about making quilts in secret from torn-up old clothes, crouching in ditches with tree brush over her. "They was in slavery," says Pettway. "They worked all day, then they'd go under the pile of brushes, and set the log down to sit on and make a quilt. The slave masters didn't allow them to piece a quilt. They didn't want them to do nothing, they didn't want them to learn how to write, they didn't want them to have no beautiful quilts, they didn't want them to have no correct language. That's what she told me."

Everyone seems to agree: Life changed in Gee's Bend because of Annie Mae Young's quilt, the one made out of torn-up pieces of denim work pants.

In 1998, a man named Bill Arnett happened to see a photograph of it in a book about African-American quilters published in 1996; the quilt -- with a vividly colored center medallion made of strips

# The Boston Globe

of corduroy -- was unceremoniously draped over a woodpile where Young, standing in the foreground, was airing it out.

Arnett is a prodigious art collector, scholar, and founder of the Tinwood Alliance, a nonprofit foundation based in Atlanta for the support of African-American vernacular art. For 20 years, he'd traveled around the South scouting art made by unknown African-American visual artists. In 1996, he started working on a two-volume set of books on the subject, "Souls Grown Deep." It was published by Tinwood Books, which Arnett cofounded with Jane Fonda, a financial partner.

The quilt was unlike anything Arnett had ever seen, and he lost no time tracking Young down. "I had no idea when I went to see Annie Mae's quilt that it would open up what it did," he says.

It opened up a world of women who had been making quilts most of their lives and "didn't think anyone in the world would appreciate what they were doing," says Arnett, who now works with his four sons on Atlanta-based Tinwood ventures, including organizing quilt exhibitions and trips and overseeing retail projects. Young introduced him to other Gee's Bend women, who showed him their own quilts, hauling them out of storage rooms and bedrooms where they'd kept them between the springs and mattresses to make their beds softer.

The more quilts he saw, the more quilters he met, and he began to understand the significance of the fact that quilting in Gee's Bend had remained more or less intact over nearly two centuries with just a few mutations. "It became obvious that we'd stumbled upon one of the great art-producing communities that I'm aware of," Arnett says.

At first, he thought he would write a book about the quilts, but the plan got more ambitious after he consulted Jane Livingstone and John Beardsley, art historians who had written for his "Souls Grown Deep" books. Beardsley, a senior lecturer at Harvard Design School, recalls being dazzled by them. "They were thematically distinct, they were geographically distinct, they had a kind of coherence, and the quilts were just plain amazing," he says.

Eventually Livingstone and Beardsley curated the show, which appeared first at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts in 2002 and has been to eight US cities. The exhibition continues to draw huge crowds, including an uncommon mix of African-American and white visitors, and "people with berets and black sweaters," says Paul Arnett, coauthor, with his father Bill, of two books about Gee's Bend.

Even more unexpected is that the success of the show has inspired a renaissance of quilting in Gee's Bend. When Bill Arnett first visited Gee's Bend, it was a dying art. Only five or six women were still making quilts, and few were making more than two or three a year.

"I can tell you a lot of the people in Gee's Bend was slowly dying and had nothing in their life to look forward to," says Rubin Bendolph, a Huntsville engineer who grew up in Gee's Bend. He's the son of Mary Lee and the sister of Essie Bendolph Pettway, another quiltmaker.

"Quilting got reenergized, after so many of the women saw the way they were being received," says another of Bill's sons, Matt Arnett, who acts as a liaison for the Atlanta-based Tinwood organization between the Gee's Bend community and the art world.

Currently, the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective, consisting of about 50 quilters, is marketing the women's quilts on a website ([www.quiltsofgeesbend.com](http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com)), for an average price of \$3,000. A Manhattan gallery specializing in contemporary American art, Ameringer & Yohe Fine Art, will be exhibiting the work of about a dozen of the quiltmakers beginning later this month, and selling others.



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Meanwhile, the exhibition has fueled a veritable Gee's Bend industry -- rugs, bedding, stationery. Half of the money from the sale of quilts sold by the collective goes to the quilter who made it; the other half is divided among its members. The quilters also receive royalties from the licensed products.

All of this has helped improve the material life of many of the quilters. Loretta Pettway and Arlonzia Pettway have added on to their homes. Mary Lee Bendolph has renovated a guest house next to hers, where she puts up visitors. The Ye Shall Know the Truth Baptist Church is called by some "the church that quilts built," because of all the money that quilters contributed to erect it.

Not that Gee's Bend is thriving economically. Quiltmaking hasn't created jobs. While some of the quilters may not need to buy their groceries on credit anymore, their grandchildren are still bused 100 miles round trip to the middle school and high school because the school in Gee's Bend was closed when desegregation came. There are still no health-care services to speak of in Gee's Bend; you have to drive more than 50 miles to a dentist or doctor or pharmacy.

"The Gee's Bend women go around the country and are treated like movie stars, and then they come back and kind of fade into the woodwork," says James Emerson, chairman of the Wilcox County Industrial Development Authority, a consortium of business and civic leaders.

Something has changed for the women, though.

"The quilts have made a difference in the way I see myself getting up in the world," says Arlonzia Pettway.

She woke up one morning in February and for the first time in her life wrote a poem. It begins:

*Never make a path somebody else made.*

*First you make your own path.*

*Great grandmama Dinah walked this path*

*With her quilt pieces and her thimble and a needle in her hand.*

*But she never reached the intersection.*

*She passed on.*

Mary Lee Bendolph experiences the world differently, too. "I go places I used to couldn't go," she says.

"Everything just opened up for us, even Camden," her daughter Essie adds, speaking of the town across the river where years ago her mother watched the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. brazenly drink from the "whites only" fountain in the courthouse.

"They still kind of down, but not as down as they used to be," says Mary Lee. "They don't shut you up so bad anymore."

Bendolph moves fast these days, with a sense of urgency, because there is so much to do.

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Her bus trip to Memphis is the beginning of a frenetic travel schedule. Within a few weeks, she'll be visiting Chicago twice and other parts of Alabama. Then it's New York, and home for a week before getting ready for Boston and the MFA.

"It's a blessing to have some place to go, to meet people and see how friendly and nice they are," she says. "When they meet me they think I'm up in the world. They want to touch me and they want to hug me, and I be the same way towards them."

Probably the most joyful part of it all is that she's quilting again. The morning before the bus trip, she was up with the peckerwoods, to pack. Then she crossed the field to Essie's house to borrow the quilting frame, because she'd just finished piecing together a new design.

It's made from fabric scraps, as always. "I don't like buying fabric to make quilts with," Bendolph says firmly. "I was brought up to make quilts from rags."

Soon it's time for noonday prayer at the church, and that evening there's a meeting she's invited to, with some other quilters -- in *Camden* -- to talk with people from the business community about ways to bring tourists into Wilcox County.

The next morning, she and the other quilters are off to Memphis, a seven-hour bus trip away.

"I know you have a long journey," pastor Clinton Pettway says as he prays them off. "Lord, bring the bus back to Gee's Bend, safe and sound."

"Amen," the quilters say.

*The Quilts of Gee's Bend will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts from June 1 through August 21. In conjunction with the exhibition, there will be a Memorial Day open house on May 30; the MFA will be open free to the public from 10 a.m. to 4:45 p.m., and quilters from Gee's Bend will be on hand to talk about their quilts. On June 1, the quilters participate in a panel discussion at 7 p.m. in the Remis Auditorium. Tickets to the panel discussion are \$18 for the public, \$15 for MFA members. Call 617-369-3306 or visit [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org).*

# NEW YORK

DEC. 12, 2002

## Quilts of Personality

By Mark Stevens

What's the best abstract art ever made in America? A friend of mine enjoyed asking students this question, and when they predictably answered "Pollock," a look of disgust would flicker across his face and he'd mutter: "Naaaah ... You forgot the Navajo women." Of course, it was unfair to compare apples and oranges – modernist paintings and Indian weavings – but the ploy invariably shook his students. Its effect did not depend simply upon the recognition that a great Navajo rug can be as visually powerful as a modernist painting. That's just Modernism 101. No, something deeper is at work whenever comparisons of this kind are made before a contemporary audience. **The Quilts of Gee's Bend**, which recently opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, is a telling example of the phenomenon. Many of the quilts on view could almost be, if you squint, works of geometric abstraction by modern painters. But that alone cannot explain why the show is a hit, attracting a large crowd of New Yorkers.

Folded into a remote curve of the Alabama River not far from Selma, Gee's Bend was for generations an isolated hamlet. A paved road did not reach the town until 1967. Its people were tenant farmers, many of them the descendants of slaves from the local plantation. They raised hogs and chickens, lived in rough log cabins, plowed with mules, and picked cotton. The women of Gee's Bend made quilts from abandoned scraps of cloth, such as worn-out dungarees and cornmeal sacks. Their isolation allowed strong family quilting styles with names like Log Cabin and Housetop to develop over generations, without competition from the world beyond. Very occasionally, outsiders discovered and sometimes romanticized Gee's Bend as a town that time forgot – first in the thirties, when the town was depicted as a place untouched by the modern world, an "Alabama Africa," and then again during the civil-rights era. The current exhibit, which has been organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Tinwood Alliance, Atlanta, contains 60 quilts by 45 women from the town.

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The quilts themselves are startlingly beautiful. They usually begin – but do not end – with a simple geometric pattern. There is no imprisoning symmetry. Like a jazz or blues singer teasing apart a melody, the artists play off their grids with unexpected riffs of color and form. The rippling of the cloth and the individuality of the sewing hand further animate the conceptual geometry. Again and again, the mind wonders, “Why’d she put that there? Why that strand of color below this bold shape?” However, the eye simply delights in the surprising rightness of such decisions. In their way, the artists of Gee’s Bend are formalists, relying for expressive power not on illustrations but on the pure passions of the eye. “I never did like the book patterns some people had,” says Annie Mae Young, one of the strongest artists in the show. “Those things had too many little bitty blocks. I like big pieces and long strips ... I work it out, study the way to make it, get it to be right, kind of like working a puzzle. You find the colors and the shapes and certain fabrics that work out right.”

While relishing the formal bravura of these quilts, New Yorkers also respond to them in ways that would surprise the women of Gee’s Bend – or, for that matter, Navajo weavers. This town with the fetching name arouses the usual modern longing for a lost community. The artists themselves are unsentimental about life in an impoverished rural village (as interviews in the catalogue attest) but possess family and spiritual resources New Yorkers often lack. They remind the knowledgeable of what everyone knows but also forgets – that creating significant art is not always the preserve of lonely genius or ambitious M.F.A.’s. For millennia, of course, women in traditional societies have worked with clay and cloth, making an earthy household art of closeness and enfolding warmth. Art rarely fulfills that function anymore. Art is for rich people. Art is something to visit in a museum. Art is for scratching your head. The women of Gee’s Bend stitched together their pieces, integrating their art with their lives. Using worn-out dungarees in a quilt became a form of resurrection.

## **The Quilts of Gee’s Bend**

At the Whitney Museum of American Art; through March 9, 2003.

# The New York Times

## ART REVIEW

### *Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters*



Lorraine Pettway, *Medallion work-clothes quilt*, 1974; and Annie Mae Young, *Blocks and Strips*, c. 1970.

**By Michael Kimmelman**

Nov. 29, 2002

THE most ebullient exhibition of the New York art season has arrived at the Whitney Museum in the unlikely guise of a show of hand-stitched quilts from Gee's Bend, Ala. Gee's Bend is a remote, historically black community occupying a bulb of bottom land, a U-shaped peninsula five miles across and seven miles long, hemmed in on three sides by the Alabama River.

The single road in and out of town was paved only in 1967. That was roughly the time ferry service, the most direct route outside, stopped when whites in Camden, the county seat and nearest city as the crow flies, decided they didn't appreciate Benders crossing the river to register to vote.

Isolation has always been the place's curse but also, because it has protected the community and been a means of incubating art, a blessing. For generations, women of



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the Bend have passed down an indigenous style of quilting geometric patterns out of old britches, cornmeal sacks, Sears corduroy swatches and hand-me-down leisure suits -- whatever happened to be around, which was never much. Quilts made of worn dungarees sometimes became the only mementos of a dead husband who had nothing else to leave behind. They provided comfort and warmth, piled on top of cornshuck mattresses or layered six or seven deep for the cold nights.

But they also became declarations of style, flags of independence hung to dry on wire lines for the neighbors or anyone else to see.

The results, not incidentally, turn out to be some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced. Imagine Matisse and Klee (if you think I'm wildly exaggerating, see the show) arising not from rarefied Europe, but from the caramel soil of the rural South in the form of women, descendants of slaves when Gee's Bend was a plantation. These women, closely bound by family and custom (many Benders bear the slaveowner's name, Pettway), spent their precious spare time -- while not rearing children, chopping wood, hauling water and plowing fields -- splicing scraps of old cloth to make robust objects of amazingly refined, eccentric abstract designs.

The best of these designs, unusually minimalist and spare, are so eye-poppingly gorgeous that it's hard to know how to begin to account for them. But then, good art can never be fully accounted for, just described.

There are 60 quilts in the show (which arrives at the Whitney via the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and is installed here by Debra Singer); they span the period from the 1930's to now. Most were made in the 1960's and 70's.

A 1950's quilt by Jessie T. Pettway of red bars dividing multicolor scraps of slim, irregular triangles, exemplifies the jazzy independence and stripped-down grandeur of the finest Bender designs.

American quilts elsewhere generally esteem perfection. Chance and improvisation seem to be operating principles here, the beauty deriving from inconsistencies played off against hierarchical forms: in this Jessie T. Pettway quilt, the wavy border; the single, small patch of orange to complete one of the red bands; the parallel stripes of off-white cloth, breaking the rhythm of the bars and adding syncopation.

You see a similar effect in one of the heraldic quilts by Arlonzia Pettway from the mid-70's. She interrupts the plain geometry of green and white stripes with an irregular sliver of flowery border, an almost imperceptible riff, which nevertheless transforms a basic serial pattern into exalted form.

Art often works this way, serendipitously: it announces itself in the nuance of an unconventional decision, suggesting the spark of sudden inspiration.

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In Gloria Hoppin's variation on the rectangular targetlike "Housetop" design, also from the mid-70's, the eureka moment comes from an equally off-kilter stroke: a stripe of red inserted to one side in the central orange square.

Where did she get such an incredible idea? Maybe from a quilt by Lorraine Pettway, from around the same time: a medallion pattern, a field of lightish blue offset by a dark blue stroke. Benders would see each other's work on clotheslines or in their neighbor's houses, and there were familial traits, inherited across generations, prompting a legacy of borrowing, stealing and mutually respectful call and response.

It's also instructive to recall photographs of Gee's Bend from the 1930's, when pine log cabins, chinked with clay, were lined with newspapers to block out the wind -- the newspapers making ad-hoc collages of geometric designs, which may have inspired quiltmakers.

But influence is never a direct affair. Eyes of New Yorkers attuned to modern art will find echoes of painterly equivalents: here a Barnett Newman, there a Frank Stella, here a Josef Albers, there an Agnes Martin. The chances that poor black women in a remote corner of Alabama ever saw, much less were influenced by, any of them is slim to nil. (One might do better to search for connections to sources like West African textiles, suggests Jane Livingston, a writer in the show's catalog.)

What we can say for certain is only that an ethos that permits us to appreciate the work of modernist painters also lets us recognize the virtues of Gee's Bend quilts, which another era might not have seen. Esthetics are contextual. New art constantly readjusts our taste, but not until we are already conditioned to accept it.

The current wave of attention to the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, a virtual media blitz of affection, is hardly the first. During the last 70 years the outside world has periodically taken notice, in sorrow at the Bend's absolute poverty during the 1930's or astonishment at its resilience and creativity, only to forget about it after a while, the outside world being fickle.

In the 1960's and 70's, art collectors and civil rights advocates in New York bought quilts; and a cooperative business sprang up at the Bend, the Freedom Quilting Bee, which sold first to Bloomingdale's, until the store lost interest because the quilts were irregular, and then mass-produced corduroy pillow shams for Sears (the women would save the extra scraps of corduroy for themselves to make their own quilts).

Inevitably, collectors turned their attention elsewhere, as time went by, to new fads, and business petered out.

But Benders carried on. From those corduroy scraps, Florine Smith made a four-block quilt of blue and green stripes, a jaunty pattern partly dependent on the limitations of

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the material at hand: corduroy frays on the bias, so it suits only blocky, rectangular designs.

Expediency and opportunism: because the women of Gee's Bend had little spare time, they inclined toward bold, simple patterns. Stitching the filler and backing to the top of the quilt, while necessary to hold the quilt together, also let the best quiltmakers add a secondary pattern. In Annie Mae Young's quilt of blocks and stripes, a bouncing grid in red and blue, the low-level buzz you register up close is created by the wavy lines of white stitching across the main pattern.

Annie Mae Young and Loretta Pettway seem the most distinctive artists in the show: their quilts look experimental and sometimes shockingly austere. Maybe once and for all, we'll remember their names and the names of the other women of Gee's Bend. With a young generation of Benders dispersing across the country, the art of making quilts is passing from the older women into the hands of their children and grandchildren, who seem dubious about continuing it. This may be the last moment to record and celebrate what is one of the country's most idiosyncratic and vivid living art traditions. There are many other artful quiltmakers around the nation. But there is nothing that has turned up yet quite akin to what's here.

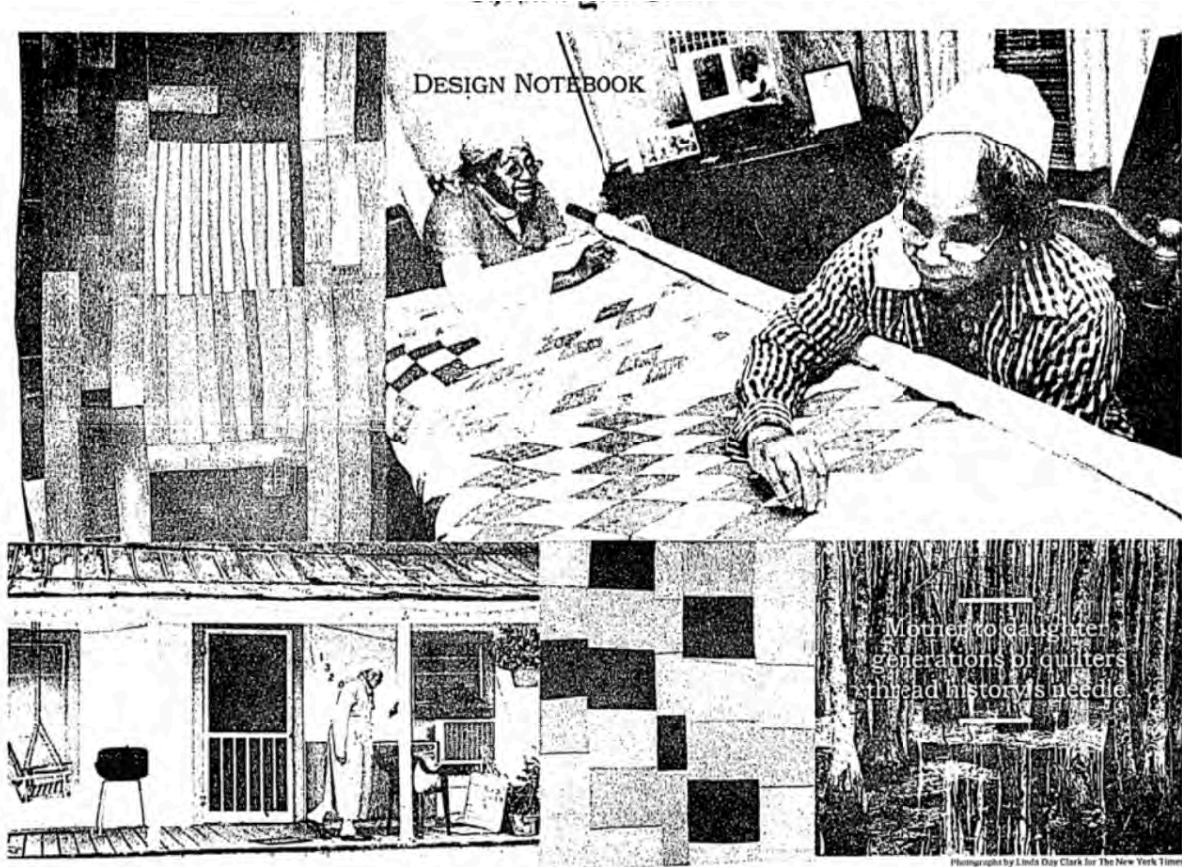
*"The Quilts of Gee's Bend" remains on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through March 2, 2003.*

# The New York Times

## DESIGN NOTEBOOK

### *From the Bottomlands, Soulful Stitches*

**LIFE'S WORK**  
Near a swampy, isolated patch of Alabama, below far right, quilts are made out of what is at hand. Mary Lee Bendolph, in foreground, and Leola Pettway (also seen at her home, below left) piece fabric, far right. Annie Mae Young made a quilt, right, from old denim work clothes. The quilt, below center, was made by Sue Willie Seltzer in the mid-1960's.



**By Patricia Leigh Brown**

Nov. 21, 2002

AT this time of year, when the shadows grow long and pecans fall heavy on the red earth, the memories of old women in this loop of land encircled by the Alabama River turn to quilting.

For it was in autumn, after the cotton crop was brought in, that the granddaughters and great-granddaughters of slaves on this former plantation land would whip cotton with plum-tree switches and then gather together to "put a quilt up."

"We'd get together and make the quilts just like we're praying together," recalled Mary Lee Bendolph, 67, one of 45 Gee's Bend quilt makers whose work goes on view today at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The quilts' journey from Gee's Bend to New York

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is yet another chapter, as yet unfinished, in the community's long and often difficult story. Ms. Bendolph was sitting on her front porch one recent afternoon beside a worn copy of the Bible. "We had no TV, no radio, no nothing. That's the way we learned -- sitting watching our mamas piecing the quilt. When the sun came down you be in the house together, laughing and talking. We were more blessed then."

The bittersweet history of a place where isolation and poverty still reside is stitched into the trouser legs, cornmeal sacks, dress skirts and Sears corduroy swatches that constitute one of the country's most unbroken and deeply imaginative quilting traditions. When Early Pettway, 73, surveys the hand-painted headstones in the cemetery beside the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached in 1965, he remembers generations of women, many his own relatives, and their jubilant stitchery airing on wire fences in the sun. "Way back yonder," he said, "everybody here but the men quilted."

The artistic legacy of African-American women in this hamlet of 300 families, where 42 percent of the residents earn less than \$10,000 a year, springs from a deep and powerful well. As a little girl, Arlonzia Pettway, 79, an accomplished quilt maker and Mr. Pettway's sister, would sit with her siblings and baby cousins on her great-grandmother's string quilt every day after the noontime dinner. Grandmama Dinah Miller, a slave who died at age 102 in the 1930's, would lay down the quilt, the single material legacy of her mother, on the gaping floorboards as protection from the wind, cold and dust. Then the stories unfolded: of slave ships cruelly decorated with red ribbons to lure people on board; of Grandmama Dinah Miller's baby boy who was fathered by a white man and then taken away; of the terrifying click-clicking sound the horses' teeth made when the slave masters came. "I'd wake up at night and think of the stories she told," Mrs. Pettway said. "I didn't forget them. I pawned them in my heart."

Despite countless forays by sociologists, photographers and writers from the 1930's onward, Gee's Bend's isolation served to preserve an idiosyncratic style of quilt making that is as direct and unvarnished as the landscape itself. "What makes Gee's Bend distinct is the freedom with which the women approach their art," said John Beardsley, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and a co-curator of the exhibition at the Whitney. "Many African-American quilts in the South emphasize recycled materials and abstract patterns. What's unusual in Gee's Bend is the density of accomplishment."

Alvia Wardlaw, a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where the show originated this fall, likens the avant-garde look of Gee's Bend quilts to the improvisational quality of jazz. "There is the same self-assuredness and freedom, a lack of hesitancy about who they are as people," she said. "The quilts reflect the bold rhythms of a life of doing, the flurry of activity, where being at home was the center of the universe and the bed a place to exhibit creativity."

The 70 quilts in the exhibition, over half by living artists, are among roughly 530 Gee's Bend quilts amassed over the last five years by William Arnett, a controversial Atlanta collector and passionate documentarian of vernacular African-American folk art, whose



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relationship with some artists he has championed has led in the past to accusations of exploitation.

As a pre-emptive strike, perhaps, Mr. Arnett has created a nonprofit foundation, the Tinwood Alliance, to own and conserve the quilts -- for which he said he paid an average of \$275 each -- and to sell an as yet unknown number to museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago, which is in the process of buying as many as five. He says he plans to funnel any profits into the community, though he has not said how that would work. "I paid them three or four times the going rate," he said. "But these quilts may be worth a hundred times that one day."

His supporting cast includes Jane Fonda, recently attracted to Southern African-American art, who has given \$1 million to Tinwood Media, an Atlanta publishing company Mr. Arnett created to produce lavish and comprehensive books on rural African-American artists, including two hefty new volumes: "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" (\$45.50) and "Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts" (\$75). The company has also produced a documentary film on the quilt makers by Mr. Arnett's son, Matt, and Vanessa Vadim, Ms. Fonda's daughter. The film will be shown at the Whitney show.

Among the most striking quilts are those made by Loretta Pettway, which are neighborhoods of emotion rendered in material form. She exploits every nuance of denim, fashioning strong abstract collages from the barest scraps. "I didn't have a good scissor," she recalled, enveloped by warmth from a gas fire in her living room. "I mostly had to rip them loose. I just fit them the way they were cut. The Lord built in me how to fit them. Because I needed them."

Like many people here, Mrs. Pettway, the mother of seven, barely gets by, living, she estimates, on about \$5,000 a year. The art world may herald her "austere masterpieces," as one museum curator put it, but she romanticizes the quilts not a wit. They were hard work, akin to chopping wood, hauling water and making laundry starch from scratch out of boiling water, flour and "a little kerosene to make the clothes slip."

"I never had no time to myself," she said.

Sometimes the walls of her childhood home inspired her. "We didn't have no sheet rock," she said. "We nailed torn boxes to the wall and then plastered them with newspapers and catalogs. I saw some quilts in those papers and liked how they were made. I couldn't make no pretty quilts, but it did me good to look at them."

Her last name, shared by many Gee's Benders, was assigned by Mark Pettway, a plantation owner who in the 1840's moved his family and more than 100 slaves from North Carolina to Gee's Bend, forcing all but his family and a cook to make the journey on foot. During the Depression, the widow of a merchant in nearby Camden who had been advancing credit to tenant farmers in the Bend foreclosed on their debts and ordered a raid, driving the community into complete destitution.

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"We went through some rough times," said Annie Mae Young, in whose hands strips of denim and corduroy assume the eloquence of a flag. "You couldn't get the money to piece quilts with. You needed fire to keep warm. You can't quilt cold."

Spurred by documentary photographs, the federal government stepped in in the 1930's and made Gee's Bend a model of the New Deal, reimagining the town and replacing skinned-pine log houses chinked with clay with "Roosevelt houses," as they are still called, equipped with leakless roofs, cast-iron stoves and other improvements. The program created a rarity: a whole community of independent African-American landowners in the impoverished rural South. For years, the Bend's connection to the "mainland" was a ferry to the far side of the river and the predominantly white county seat of Camden. During the civil rights movement, many quilt makers here, along with their families, began to cross the river to register to vote, resulting in the abrupt termination of ferry service in 1965. Service has never been restored to Gee's Bend. The closest hospital, high school and police station require a 45-mile drive.

The civil rights movement led in 1966 to the creation of the Freedom Quilting Bee, organized by Francis X. Walter, an Episcopal priest who was in Alabama documenting civil rights abuses. He seized upon quilts as a vehicle for economic empowerment and helped local women set up a cooperative, leading to highly publicized auctions in New York. The first check from New York, \$2,065 for more than 70 quilts, went to necessities like washing machines, indoor plumbing and, in at least one instance, college tuition for the great-granddaughter of a slave.

For a fleeting moment in the 1970's, the Quilting Bee's work, made in Rehoboth, just up the road, was promoted at Bloomingdale's, in Diana Vreeland's Vogue and by the decorator Sister Parish, who outfitted the summer house of William S. Paley, the chairman of CBS, with orange and yellow fabric stitched at the Bee.

"The Bee was the first business black people in Wilcox County owned," said Nettie Young, 85, an original Bee leader who learned to quilt at age 7. "It was the first time I knew I was special, the first job I had, excusing cotton picking."

The Bee, which is now struggling to survive, eventually went commercial, diluting the Bend women's singular designs to produce eyeglass cases, crewel-work TV Guide covers, conference tote bags and other less than distinctive products. But many quilt makers here would like to see the Bee, which is currently reorganizing its board, return with the kind of quilts now hanging in the Whitney.

That so many Benders, including the quilt makers, were willing to part with their creations reflects the complex texture of a place where chickens and cows share the road and generations of families are often clustered in a phalanx of weatherworn houses and mobile homes. Created as objects of utility, the "raggly" or bedraggled antique quilts, squirreled away under mattresses and in chicken coops and wood piles, were often used to mop up motor oil, cover up cars from the rain and even, as Arlonzia Pettway herself did, "lit on a big old wood pile and burnt."

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But hindsight can be a hard teacher, especially when illuminated by museum spotlights. At the moment the town is divided between those who feel fairly compensated for their quilts and those who now consider them "a gold strike" for the buyers, in the words of the Rev. Clinton J. Pettway Jr., pastor of Ye Shall Know the Truth Church.

"We didn't know these quilts would have value, like Babe Ruth cards," he said. His mother sold some quilts to the Arnetts, which he regrets. "When I first heard about selling quilts I was against it," he said. "But at the time people needed the money. It was like telling someone not to eat when food was in front of them."

Mr. Arnett, who said he borrowed \$1 million to purchase, conserve and research the quilts, said one goal might be to help get the Freedom Quilting Bee going again, possibly with a quilting museum inside. Nowadays, in a Wal-Mart culture, there is less time and motivation for younger women to make quilts. A potential model could be Mississippi Cultural Crossroads in Port Gibson, Miss., which has gotten grant money to foster quilting through apprenticeships.

For Annie Mae Young and Arlonzia Pettway, who had given up their art because of old age and arthritis, the sight of their joyous creations being celebrated in books and art museums has inspired them to begin quilting again. It has made Essie Bendolph Pettway, 46, who works long hours in a sewing factory in Selma, to renew her commitment to the art she hones deep into the wee hours of morning "just to see how that quilt turns out."

Nettie Young, who has made quilts to commemorate each of her 22 grandchildren's high school graduations, has recently started to teach her 29-year-old granddaughter, Carolyn Pounds, how to quilt. Like the strips and pieces of work clothes and old dresses in a quilt, she sees the past and present coming together.

"Quilting is the whole history of my family," she said, sitting with three generations beside her on a velveteen sofa. "I learned this year that what my foreparents did is recognized today to be art, not just cover. But it was always special to me."

# Los Angeles Times

## Crossing Over

By J.R. MOEHRINGER

AUG. 22, 1999

### GEE'S BEND, Ala. — CHAPTER 1 / Mary Lee's Vision

She hopes the ferry won't come, but if it does, she'll climb aboard. She'll tremble as she steps off the landing because she can't swim, and she can't forget the many times she's crossed this ugly brown river only to meet more ugliness on the other side.

But fear has never beaten Mary Lee Bendolph, and no river can stop her. She'll board that ferry, if it comes, because something tells her she must, and because all the people she loves most will board with her, and because if there's one thing she's learned in her difficult life, it's this:

When the time comes to cross your river, you don't ask questions. You cross.

It won't look all that dramatic, just a new ferry taking a 63-year-old great-grandmother and her cousins across a Coca-Cola-colored river. But in this damp cellar of the Deep South, where the river has separated blacks and whites for 180 years, where even the living and the dead are less divided than the black and white towns camped on opposite shores, a new ferry will be like the river itself: more than it looks.

Some say the ferry won't ever come, others say any minute now. Either way, Mary Lee has already seen herself crossing. A round woman with a giggle like one of the river songbirds and a speaking voice pitched between a lullaby and a prayer, she often sees the future in her dreams and trusts these visions as she does her cousins. They never lie. 'The first mind you have when you get up in the morning,' she says, 'that the right mind. Then another mind come and tell you something else, that the wrong mind.'

This morning, her right mind tells her something's coming, something big. Maybe a ferry. Maybe death. Maybe the end of her holy place on the river, the only home she's ever known. It all seems the same in Gee's Bend, Ala.

Gee's Bend is where the Civil War came and went, but the slaves stayed, and their children stayed, and their grandchildren stayed, and their great-grandchildren, and so on, until today, Mary Lee and 700 of her kin cling to this bulb of bottom land that their ancestors were chained to. They bear the surnames of the last slaveholders to live here. They grow corn near the

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slaveholders' headstones. They come and go amid the ghosts and dust devils that dance on the site of the old Big House.

The South was once dotted with such places, where slaves lingered long after Lincoln freed them, most famously the sea islands off Georgia and South Carolina. But Gee's Bend is the only place anyone can think of where the slaves did more than linger. They conquered. They outlasted the masters, bought back the plantation and lived upon it in blissful isolation, not a collection of historical anomalies, but a vast family, sharing the same few names and the same handful of fables, like some hybrid of Alex Haley and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Some of their isolation owes to geography. The Alabama River all but encircles Gee's Bend, carving from the caramel soil a U-shaped peninsula 8 miles wide and 16 miles long, a virtual island set apart from the 20th century, as it was from the 19th. Some of their isolation owes to personality. 'Benders' have always held themselves aloof, a regal clan proud of their capacity for solitude. But most of their isolation owes to white folks across the river, who have done everything possible to make Gee's Bend lonelier than a leper colony, and who now--suddenly, oddly--want to bring Gee's Bend a brand new ferry.

White folks. Mary Lee wonders what they're up to now. Every few decades, they remember Gee's Bend, and so begins another spell of hard times.

White folks say a ferry would bring the modern world at last to this rural wilderness 60 miles southwest of Montgomery, where the heat-crazed insects sound like a million clocks ticking; where only two businesses exist, a post office the size of a phone booth and a general store with nothing on its shelves; where the night sky is unbroken by a single street lamp or stop light, and Orion feels close enough to gather in your fist, like a cluster of fireflies.

Mary Lee knows better. A ferry would also bring tourists and hunters and developers and criminals and snoops. In other words, the end of Gee's Bend, the last place on Earth still safe enough for children and dead folks to go walking after dark. 'When you can sit in a place,' she says, 'and everybody be lovely--no fussing, no killing. To me, this don't even seem like the USA.'

Then why not fight the ferry? She might. Except white folks never take no for an answer, and even some of her cousins are insisting, because a ferry, after all, would settle old scores. 'It's a symbol of what we had,' she says, 'a symbol to what was taken from us.'

A ferry would close a 180-year-old circle, and Mary Lee is made of circles. Her body is round, her face is round, her river is round. In Mary Lee's world, everything is round, because it's not until the end of something--a century, a story, a sentence--that you really understand the beginning. Maybe it's all this ferry talk that's got her mind circling back. She's always had a gift for dreaming the future. Lately, she can't stop reliving the past.



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Also, her mind is busy with something else, something more pressing than a ferry, though it feels connected. Mary Lee is sick, violently sick, and her sister recently foretold doom. ‘Cancer,’ her sister said, and Mary Lee could only agree.

She’s spent her whole life in this timeless place. How did age manage to find her? She still has the flirty giggle, the smile that makes men trip over themselves in church. How can her hair be sprouting tufts of gray like summer dandelions? Walking down the dirt lane, swinging her arms and looking up at the clouds, she could be a sixth-grader coming home from school. And yet, Mary Lee’s life has been a series of sorrows and betrayals, and some days every bit of it shows on her face, despite the faraway look she wears to keep people from her deepest thoughts.

‘Some people have a good life,’ she says. ‘But I had a rough life. But I thank God that he helped me come through, and I ain’t dead.’

While among the living, she plans to keep moving. Every day, she does a dozen chores, then makes rounds, seeing to the needs of her lovely people, which is how she describes those inside the circle of her heart. She has a mother to nurse, a brother to mind, grandchildren to raise, cousins to bury. Most of her life she picked cotton, now she tends people. If death or a ferry means to stop her, there’s nothing to do but wait. Like dreaming the future, waiting is one of Mary Lee’s special gifts.

Every Bender knows how to wait. Living here, you learn that fate is like a ferry. It comes when it comes.

And when it gets here, everyone must cross.

## CHAPTER TWO / The Road to Freedom

There was a ferry once.

A flat-bottomed skiff, it wasn’t much more than Huck Finn’s raft. And when Mary Lee was born, its pilot was a cranky old-timer named Uncle Linzie, who would pole you across the 600-yard river like a Venetian gondolier--if he felt like it.

Benders would ride the ferry into Camden, the sun-bleached country town across the river, for groceries and medicine. Camden, the seat of Wilcox County, was the only source Benders had for basic needs, the ferry their only link.

Still, Benders knew to use the ferry sparingly, because Camden was nearly all white, and most of its 1,000 residents meant to keep it that way. ‘You’d have to run through Camden,’ says Lucy

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Mingo, 68, who lives up the road from Mary Lee, by the swamp. ‘They was dirty people over there.’

Camden was the kind of town where the newspaper got its start in the early 1800s, printing ads for slave-catchers. It was the kind of town where the manager of the Wilcox Hotel would tell a government worker in 1941, ‘A nigras is a nigras. And if you go and try to fix ‘em up, make somethin’ out of ‘em, put ‘em to livin’ like white folks and try to treat ‘em decent, you don’t do anything but make a mean nigger out of ‘em that somebody eventually will have to kill.’ It was the kind of town ruled for a third of this century by a pear-shaped sheriff named Lummie Jenkins, whose pastimes included hunting quail and tormenting Benders. His thick glasses, Mary Lee recalls, turned his black eyes into burnt corn kernels.

Then, Martin Luther King Jr. appeared.

In the early ‘60s, King’s voting rights crusade took aim at Wilcox County, where no black had ever cast a ballot, though blacks outnumbered whites four to three. When King called for Benders to march on the Camden courthouse and demand their right to register, whites heard him crying, ‘Revolt!’ while Benders heard him saying, ‘Cross that river for freedom.’

They heard, and they crossed. The ferry nearly capsized as Benders swarmed into Camden, clapping hands, singing. They didn’t always stop at Camden, either. Often they stomped onward through Alabama, joining King in the most famous protests of the civil rights movement.

Some braved the nightsticks and bullwhips of Bloody Sunday, 1965, when marchers crossing the Alabama River at Selma were overrun by state troopers. It was one of the horrific moments of the era, a peaceful demonstration meeting a wall of brute force on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and it turned America’s stomach. Among the thousands of river crossings, it was one that led to change. Five months later, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act.

Trampled, beaten, teargassed, jailed, Benders never backed up. (‘No white man gonna tell me not to march,’ Lucy says, jutting her chin. ‘Only make me march harder.’) If they seemed fearless, reckless, the reason was the river. At night, they could slip back into its sheltering arms, where whites didn’t dare, or bother, to follow.

‘I loved to go over there,’ Mary Lee says, giggling. ‘Just so I could tell the white folks, and Mr. Lummie, ‘You can’t jail us all.’ ‘

King heard about Gee’s Bend and had to see it. He came one cold February night, three weeks before Bloody Sunday, weak from a virus, ignoring the warnings of his security staff, who feared for his safety in a county run by Sheriff Lummie. Through a sideways-blowing rain, his caravan

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of cars made slow progress along the mud roads of Gee's Bend, and by the time he reached Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, a sagging barn with planks for pews, the hour was past midnight.

A pot-bellied stove gave off scant heat. A bare lightbulb hanged from the ceiling. Cold rain blurred the windows, and Sheriff Lummie lurked against the back wall. Then King stepped through the front door, and Pleasant Grove became the warmest, brightest, safest place on Earth.

'They had a little prayer,' Mary Lee says. 'They sung a song. And then they turned it over to him.'

There was something about King that made Mary Lee's blood race, something she'd never seen in a black man before, a quality beyond her powers of description. 'It was just like, like . . . .' She searches for the word, shyly, the faraway look falling across her face. Then the look lifts. 'It was power.'

King had been losing his voice for days, but he still managed to shake the walls of Pleasant Grove with a sound like nothing Mary Lee had ever heard, or else like everything she'd ever heard blended into a song that gave her goose bumps. It was a thunderclap before a lightning storm. It was a steamboat horn conjuring far-off places. It was Gabriel's trumpet calling her home.

'He was a God-sent man,' Mary Lee says. 'He said he was gonna make it better for us colored people, and that everybody could have some of what they want to have.'

King delivered a message that amounted to Revelation for Mary Lee: He told her that she might not speak with perfect grammar, might not own more than one dress, might not be more than a dirt farmer descended from slaves, but she was every bit as good as those white folks across the river. Tears filled his eyes as he shouted, 'I come over here to Gee's Bend to tell you--you are somebody.'

No one had ever said that to Mary Lee before.

Another time, Mary Lee saw King in Camden and gave him a big hug. She met him again in Selma and watched in awe as he drank from a 'whites only' fountain.

'I never saw a black person do a thing like that!' she says. 'I was so glad. I said, 'I'm going to get me a taste my own self.' My sister tried to hold me back by the coat. I said, 'You're welcome to that coat. I'm getting me some of that water.' '

She savors the memory.

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‘You know,’ she says, ‘it was no more different than other water. But it was colder.’

Her heart drummed hardest when King described the future. Like Mary Lee, he saw the future in his dreams. I have a dream, he kept saying, I have a dream.

I have them too, Mary Lee thought.

It was around then that white folks got together and decided the ferry had to go. Maybe they couldn’t stop King, or his movement, but they could sure as hell keep a bunch of troublesome Negroes on Gee’s Bend.

There was no public meeting, no notice in the newspaper. Mary Lee and others just went down to the river one day and found their link to Camden cut. Though cars were rare, and the dirt roads of Gee’s Bend were impassable much of the year, Benders now would be forced to drive around the river whenever they needed to buy a hoe or see a doctor.

‘We didn’t close the ferry because they were black,’ Sheriff Lummie was rumored to have said. ‘We closed it because they forgot they were black.’

## CHAPTER THREE / A Change of Heart

On the surface, Mary Lee’s river is just another plain brown river, skittering down the middle of the Deep South like a raindrop down a dirty window. But rivers have their faraway looks too.

Slow, timid, her river typically keeps to itself, hiding between steep banks the color of blushing cheeks. On hot summer days, it goes through the steaming fields at about the speed of a Model T, giving no sign of its quick temper, no hint of the Indians, settlers, slaves and steamships strewn along its floor, 40 feet down, all guarded by poisonous water moccasins and man-sized catfish and alligators that will bite a hound dog in half. ‘No one,’ a Camden minister wrote in the early ‘30s, ‘plays in the Alabama River.’

It travels 315 miles, mostly in circles, and, like Mary Lee, it never leaves Alabama. The errant child of two capricious rivers--the Coosa and Tallapoosa, which swirl down from the Georgia mountains--it does what errant children do: whatever it wants. Above Gee’s Bend, it becomes even more erratic, performing balletic loops and sluggish U-turns, staggering left and right before finally crashing into the Tombigbee, which takes it to the sea.

None of which describes Mary Lee’s river.

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Her river is a 'strong brown God,' as T.S. Eliot said of a different river, but also a way of thinking about God. Eternal. Silent. Life-giver and ruthless taker. It's the force that shaped Mary Lee's world, drew it like a hurried artist signing his name with a piece of charcoal in the lower right-hand corner of America. Some people spend their lives resisting what defines them. Mary Lee was baptized in the water that define her. She takes it as a given, and gives thanks.

Like God, the river is whatever those who love it or fear it say it is. Wild and calm, cruel and kind. For a black woman descended from slaves, its contradictions run deeper. It begs to be crossed and bars the way. There are reasons, spiritual and logical reasons, why rivers run through the epic poems and hymns of the African American tradition, whether the Congo or Ohio, the Gambia or Mississippi. 'I've known rivers,' wrote Langston Hughes. 'Whoever lifts himself,' wrote Jean Toomer, 'makes that great brown river smile.'

Mary Lee has known only one river, and she's never seen it smile. Maybe that's why she's always smiling, as if trying to compensate.

'I'm just a lovely person,' she says one morning in the midst of her chores. 'I'm not a person to be angry, I never was. When you be pleasant, your light shine better. Your eyes feel better. Your body be more easy. I don't care how much confusionment it is, if I can't laugh and talk with you, and be friendly nice with you, I don't be around you no more.'

Half a lifetime ago, Mary Lee relied on the river to protect her from those who couldn't be friendly, particularly a white man she'd never even met, a man she'll meet soon enough, if a ferry ever comes.

His name is Hollis Curl. As owner of Camden's only newspaper, the Wilcox Progressive Era, he helped lead the fight against King's movement, and in the heat of battle published some regrettable things about Mary Lee's people. 'I was as racist as anyone else,' he says. 'Not to the point where I'd mistreat anyone, but I wanted to preserve our way of life.'

Now, steaming his 50-horsepower pontoon past Gee's Bend, past a flock of cattle egrets perched like white question marks in a bare tree, Curl swears those days are as well behind him as the creamy wake of his boat. Today, he's the 63-year-old chairman of the Alabama Press Assn., the genial, grandfatherly figure behind the move to restore the ferry. 'I've undergone a metamorphosis,' he says. 'I'm the best friend [Benders] have.'

Not long ago, he was their worst nightmare.

'There's a code of behavior between whites and niggers,' Curl said in 1970. 'Say a colored man comes into your place of business wearing a hat. And a white man comes in at the same time wearing a hat. The white man may leave his hat on, and you don't notice this. You probably



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wouldn't notice whether he had a hat on or not. But if the colored man doesn't take his hat off when he comes in, you're going to notice it. Nobody ever told me to be sure and watch and see if this nigger takes his hat off. He just does.'

Curl said and wrote what his readers believed, and enforced their beliefs as well. Besides owning the newspaper, he served as city court judge, jailing blacks whenever they marched through town without a parade permit. 'They sang 'We Shall Overcome' so many times,' he says, 'we started to memorize the words.'

One day, Curl jailed 410 men and women, a number he cites with pride, to show how much he's overcome.

Though he wasn't party to the decision, getting rid of the ferry seemed like a fine idea to Curl. If the law couldn't keep the races apart, why not let the river. Later, when the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the river to make it more navigable, widening the gap between Camden and Gee's Bend to a full watery mile, fate seemed to be reinforcing the river's segregation.

Then, nine years ago, Curl suffered an acute attack of remorse. Out of nowhere, he says, a thought dawned: Maybe the river is wrong. Maybe his dead hunting buddy, Sheriff Lummie, was wrong. In a front-page column that caught Camden off guard and ultimately led to the coveted Sigma Delta Chi prize for journalism, Curl called for a new spirit of racial cooperation, and a new ferry as its symbol.

Some readers applauded. Others recoiled. Most paid Curl no mind. Wilcox County is one of the poorest in the nation, with barely enough money for tractors to resurface the dirt roads, let alone a ferry to reunite two historically alienated communities. So when Curl wrote a second ferry column, and a third, most folks figured he was wasting his time.

Years passed. Curl gave up. Then, three years ago, a few of his old ferry columns caught the eye of Mary Lee's new congressman, Earl F. Hilliard, the first black representative from Alabama since 1876. Hilliard knew Gee's Bend. He'd marched with Benders in the '60s. He remembered their poise under fire, their role in the movement. When he learned they were still without a ferry, he came and stood with Curl by the river.

After a short news conference, to announce that they would find a way to restore the ferry, the two men cast off in Curl's boat, hailing 'a new day in Wilcox County.' They made an unlikely pair, and everyone went down to the river to hear what they had to say.

Everyone except Mary Lee.

She had work to do.

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## CHAPTER FOUR / A Community of Survivors

Mary Lee rises with the river birds and changes her 87-year-old mother's diaper, then straightens the house, then feeds her three grandsons, then feeds her six cows, then drives her mother around the river for one of the frequent checkups Aola Bendolph requires now that Alzheimer's has left her frail and mute.

They start up County Road 29, the only road in and out of Gee's Bend. A two-lane blacktop, it forms a perfect circle at the bottom of the U, then winds north, past dense woods and slow-moving creeks, through shade-drenched meadows and one unexpectedly beautiful valley.

At the top of the U, they turn left on Alabama Highway 5, headed south with the river, then cross a bridge below William 'Bill' Dannelly Reservoir, named after the judge who denied a request from Benders, heartsick after King's assassination, to re-christen their community King, Ala. Instead, Gee's Bend was renamed Boykin, after a senator Benders had never heard of. Regardless, Benders still say Gee's Bend, as do road signs. Mary Lee pronounces it in a prayerful mumble that sounds like 'Jesus been.'

Name or no name, Benders were able to honor King in their own way. The two farm mules that pulled King's casket through the streets of Atlanta came from Gee's Bend.

Across the river now, Mary Lee and her mother come to the Camden town square--jail, bank, courthouse, Curl's newspaper. From Mary Lee's front door, it's a distance of only four miles as the red-tailed hawks fly, but it's an hour's drive around the river, which is why Mary Lee's Chevy Corsica has grown old before its time.

The trip leaves both women spent. In the doctor's examination room, Aola slumps forward in her wheelchair, muttering, laughing at nothing. Mary Lee leans against the wall, glasses slipping down her nose, a faraway look fixed tight on her face. She's thinking about scheduling a doctor's visit for herself, to find out why she's been 'heaving,' why she's been urinating blood.

The room is cold and bare, except for the walls, hung with black-and-white photographs of Gee's Bend in bygone days. Baptism in the river. Girl in a cotton patch. Ferry crossing to Camden. Mary Lee eyes each one.

'We have people ask about those pictures all the time,' the nurse says. 'But they were taken so long ago, no one knows anything about them.'

'I know,' Mary Lee protests. 'These my people.'

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‘What?’ the nurse asks.

‘This Roman,’ Mary Lee says. ‘That Rissa, that Cassie, this Perkin . . . .’

The nurse watches, mouth agape, as Mary Lee goes around the room, identifying the long dead.

White folks have always felt compelled to record Gee’s Bend. Writers, students, storytellers, anthropologists, photographers, reporters, all sorts of strangers have come shambling down the one road in and out of Gee’s Bend, especially since the road got paved in 1967, fulfilling a promise King made the night he came.

These photographs in the examination room are blurry and unremarkable, but others of Gee’s Bend hang in museums, including one of Artelia Bendolph, first cousin to Mary Lee’s husband. She was 10 years old when Arthur Rothstein made his way to her loblolly pine cabin, beneath a massive chinaberry tree. At the depths of the Great Depression, the federal government hired Rothstein to find and photograph the poorest of America’s poor. He found them in Gee’s Bend. In Artelia, he met their queen.

Among the many images Rothstein made--the ghostly Big House, its elegant cornices and fanlights still intact; the sad slave cabins, dung and newspaper stuffed in their cracks; the womenfolk teaching girls to piece artful quilts with rags, ‘the onliest way we had to keep warm,’ says neighbor Lucy--none achieved the power of Artelia. Hair in cornrows, face in gentle repose, she stood at the glassless window of her cabin, a faraway look on her face.

Artelia never got far from that cabin, but her face went around the world. Novelist William Saroyan wrote a poem to her beauty: ‘Behold ... a young queen, not on a barge on the Nile a thousand years ago, but right where she is and right now.’ Something about that face, that look, spoke to Saroyan of rivers, and royalty.

Today, Mary Lee lives on the very spot where Artelia was photographed. The cabin’s gone, and Mary Lee chopped down the chinaberry herself. In their place stands Mary Lee’s green-shuttered house, second of the Bend’s ‘Roosevelt houses,’ so called because President Franklin D. Roosevelt rebuilt Gee’s Bend and saved its people from starvation.

In the early ‘30s, Roosevelt learned that hundreds of slave descendants were dying on a U-shaped peninsula in Alabama. After the stock market crashed, cotton had swooned to a nickel per pound, and Benders couldn’t grow enough to pay for seeds and supplies. A Camden merchant had been advancing them what they needed, warehousing their cotton until prices rose again. But when the merchant died, he left no records--and one ruthless widow.

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It was a cool day in autumn. Armed with pistols, the widow's henchmen came by the ferry and went from cabin to cabin, closing out debts, settling accounts, robbing Benders blind. They took everything--tools, wagons, plows, furniture, eggs, hogs, mules--then wended like a funeral procession back to the river.

Mary Lee's father, Wisdom, sat in the dirt and wept. He might have given up, might have gone under, but for Mary Lee's mother. "She told him, 'Don't cry,' " Mary Lee says. "She told him, 'Everything be all right, everything be all right.' "

They survived that winter on wild plums and blackberries. They killed squirrels with slingshots and fished some. The Red Cross sent meal and meat, but life didn't get better until Roosevelt came to the rescue. He granted 100 families in Gee's Bend low-interest loans to buy modest farms and build new houses, with real glass windows and hardwood floors, the first some Benders ever set foot on.

Today, aside from a smattering of trailers, every Bender lives in a Roosevelt house, and much of Gee's Bend looks as it did in Roosevelt's day. Cows still have the right of way. Buzzards still circle overhead. And 100 homesteads still sit along red dirt lanes, in slightly uneven rows, like Monopoly houses.

Mary Lee's memories of those days--wearing a fertilizer sack for a dress, picking cotton alongside her mother, sleeping 12 to a bed on a mattress stuffed with cornhusks--remain clearer than any Rothstein photograph. So clear, she can hardly believe Wisdom's in the ground 22 years now and Aola sits in her own permanent posture of defeat.

"Ready for your shot?" the nurse asks Aola.

"She don't talk," Mary Lee says. "Sickness took everything but the laughter."

The nurse swabs Aola's arm with cotton. Then, the needle. Aola jerks forward, laughing. Mary Lee puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Everything be all right," Mary Lee says. "Everything be all right."

## CHAPTER FIVE / Confronting the Future

The seventh child of Wisdom harbors a heavy shame about her lack of education.

"I loved-ed school," Mary Lee says, "but I loved-ed mens more."

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She left school in sixth grade, pregnant. She didn't even know what pregnant was when she found herself on hands and knees behind the cabin, throwing up the dewberries and dumplings she'd eaten for breakfast. Then she looked up and saw Aola's troubled face at the window.

School days are over for you, Aola said, explaining that a person was inside Mary Lee's stomach.

'Oooh!' Mary Lee says. 'That struck me! I cried all day long, telling the Lord to take it away. But the Lord wouldn't move that. Some things the Lord don't move.'

A sixth-grader brimming with prayers and fears: How Mary Lee sounded is preserved on reel-to-reel tapes in the Library of Congress. After the Roosevelt program was launched, government workers recorded hours and hours of everyday life at Gee's Bend, including sixth-graders singing a hymn to which Mary Lee still knows every word by heart:

It may be trouble at the ferry,

I'm gonna stand there anyhow.

Dear Lord! Dear Lord! Dear Lord!

Because she was 14 when she became a mother, childhood and motherhood are all jumbled up in Mary Lee's mind.

She's reliving both this morning, driving around the river to attend an important assembly at her grandsons' high school.

Mary Lee's three grandsons--17, 16 and 12--stay with her because their parents live in Mobile and can't handle them. There were nasty scenes, she says, loud arguments, and she had no choice but to take in the boys. 'It's a terrible thing to be afraid of your own child,' she says vaguely.

Mary Lee has spent her life among swarms of children. She had 16 siblings growing up. She had eight children of her own, who have given her 30 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren so far. There should have been more. She once saw herself having 15 children. Then came a hysterectomy, and seven of her unborn children were stranded, no way to cross over into this world.

With them is her baby, who died in his sleep. Mary Lee never knew why. 'Pretty baby,' she says. 'Smiling all the time.'

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She can see him. He always was a late sleeper, and one morning she let him sleep awhile longer. When she finished her chores and got the other children off to school, she went to wake him. 'He had a real pretty smile on his face. And I said, 'Boy, you better wake up!' Then I said, 'Boy, you better straighten out. What you so stiff for?' Then I busted out crying.'

That boy, he'd have grown up to be sweet-tempered like his mama. Not like her grandsons, she says with a snort. Since she's been sick, unable to crawl out of bed some days, the boys have been running wild, giving her sass. Mostly, they just ignore Mary Lee. They clod sulkily through her house, speaking only to ask for pocket money. Even when she saved enough from her \$382 monthly Social Security checks to buy them a computer, their mood didn't improve.

If they seem angry, sometimes they have cause: They spend half their day on a slow-moving bus. The 12-year-old goes to school at the top of the U, but the older two attend high school in Camden, and circumnavigating the river consumes their youth.

The children, Curl and Hilliard are quick to note, would benefit most from a new ferry. Ten minutes to Camden, 10 minutes back. For the first time in 35 years, the children of Gee's Bend wouldn't be slaves to the bus. They would be able to take part in after-school plays, sports and teacher-student tutorials. To those on both sides of the river who fear the change a ferry would bring, Curl and Hilliard insist: A ferry wouldn't be for you. It would be for the children, heirs to the civil rights movement's bravest warriors, and such special children deserve a change.

Mary Lee doesn't disagree. She'd just rather see Curl and Hilliard build the children a new school in Gee's Bend. Or a community center. Or a store. Something to keep the children here, and Gee's Bend alive.

Now, after the long drive around the river, Mary Lee settles into a chair in the high school auditorium, fidgeting, nervous to be in a school again. One of the first speakers puts her at ease. 'Where I'm from,' he says, 'we take away the big words, like 'statement of purpose.' Instead, we say, 'How come us here?'

Mary Lee giggles.

Parents are here, he says, to learn about stiffer state requirements for a high school diploma. Students are here because their parents made a mighty sacrifice.

'You here,' he tells the students, 'because somebody sweated for you! Somebody dragged a long sack of cotton through the dirt!'

'Mm hmm,' Mary Lee moans, as though in church.



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For an hour, speaker after speaker explains the new diploma requirements, with pie charts and graphs. Mary Lee doesn't understand much of what they say, until one speaker waxes about the value of education, wounding her deeply in the process.

'If you don't graduate from high school,' he bellows, 'you spit in the face of Martin Luther King!'

## CHAPTER SIX / 'I Ain't Ready to Die'

The funeral procession wends slowly past Mary Lee's house and up the hill to Pleasant Grove, past Tinnie Dell Pettway's store, which Tinnie opens whenever she damn well feels like, past the post office, where Mary Lee's best friend, Betty Bendolph, sorts the trickle of mail that comes to Gee's Bend, past the pines, where Benders visit with God.

Most Benders have a special 'praying place' in the pines, a spot to meet God and talk with him. Mary Lee fears the woods, however. Too dark. Too filled with frogs and snakes. She prefers to meet God in her barn. When you see Mary Lee headed for her barn, she's either going to do a little chore or have a big chat.

Should God need to find Mary Lee, she's in church every Sunday morning, and Thursday nights, and whenever there's a choir practice or a town meeting about the proposed ferry. She also attends every funeral, of which there seem to be more and more these days. Today, another one. Another brother going home, the deacons say. Another cousin crossing the river, that's how Mary Lee puts it.

Swaying side to side, Mary Lee aims each note of 'Amazing Grace' at the windows, which are painted pink and green and blue to look like real stained glass. Her voice rises above the funeral choir, and despite the farway look, her thoughts are audible too. Her worst fears have been realized. When the vomiting and pain became too much, she took herself to the doctor, and sure enough, a growth.

Your kidney will have to be removed, he said.

No, thank you, she said.

The doctor didn't understand. With Mary Lee in the hospital, how would her lovely people survive? Her mother and grandsons, her daughter and brother? Her cows? She couldn't leave them to fend for themselves.

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Then, days after the diagnosis, God visited her in a dream and told her to do what the doctor said. She obeyed. She endured the surgery. Dreams are law with Mary Lee. Dreams never lie.

And yet, dreams don't keep her from worrying. She fears the operation was a failure because her stomach feels tender, especially when she giggles. She tries not to giggle, but she might as well try not to breathe. Next time everyone gathers in Pleasant Grove, it will be Mary Lee who crossed over, she feels sure.

Betty doesn't help.

'T-nanny,' Betty says, using a nickname Mary Lee has had her whole life, 'I'm afraid to love you how much I love you because everyone I love ups and dies.'

'Then get on away from me, girl,' Mary Lee says, giggling, wincing. 'I ain't ready to die.'

As the funeral ends, people drift outside to the graveyard, set on a hill circled by scrub pines that sway in the wind like Mary Lee when she sings. Here lies her husband, Rubin, who died seven years ago, though being dead didn't stop him from visiting Mary Lee when she was in the hospital having her kidney out. He stood over her bed and they had a sweet visit, because he couldn't beat her anymore.

Mary Lee misses Rubin but not those beatings. Once, during a lull in the violence, Mary Lee dreamed that Rubin would apologize for every time he slapped her, every time he punched her, even the time he chased her with a shotgun, a scene that brought Sheriff Lummie to the house. He would even apologize for the time he hurled a butcher knife at her. 'If I hadn't got behind the tree, I'd got it,' she says. 'The knife stuck right in that tree.'

In the morning, when Rubin refused to apologize as he did in the dream, Mary Lee took \$35 of Pleasant Grove money ('I placed it back later') and bought a bus ticket to New York City, the farthest she ever got from Gee's Bend.

Standing outside the Manhattan bus depot--threadbare coat, innocent smile--she was easy prey. Men fluttered around her like moths. At last, a cabdriver spotted her and pulled over. She gave him the address of a brother in the Bronx, then leaned forward, her face in the front seat.

'Sit back,' the driver said, angry. 'Relax!'

'I don't know how to relax,' she said.

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New York was magic. She got a job, made friends, went to a Harlem dance club and pretended to be drunk, so as not to stand out. But the Hudson wasn't Alabama, and after a month she missed Gee's Bend in her bones. When Wisdom wrote that it was time to come home, she agreed.

And when she did, Rubin apologized.

Just as she dreamed he would.

Right after he died, Rubin visited Mary Lee, and he was mighty sore. He came to her in the middle of the night and ordered her not to sleep in their bed anymore, out of respect. Then 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. 'And I ain't never had no more trouble from him again,' Mary Lee says.

Every night since, she's slept in her spare bedroom, honoring a difficult husband's last request. Rubin was a hard man to love, but she 'loved him harder than anybody.' Besides, he wasn't the only man who beat Mary Lee. Every man in her life raised a hand to her in anger. Wisdom didn't hesitate when she disobeyed. Wisdom's uncle, Isom, whipped her soundly when she was young, for being willful. A blind former slave, Isom didn't understand that a girl born beside a willful river can't help but be willful now and then.

People always ask Mary Lee about the U-shaped scar on her hairline, which bears a striking resemblance to a map of the river bend. 'When Rubin did this to me,' she says, fingering her forehead, 'that was the worst day of my life, because my face stayed swollen, and I ain't had no money to go to the doctor. I just put some home remedy thing on my face. Used to keep my hair combed to that side.'

As she got braver about showing the scar, people got bolder about staring. Every time they'd ask, she'd give them the faraway look and mumble, 'Long story.'

It's been Mary Lee's experience that, even more than death, people are terrified at the prospect of a long story.

## CHAPTER SEVEN / Sometimes You Can't Cross Back

The headstones tilt this way and that, like the Earth's rotted teeth. Mary Lee eyes them as she did the photographs in the doctor's office. The cousins beneath these stones are the same ones in the

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photographs, born in the 1800s and early 1900s, when Benders went from slaves to sharecroppers, and barely noticed a difference.

It wasn't until the close of the 19th century that the slaveholders who'd owned Gee's Bend since before the Civil War finally relinquished the land. On the third day of the 20th century, Gee's Bend became the property of Adrian Van de Graff, a Yale-educated racist who believed himself destined to remake the South as a whites-only enclave. Heavy debts plagued him, however, and he died before doing the harm he intended. Gee's Bend fell to his son, who sold it to the Roosevelt administration, which parsed all 10,000 acres back to the former slaves and their descendants.

At last, with the stroke of a pen, the owned of Gee's Bend became its owners. A giant plantation with a sordid past became a quilt of small farms, a patchwork of independent families. Those were days of hope and glory, when competition from mechanized farms was beyond imagining.

Now, the labor that defined Gee's Bend and bound Benders to one another has fallen away. Everyone keeps animals and tends a garden, but only a hardy few still reap and sow. Only a handful of fields still sprout corn, the wind rustling their stalks like a grown-up tousling a child's hair. When the Civil War freed them, Benders stayed put; when the civil rights movement freed them a second time, they flew, and farming went with them.

King told them to cross the river, and they crossed. That was the moment Mary Lee learned why every crossing is so fearful. Sometimes you can't cross back. There were 1,500 people in Gee's Bend the night King came. Half as many live here today, most Mary Lee's age and older, too old to farm. They get by on savings and Social Security. Their children work office jobs in Camden, or Selma, 45 miles northeast. Their grandchildren go to school or kill time on the bleachers across from the post office, awaiting their chance to go.

As farming has faded, so has quilting. Nothing shows the ebb of life more than the abandoned-looking Freedom Quilting Bee, up County Road 29. Mary Lee worked there. Lucy worked there. Every woman in Gee's Bend took a turn at the Quilting Bee, which briefly put Gee's Bend on the map.

It was founded in 1966, after a civil rights worker came marching through Wilcox County and happened upon an astonishing sight: three brilliant quilts fluttering from a clothesline outside a rude cabin, like battle flags of some rebel nation. The patterns were unique, the craftsmanship exquisite. No American quilts could quite compare, because these quilts weren't quite American.

Within weeks, great batches of Gee's Bend quilts were being shipped north, to fine museums and fancy department stores. A priest helped the women go into business for themselves, and a national hunger developed for all that their work-gnarled fingers could produce. Each day, the women of Gee's Bend formed their sewing circle, breathless at the possibility: For generations,

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their secret art--created in slavery, perfected in solitude--had kept them warm. Now it promised to set them free.

Then, overnight, white folks forgot about Gee's Bend again. At the same time, things began to vanish--the ferry, the farms, the farmers--business at the Quilting Bee ground to a halt. Only one of the original women joins the circle anymore. The rest have retired, left or died.

Some days, Mary Lee can feel it, all that Gee's Bend energy grown fainter, like Aola's pulse. Gee's Bend was never perfect, God knows, but it always had its busy women piecing quilts, its men walking tall behind their plows. If an isolated peninsula where three of every four people live below the poverty line can be called Paradise, then Gee's Bend was, because it was a family. Somehow, the family idyll that Gee's Bend represented has become fallow as the dirt.

And yet, the place remains holy to Mary Lee, and the dirt will forever be fertile with her forebears, who were sometimes buried where they fell, or swallowed by the river, to be deposited in the fields with the next spring freshet. While making her rounds, or strolling with Betty, or searching for one of her stray cows, Mary Lee is as likely to come across a forgotten slave grave as an abandoned well.

Her 26 acres of Gee's Bend came down to her from Rubin, who inherited them from his granddaddy, Patrick Bendolph, a mighty red oak of a man, and one of the patriarchs in Gee's Bend when Mary Lee was born. Pa-Petty, as Mary Lee called him, wore a pajama top for a shirt and sported a head of white hair straight as a stick, which unaccountably turned curly the day he died. His land, now deeded to Mary Lee's children, may be no more than pasture for her cows, but Mary Lee treasures every acre; it connects her to all the dead who tilled it and now lie mixed up in it.

Mary Lee stands to one side, watching the gravediggers do their work, the only plowing that gets done in Gee's Bend these days. Gee's Bend is going from a quilt of farms to a quilt of graveyards, and she'd just as soon be someplace other than a graveyard when she's feeling so fretful about her own health and the health of her holy place. Before her living cousins lower her dead cousin into the ground, she says a prayer, what she calls 'a sincereness of the heart.'

This isn't her praying place. But surrounded by all these lovely people, living and dead, she just knows God must be nearby.

## CHAPTER EIGHT / Coming Too Late for Raymond

They visit in the living room, Mary Lee on the couch under a portrait of King, Raymond across the room in a straight-backed chair. For long stretches, they say nothing, Raymond staring at his big sister, Mary Lee staring at her feet.

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He lives by himself in this tiny brick house--the floor canting like the deck of a ship, the sink full of dirty dishes--counting the minutes until Mary Lee comes.

It's Raymond but it's not Raymond, she says, because he hasn't been right since the accident 20 years ago. She's not sure what happened, and Raymond can't say. She only knows that, while driving around Gee's Bend, he skidded off the road and flew from the car, then writhed in a ditch until someone saw him and ran to get Mary Lee.

Everything be all right, Mary Lee told him, sobbing, peering down the road for the ambulance, everything be all right.

With no ferry, the ambulance had to come around the river, as it must each time a Bender has a seizure, a heart attack, an accident. The paramedics took two hours to reach Raymond that day, and while waiting, he suffered a stroke.

If a ferry comes, Mary Lee says, it will be too late for Raymond. Too late by 20 years.

Outsiders often ask why Benders like Mary Lee don't just leave, and one reason has always been true: Most have Raymonds. While Mary Lee was in the hospital, her sister checked on Raymond, cooked his meals and washed his clothes. But what would happen to Raymond if Mary Lee left, or died?

What would happen to him if a ferry came, carrying people less patient, less kind than his fellow Benders. She studies Raymond, his eager expression the opposite of her faraway look. Always right here, right now, he's always more vulnerable to strangers than she.

While Mary Lee studies him, Raymond studies the portrait of King.

'I have a dream,' Mary Lee says, reading his mind.

Raymond smiles.

'He had one, too,' Mary Lee assures him.

As a boy, Raymond was a history buff. 'He'd write everything down,' Mary Lee says. 'All the history of Gee's Bend. Since the accident, he can't catch up with everything like he used to.'

She tries to catch up for him. The trouble is, Gee's Bend history has more remote bends than the river. Almost nothing is known, for instance, about the decades after the Civil War, when



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Benders kept the river wrapped around themselves like one of their quilts, remaining so isolated from the outer world that other Alabama blacks called them 'The Africans.' When Pa-Petty was born in 1866, Benders still spoke a hodgepodge of backwoods English and African dialect, and held fast to ancient superstitions. If you sit on a log, you'll soon be disappointed. If you travel at night with whiskey in your pocket, the dead will follow on your heels.

This much Mary Lee knows: Half her neighbors and cousins and girlfriends are named Pettway because a white man named Mark Pettway left his North Carolina plantation in 1847 and came here with 100 slaves in tow. He formed a caravan of covered wagons, to keep his family and furniture dry, and marched his human possessions alongside, a 700-mile trek through December rain and cold. Only one slave was allowed to ride--the cook. Pettway wanted her fresh to prepare the meals.

Before Pettway, Gee's Bend was owned by a shadowy 57-year-old bachelor named Joseph Gee, the first white man to stake his claim here. In 1820, Gee and his slaves tamed the swamp and cleared the land, which would forever bear his name and their progeny. When Pettway arrived, he threw his slaves among Gee's slaves and named them all Pettway. Today, nearly every Bender is connected to the merger of those two slave clans. Though Mary Lee's last name is Bendolph, her grandmother was a Pettway, her daughter married a Pettway, Pa-Petty married a Pettway, and so on.

In Pettway's day, Mary Lee's river was crowded with ships. They passed Gee's Bend day and night, ferrying planters and miners, gamblers and dandies, stevedores and cotton kings. Many emitted a ghostly calliope music, the music of merry-go-rounds and other things that go in circles.

One of the grandest of all, the Orline St. John, caught fire and sank off Gee's Bend in 1850. A slave named Abram swam out and saved nine men, who were carried with other survivors to the Big House, a makeshift hospital that day. Scores drowned, however. At least one was laid to rest in Camden.

Surely Master Pettway attended the funerals. And if he did, he went the long way, taking the same road his caravan took into Gee's Bend, the same road Martin Luther King's caravan took, because it would be another 20 years before his son would build the first ferry ever at Gee's Bend.

Pettway knows. Better than anyone, he could tell Mary Lee the history she longs to hear. She passes him every day too, but unlike most of the dead, he keeps silent, as mute as Raymond and Aola. He just lies there, in a snake-infested copse of trees not far from Raymond's front door.

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## CHAPTER NINE / No Rest for the Weary

Mary Lee lifts her blouse and lets the doctor probe her stomach. He asks how she's been feeling since the surgery.

Can't laugh like I used to, she says. Also, 'I ain't been sleeping.'

In the middle of the night, her mind goes roaming like one of her cows after busting through a fence. Some nights, she gets out of bed and kneels down and begs God to bring it back. 'My mind be sometime just a-wandering,' she says. 'Sometime it don't let me finish thinking about this; it'll catch me before I finish and put me over to something else.'

Mostly, her mind explores the realm of possibility. Choices she might have made, places she might have gone. 'I just be thinking what I could did,' she says, 'instead of what I did when I did it.'

Did she do right marrying Rubin? Did she do right leaving him? Did she meet her fate, or did fate have trouble finding her here in this cobwebbed corner of creation? 'I'm thinking,' she says, 'about the friend I never had.'

Along with the past, the present weighs on her mind. Can her Chevy survive the summer? Can she survive her grandsons? Can she pay off her \$15,900 surgery bill by sending the hospital \$20 a month?

When she nods off, dreams are more exhausting than a full day's chores. Not long ago, she found herself on the banks of the Jordan River.

'It was a whole bunch of trash going down the river,' she says. 'And Willie Quill, he was standing down beside me, and there was some more people on the other side, and a man told Quill to tell me to go back.'

Willie Quill Pettway, first cousin to Mary Lee's mother, is a 71-year-old living landmark in Gee's Bend. His house sits near the old ferry launch, and when folks come around asking questions, Benders point in that direction and say, 'Go ask Quill.'

Dark as a waterlogged cedar tree, named after a 19th century riverboat, Quill is the best storyteller around. Seated beneath his prized portrait of King, he puts visitors in a trance by piecing together scraps of memory and facts and folklore into one tight narrative quilt.

It made sense to Mary Lee that Quill was directing traffic on the Jordan.

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In her dream, she told Quill that she'd already crossed the Jordan once before, in an earlier dream, and the river was full of obstacles then too.

'It was so tangled up,' she says, 'and I was crawling, I was swimming, trying to get across. When I got midway, the water got calm, and it was just clear, you could see all the way to the bottom.'

I been across this river, she told Quill, and I know it gets calm in the middle, so I ain't afraid to cross now.

Just the same, Quill said, it ain't your time yet, T-nanny, you go on back.

With that, Mary Lee woke up, thanking God for sparing her. But wondering, who were all those people on the other side?

Something else strange about her dream: The Jordan looked a lot like the Alabama.

Is that why there was no ferry?

She smiles. Such a foolish question.

On the Jordan, she says, 'Jesus is the ferry.'

She works at her Jordan River dream, trying to 'interpretate.' Like the shore, the meaning lies just beyond her reach. She's about to make a crossing, yes. But what kind? And when? And who will cross with her? Aola? Quill? Martha Jane Pettway, the oldest Bender of all?

Born in 1898 just after white Pettways left Gee's Bend, Martha Jane was a little girl when Theodore Roosevelt became president, a grandmother by the time that other Roosevelt saved Gee's Bend. She was older than Mary Lee when the ferry disappeared, and each time she turns another year older, word goes out to Benders across the nation:

Come home, family, come home.

They hear, and they come. Hundreds gather in Martha Jane's yard to wish her well and kiss her cheek, rough and cool like the bark of an oak. Mary Lee goes next-door too, with a sweet potato pie and a heavy heart, because she wishes they would stay.

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Especially the men. She hates that a drift as sure as the river's current has carried away every potential Pa-Petty, rendering Gee's Bend a matriarchy, with Martha Jane and Lucy and Betty and Mary Lee its queens. Being queen of Gee's Bend is a lonely business.

'You look like you have something you want to ask me,' the doctor says, snapping shut Mary Lee's chart.

'I want to know,' she asks, blinking, 'will I be all right?'

'You keep asking me that,' he says, annoyed.

He explains that the growth on her kidney wasn't cancer but a benign tumor. He says she can live a normal life with one kidney, so long as she cuts out the meat, salt and fat.

She slumps forward, disappointed.

The doctor didn't understand her question.

She just wanted him to tell her that everything would be all right.

## CHAPTER TEN / A New Journey Begins

This is how death will be, she just knows.

Like the end of another long day, when she can finally sit on her screened-in porch, body at ease, mind at peace.

'Yeah,' she says, smiling. 'I'm going home to rest. I sure would like to go there, 'cause I've had enough of hard times here.'

Then she changes her mind. 'No, no, no. I'm not ready to go now. I want to stay here a little longer.'

Torn between the only home she's ever known and the one she sees in her dreams, Mary Lee knew just how her mother felt not long ago. After the doctors diagnosed Alzheimer's, Aola was seized by a need to see where she was born and raised. Without a word to anyone, she set off across the fields in search of her old cabin.

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Hours later, Mary Lee noticed her mother missing and got up a search party. They fanned out across Gee's Bend, and, as the sun was setting, they found Aola in a meadow, sitting against a tree, fast asleep.

Never did find my home, Aola said, dejected.

Mary Lee knew what her mother meant.

Things used to end differently in Gee's Bend. Times were hard, but death was soft. People would reach ripe old ages and die in bed, encircled by five generations of loving kin, tucked under quilts older than their mortal coils. They die younger these days, Mary Lee notices. And lonelier.

Of course, a person dies many times in the course of a life, and every death is an illusion. Maybe the same is true of places. If a ferry comes and kills Gee's Bend, it will only kill it again. Gee's Bend died when the widow's henchmen cleaned it out. It died when its mules carried King to the grave.

Something tells Mary Lee, though, this death would be different.

Curl says a ferry won't kill Gee's Bend but revive it. He talks about a ferry as if it were a vessel of salvation, like Noah's Ark, or the basket that carried baby Moses. A ferry will revive Gee's Bend, he says, with new people.

If so, they won't be Mary Lee's people. They'll wave their money under the nose of her poor cousins and buy up all the prime land. What's left, that is. White folks already have the best riverfront. Already they're talking about a golf course along the banks of Gee's Bend.

No matter what Mary Lee thinks, no matter how hard she prays, it's done. The ferry is coming. While she was taking sick, Curl and Hilliard raised the \$1 million needed. While she was lying in the hospital, a shipyard near Montgomery won the contract. While she was recuperating, the blueprints were drawn. While she was tending her mother and Raymond and her grandsons, the boat got built.

After a few runs to make sure it's seaworthy, the ferry will begin its momentous journey downriver. September, Curl says. October at the latest. And though he's been saying the same thing for years, Mary Lee suddenly believes him.

She's not sad. Some days, she's not even sure she has the strength to care. She regards the ferry as she does her death: fears and welcomes it at the same time.

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It will look about how Mary Lee pictured it. Big. Roughly 100 feet long, and 200 tons, with room for 149 passengers, or two full school buses, or one 18-wheeler loaded with pine trees bound for the Camden paper mill. The county will run it from sunup to sundown, seven days a week, and some say the county plans to call it The Pettway, launching that surname into the next century.

When it finally comes, Curl will be more than the cause. He'll be the pilot. A Coast Guard-certified riverboat captain, Curl will steer the ferry into the latticework of shadows cast across Mary Lee's river by hickory and poplar, sweet gum and persimmon.

Seeing him there at the helm, Mary Lee will have a choice. She can believe he's bringing back the ferry because it will attract new business and boost the value of riverfront property, including his own 60 acres on the Camden side. Or she can believe that a white man exactly her age has done a complete U-turn, in a place where only her river has been known to do that.

It's not impossible for a 63-year-old to do a U-turn. Recently, she thought about doing one herself. When an old widower returned from the North, looking for a new wife, Mary Lee let him phone her, let him woo her, even toyed with the idea of letting him carry her off.

Then an impulse overcame her. She told the widower her long story. In one great rush she blurted out that she was on the mend from kidney surgery, that she was caring for an elderly mother, a troubled brother, three devilish grandsons and six cows with wanderlust.

'He said a prayer for me,' she recalls, giggling, 'and then hung up, and I ain't never heard from him again.'

The sun is eye-level now, making every field a vivid shade of copper, red and orange, a quilt of different colors, but each a distant cousin to the river's syrupy brown.

Another day ends, and the dirt releases its warmth like an exhausted sigh.

Mary Lee sighs too, worn out by the story of Mary Lee.

Long story.

She smiles, apologetic.

At such a peaceful moment, she's not sure the story's ended. Maybe she'll live to be Martha Jane's age, reign another 40 years as queen of Gee's Bend. She smiles. She giggles.

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She gets the faraway look.

Farther than ever.

Something coming. Something big. Maybe a ferry, maybe death, maybe the end of the only home she's ever known.

It's hard to tell the difference when the dying sun floods the fields with such a pretty white light.

\*

Times researcher Edith Stanley in Atlanta contributed to this story.