

# NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY

## *My Way: A Gathering*

Delia Bennett  
Essie Bendolph Pettway  
Martha Jane Pettway  
Susie Mae Ponds  
Mattie Ross  
Sarah Young

Maren Hassinger  
Tau Lewis  
Faith Ringgold  
Betye Saar  
Mildred Thompson  
Rachel Eulena Williams

January 19 - February 18, 2023

Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is pleased to present *My Way: A Gathering*, a group exhibition.

Historic quilts from Gee’s Bend, Alabama made by Delia Bennett (1892–1976); Susie Mae Ponds (1897–1999); Martha Jane Pettway (1898–2003); Mattie Ross (1902–1997); Sarah Young (b. 1935) and Essie Bendolph Pettway (b. 1956) are paired alongside mixed media works by six of their contemporaries: Betye Saar (b. 1926); Faith Ringgold (b. 1930); Mildred Thompson (1936–2003); Maren Hassinger (b. 1947); Rachel Eulena Williams (b. 1991); and Tau Lewis (b. 1993).

*My Way: A Gathering* forms a dialogue amongst Black women artists exploring languages of abstraction, collage, and assemblage in practices that ritualize the everyday. Foregrounding the paramount artistic legacy of the Gee’s Bend Quiltmakers, this exhibition pieces together aesthetic and affective connections between artworks made during the last sixty years by artists who practice(d) in myriad contexts—be they geographic or social—within or outside of artistic “centers.” Shared here is a reverence for materials and narratives that accumulate at the margins, as well as a belief in the spiritual and metaphysical power of art making. For the twelve artists on view, it is often the scrap, or the ends, which provides guidance in this transformation.

For generations, women in Gee’s Bend have made quilts using the materials afforded to them, repurposing remnants of old work clothes, choir robes, feed sacks, faded denim and found fabrics in highly unique, improvisational designs. Many of these styles have come to be locally referred to as ‘My Way’ quilts; rather than adhering to a guide or template, a ‘My Way’ quilt embodies a quilter’s individual artistic vision and relationship to the fabrics at hand. This intuitive piecing of color and pattern results in deeply personal abstractions. Delia Bennett’s *Bricklayer* (c. 1967) incorporates steps and bars of denim and cotton into a repeating grid of four Bricklayer patterns, while the earthen palette of Susie Mae Pond’s *Crazy Quilt* (1974-75) explodes in an array of irregular blocks and strips. Mattie Ross’s long, rectangular *Sampler* (c. early 1970s) salvages scraps and rejects from the Freedom Quilting Bee, a nonprofit cooperative association for which Ross was a Founding Member and Treasurer.

The impulse to gather and repurpose echoes resoundingly in the work of Saar, Ringgold, Thompson, Hassinger, Williams, and Lewis. And with this impulse, distinct forms of abstraction are registered in uniquely somatic approaches to small-scale collage, wood and paper sculpture, and painting. In the case of the works on view, all methods inflected with similar approaches to making as those employed by the quiltmakers. Saar’s handkerchief collage *Designs of Destiny* (1981), Ringgold’s two *Windows of the Wedding* tanka paintings, and Thompson’s *Untitled* wood sculptures (the smaller from the *Credo Series*, c. 1992-94; the larger from the *Vespers Series*, c. mid-1990s) engage with senses of quotidian transcendentalism through their confluence of pattern and spiritual forms. In more recent works by Hassinger (*Fringe*, 2015), Lewis (*look how long I’ve been crying to get to you!*, 2018), and Williams (*Fall Scrap Flag*, 2022), a kinship emerges with ‘leftovers’ or refuse materials, deliberately twisted or stitched together into a greater whole.

*This show is the second part of a three exhibition series. The first iteration, My Way: The Gee’s Bend Quiltmakers and Contemporary Abstraction, organized by Nicelle Beauchene and Franklin Parrasch at Parts & Labor, Beacon opened in 2020. A third exhibition in this series, featuring work by today’s younger generation of quiltmakers from Gee’s Bend, is planned for 2025.*