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ART REVIEW; Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

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 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.

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 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.