



The Life and Art of Mary Lee Bendolph

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There is only one road leading into Gee's Bend, a small, historically black community in the lush green backcountry of southwest Alabama. Surrounded on three sides by a sharp, capricious curve in the Alabama River, it is a place that has always remained tucked away from much of the outside world. No one really knows the precise population of the Bend, but some say it is seven hundred or so. Appearing amidst a landscape of overgrown fields and patches of scrub forest, the town itself is a scattering of one-story houses connected by red dirt trails and joined by a tiny post office, two convenience stores, and four churches.

Like many old agricultural communities where farming has become practically obsolete, Gee's Bend seems to belong to another time. In fact, there is a highly palpable sense of the past that hangs in the air like the thick humid atmosphere of an Alabama summer day. Everywhere are markers of eras gone by: rusted cars, decaying barns, and the metal corpses of defunct farm machinery. On a late afternoon, an elderly man sits quietly on the front porch of his weathered home and gazes past the muddy clay road into a cornfield that has long ago turned into an empty vista. It is an everyday scene from the Bend that also serves as its elegy, a melancholy ode to the inevitable passing of an age and a place.

A fading community of mostly older, rural black folk living well below the poverty line, Gee's Bend is not where one would expect to encounter, among its inhabitants, some of the culture industry's latest celebrities. But that is who you will find there. For not too long ago, a number of quiltmakers from the Bend were suddenly pronounced

accomplished artists and propelled to national acclaim. Heirs to a rich and long-standing quilting tradition, women from the area had been creating patchwork masterpieces since the nineteenth century. Still, this was the first time that anyone had celebrated their imaginative vision and called their bedcovers art.

In 2002 the first touring exhibition of quilts by more than forty women from Gee's Bend landed in New York at the prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art. And it was there that these once-humble patchworks began to garner praise from major art critics, including Michael Kimmelman at the *New York Times*, who christened the quilts, "some of the most miraculous works of modern art America has produced."¹ In an abrupt and dizzying inversion of the cultural status quo, a group of rural women from the Deep South, some of whom had never before left Alabama, were traveling around the country, speaking at museum roundtables, and signing autographs.

Soon, the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend also captured the fascination and esteem of America at large, becoming the subject of feature articles in such major publications as *Newsweek* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*, and even spots on PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and *Martha Stewart Living*. They dined with Laura Bush and toured the South with Jane Fonda. They had their creations reproduced on rugs, stationary, pillows, and neckties. And ten of their quilts were even chosen to appear in a series of commemorative stamps issued by the United States Postal Service.

"I never make a quilt altogether like anybody"

One of the best-known and most revered quiltmakers among this group of recently recognized artists is Mary Lee Bendolph. Just about to turn seventy-one years old, she has spent many decades transforming scraps of old cloth into aesthetic marvels. To create her quilts, she tears worn and discarded clothing into simple strips and blocks of fabric, then assembles them into highly refined geometric abstractions. Her genius resides in her ability to invent a seemingly endless variety of complex compositions and astounding visual effects from a rudimentary vocabulary of shapes.

In one of her works, Bendolph fashioned an eccentric maze of aqua blue corduroy that suddenly dissolves at center into a mysterious hieroglyph of hot red, pink, and orange fabric (page 10). Within another patchwork, somber rectangles of brown wool and blue denim engage in a cubist struggle to subdue a rowdy assortment of brightly colored strips and squares (page 11). Still another quilt gives shape to tapered bands of red, gold, and lavender, a dazzling field of shifting, zebra-stripe angularity (page 67).

In the most basic sense, Bendolph's geometric imagery is an ingenious elaboration on the common practice of strip quilting, a fundamental technique of piecing together bands of cloth that is widespread throughout the South and in many other patchwork traditions. Her grid-like forms also seem to play off the structural framework of the "Housetop" pattern, a conventional quilt design of concentric squares that is particularly popular among the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend. But according to Bendolph herself, the majority of her works simply draw inspiration from the colors, shapes, and patterns of the world around her, resulting in quilts that are really abstract remappings of the surrounding visual environment. As she recently explained, "Most of my ideas come from looking at things. Quilts is in everything. Sometimes I see a big truck passing by.

I look at the truck and say, I could make a quilt look like that. . . . I see the barn, and I get an idea to make a quilt. I can walk outside and look around in the yard and see ideas all around the front and the back of my house. . . . As soon as I leave the house I get ideas.”²

Within most other quilting traditions, the choice of a quilt pattern virtually ends the creative process; all that remains is its faithful execution in cloth and thread. In Bendolph’s case, the idea for a quilt is only the beginning. For like many of the best quilters in Gee’s Bend, she is a master of improvisation who courts surprise, unpredictability, and spur-of-the-moment aesthetic inspiration. While many conventional quilters strive to replicate a pattern with great precision, prefer only gentle harmonies of color, and pursue a delicate perfectionism of form and technique, the goal among women in the Bend is to break the pattern, to heighten visual drama through strong contrasts in colors and values, and to enjoy the expressive possibilities of rakish lines and irregular shapes. Describing her free-form inventiveness, Bendolph confided, “I say I’m going to cut out a quilt like something I see. I start it, but when I end up, I always got it going another way.”³

This philosophy of improvisation is at the core of Bendolph’s art and the principle behind her unusually adventurous sense of aesthetics. In her creative world, patterns suddenly fracture into small pieces, positive forms turn into negative shapes, and entire designs unexpectedly shift in direction. And then there are the countless smaller surprises, the little incongruities in color or shape that tweak the imagination and astound the eye—a startling patch of red that pops up out of nowhere, a blue strip that abruptly turns into orange, and one sliver of purple cloth that somehow enlivens a whole quilt. Within her work, Bendolph both makes and breaks her own visual rules. Still, amidst her universe of crooked squares, bent lines, asymmetrical forms, and dissonant hues, there is always the sense that every shape and color, however improbable or surprising, has miraculously found just the right spot.

Within the tradition of southern improvisational quilting, most artists establish their own repertoire of patterns, stitches, and approaches, finding a balance between the cultural codes and aesthetic conventions of the group and their own creative vision. Many of the women of Gee’s Bend are especially outspoken regarding their expressive individuality. Talking about quilting influences in her life, Bendolph says, “I never make a quilt altogether like anybody. . . . It’s better if you do what *you* are supposed to do than to try and copy somebody else.”⁴ Flora Moore agrees, “I didn’t put it the way the pattern went. . . . I put it my way.”⁵ In a poem, quilter Arlonzia Pettway writes, “Never make a path somebody else made.”⁶

Another widely held conviction among Gee’s Bend quilters is the related belief that no two quilts should ever be alike. As Mensie Lee Pettway advises, “Ought not two quilts ever be the same. You might use exactly the same material, but you would do it different.”⁷ When discussing how other quilters use the same pattern over and over again, Bendolph recently asserted, “You know, I can’t duplicate my own work.” “Why not?” she was asked. With a chuckle she replied, “Because I don’t want to.”⁸

In an effort to describe the unique nature of Bendolph’s works and the other Gee’s Bend quilts, many have likened them to jazz music, with its colorful offbeat phrasing, independent rhythms, and spontaneous riffs off the central melody. But perhaps even greater aesthetic similarities may be found with gospel music, particularly in regard to

its adventurous harmonies, rhythmic inventions, and freestyle note-bending. As Alvia Wardlaw wrote, “Gee’s Bend women were surrounded by the soaring free-form notes of the blues and gospel as well as of master soloists, and this music became imbedded in their personas. Just as it became second nature for the singers that they listened to—Mahalia Jackson, the Staple Singers, Shirley Caesar—to play around with a note, so too did they become comfortable about straying into uncharted territory in their quilting style, producing compositions quite unlike the norms of American quiltmakers.”⁹

In the 1940s, Ira Tucker and Paul Owens from the famous gospel group the Dixie Hummingbirds referred to their improvisational strategies for engaging and astonishing audiences as “trickeration,” a term that could just as easily apply to the startling visual inventions and high-effect aesthetics of Bendolph and the other quiltmakers. Not coincidentally, Bendolph and a number of her fellow quiltmakers are also gospel singers who perform in groups for the various church congregations in the area. Bendolph belongs to the Ye Shall Know The Truth Baptist Church Choir and sings her hymns with a deep voice and swelling tones that echo the rich, expressive colors of her quilts.

“We made them to keep warm”

Mary Lee Bendolph never thought of herself as an artist. She never used the word, and neither did any of the other women from Gee’s Bend. In fact, when asked about the reasons for making their extraordinary patchworks, they offer a different explanation. As Annie Bell Pettway explained, “I been doing quilts all my life. You had to do that to keep warm in those old wood-plank houses. You could see the ground through the floor. You could look outside through the wall. It got really cold in there.”¹⁰ Marie Coleman Anderson similarly recalled, “You could look through the floor and see the hogs slept under the house, the chickens slept under the house, the dogs slept under there. It was cold; it need four quilts on each bed to keep warm.”¹¹

Working long days in the fields, as well as tending to homes and families under the most impoverished conditions, the women of Gee’s Bend had much more on their minds than making “art.” And their quilts—piled high at night on corn-shuck mattresses in damp and drafty shacks or hung on the walls to prevent the wind from blowing through—were fashioned out of the direst necessity. At the same time, no amount of material need could prevent the women of the Bend from also turning patchworks into a medium of self-expression, infusing objects of ordinary use with beauty, and integrating aesthetics into everyday life. Describing this artistic imperative, one writer observed, “A woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn’t freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn’t break.”¹²

When making their patchworks, the women of Gee’s Bend had little time to “fuss” over countless small details; they chose a bold, expressive language instead. To fashion their highly creative patterns, they used old clothing—an assortment of worn-out shirts, trousers, overalls, aprons, and dress bottoms, as well as any other scraps that they could salvage. For batting, they beat the dirt out of trash cotton retrieved from the fields or from the floor of the cotton gin.

When she was twelve years old, Bendolph created her first quilt, but it took her an entire year to finish because she could not find enough fabric remnants. She recalls:

I didn't have nothing to piece the quilt with. It was some jean pants, some overall pants, shirts, sleeves off the shirt—the good part I could find off of there—skirts, flour sacks, fertilizer sacks. Anything I could find—a scrap piece—I put it in that quilt if Mama wasn't using it. It didn't matter what it was, as long as it was something to go in. I remember picking a piece from out in the road; it was a raggy old shirt what the wagon had rolled over. And it was muddy. It was kind of blue, a gray-blue Indian-head cloth. I washed all the mud out of it and hung it on the wire. When it got dry, I put it in the quilt.¹³

Faced with a poverty of means, the women of Gee's Bend took on the imaginative challenge of transforming ragged cloth into warm and protective patchworks, of making something out of nothing. More than just bedcovers, their quilts became icons of survival and self-sufficiency amidst chronically hard times, symbols of an empowering make-do ethic that continues to endure in the community there.

Although today many quiltmakers have turned to new, store-bought fabrics, many others still disassemble old clothes. Bendolph, in particular, persists in using castaway materials. For her, recycling and reuse have become part of a larger moral philosophy. As she explained, "I make quilts out of [old cloth] because I hate throwing away things, because somebody can use things that people throw away. People are so wasteful now. It hurts me to see people waste up things."¹⁴ Offering a further parable on rescuing the most undesirable of discards, Bendolph often tells the story of her "favorite quilt" and one of her best known masterpieces—an eye-popping, geometric patchwork of brown, black, crimson red, and flesh pink fabrics that she salvaged from a tossed-out assortment of polyester leisure suits (left).

"Old clothes have a spirit in them"

Within the quilting tradition of Gee's Bend, the use of old clothes also serves as a major means of commemoration, for there is an implicit understanding that patchworks symbolize and preserve the spirit of those whose garments were salvaged to make them. Like a family scrapbook, scavenged bits of cloth invoke recollections—a piece of old apron material brings to mind a grandmother, a fragment of trousers recalls a child now grown and gone, and stained squares from some old overalls conjure the presence of a deceased and beloved husband. In the Bend, quilts are like jigsaw puzzles that piece together memories, chart the courses of lives, and bind the past with the present. Reflecting on these special metaphysics, Bendolph once commented, "Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them. Even if I don't even know the person, I know someone wore those pants, and it feels lovely and warm to me."¹⁵

Beyond the remembrances of individual lives and families, quilts made of worn clothes also evoke a larger sense of history. This is especially true for the bedcovers fashioned from old work clothes—a collection of denim britches, jean overalls, woolen shirts, and blue chambray dresses—whose stains, tears, holes, and faded patches provide a tangible physical record of lives marked by seasons of hard labor in the sweltering fields of the Deep South. Characterized by a muted palette of browns, grays, and

blues, work-clothes quilts are often the most austere and minimalist among the patchworks of Gee's Bend, but in their somber poetry, they offer a moving portrait of the history and hardships of black rural life. Typically quilts summon up the vision of an idyllic American past and serve as sentimentalizing odes to the virtues of simpler times, frontier self-sufficiency, and the spiritual value of handmade objects. The Gee's Bend patchworks are a rebuttal to that romantic image, a countermemory, in piece after piece of worn and tattered cloth that cannot be buried under by national myths and quaint explanations. Describing the emotional power of the older patchworks from the Bend and their effect on those who see them, Bendolph recently said, "The history is there in the quilts. . . . People can't help but feel the history because they see what their old parents went through in the old quilts. They see that resentment and hurt. It stick to the skin and that make them feel sad and sorry."¹⁶

Until the middle of the twentieth century, most of the quilts in Gee's Bend were made from work clothes, which, in the rural South, were simply the clothes that everyone wore nearly every day. When other fabrics became available, many women felt relief over no longer needing to wrestle these thicker and tougher materials into their patterns. Others, like Bendolph, did not mind the challenge and appreciated the meanings encoded within the old-style remnants of heavier cotton, wool, and denim. For Bendolph, in particular, the transformation of old and worn fabrics into beautiful and comforting quilts became a metaphor for surviving hard times. According to her, "They remind you of where you have been and where the Lord have brought you from."¹⁷

Throughout the lexicon of African American vernacular culture, castaway objects are often used to reaffirm life, as the reinvestment of creative energy in old and outworn things suggests the possibility of turning adversity into spiritual triumph and of redeeming the socially dispossessed or human castaways of the world. The tradition of the work-clothes quilt, perpetuated by Bendolph in many of her pieces, is part of that practice. Although her contemporary patchworks are no longer made from the pathos-ridden overalls of earlier times, her recycled-denim quilts continue to evoke the same notions of loss and redemption, despair and deliverance. In an especially intriguing example from 2002, Bendolph created a brooding patchwork composed almost entirely of worn blue jean scraps. But here and there within the dark, heavy field are passages of brilliant red. Even more paradoxical is the appearance of a few other squares of cloth printed with a delicate pink flower pattern—a symbol of regeneration (page 15).

"I come through it"

Like the cloth scraps that she rescues for her quilts, Bendolph sees herself as a survivor. In her words, "Some people have a good life. But I had a rough life... I thank God that he helped me come through."¹⁸

In many ways, Bendolph's life story is linked to the history of Gee's Bend, where she was born and has always resided. Like nearly all of the inhabitants of the area, she is descended from the slaves who worked the local cotton plantation. First owned by white settler Joseph Gee, the plantation later became the property of Mark Pettway, whose name, forced upon those in his servitude, is the one that many of the current residents still share. After the Civil War, the forbears of the Gee's Bend community stayed in the area and became tenant farmers, where for generations they worked under the ruthless oppression of white absentee landlords.

As in much of the post-slavery South, black tenant farmers in the Bend had a hard existence, which became more difficult in the late 1920s when the Depression hit and the price of cotton plummeted. To make matters worse, a white merchant from the town of Camden across the river had been providing the Benders with advancements on their crops, and he died in 1932 without leaving any records. Soon afterward, his widow decided to call in those “debts” and, in an act of indescribable brutality, sent henchmen to Gee’s Bend to confiscate anything they could find—tools, wagons, plows, furniture, livestock, and even stores of food. The community, devastated and on the brink of starvation, survived on bags of flour and meal sent by the Red Cross, supplemented by hunting game and foraging for wild fruit. Bendolph’s parents, Aolar and Wisdom Mosely, were among those who lost everything. A few years later in 1935, amidst some of the worst times that Gee’s Bend had ever seen, Bendolph was born.

By the time Bendolph was five years old, life in the Bend had already begun to get a bit better. Around then, she and her family moved from their ramshackle log-and-mud cabin into one of the community’s new “Roosevelt houses,” so named because they were built as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal relief programs for rural America. As part of those relief efforts, Benders were given the opportunity to own their own homes and eventually their farmsteads, a rare occurrence for African Americans in the South at that time. They also received government assistance to build an agricultural cooperative, as well as a cotton gin, gristmill, general store, school, and medical clinic. One of the reasons that the government was persuaded to launch such a social experiment in Gee’s Bend was a now-famous series of photographs taken in 1937 by Arthur Rothstein that documented the plight of the community there. These pictures, which include a portrait of Bendolph’s husband, Rubin, and his family when he was a small child, soon became iconic images of black rural poverty from the era (page 16).

Compared to the grim years of the 1930s, life in Gee’s Bend during the next decades was much improved, but many in the community still continued to struggle. In fact, Bendolph and nearly everyone of her age often recount the hardship of those days—stories of men, women, and children laboring past exhaustion in the fields, plowing with mules, picking cotton, hoeing corn, stripping millet, and digging sweet potatoes, just to obtain a bare subsistence. Bendolph herself began working in the fields when she was twelve years old, attending school only during the parts of the year when the crops did not need tending. One of seventeen children, she also cooked and cared for her younger siblings. Then, at the age of fourteen, after reaching the sixth grade, she unexpectedly got pregnant. Among all the stories that she tells about her life, this event remains for her one of the most traumatic and heartbreaking. As she recalls:

One day, I got ready to go to school, and Mama wouldn’t let me go. I ask her why I couldn’t go. . . . She say, ‘You big.’ That meant I was with baby. I cried and prayed all day for the Lord to take it away from me, but he didn’t. . . . I couldn’t go to school no more. . . . They didn’t want me to influence the other kids. After I had the baby, I tried to go back, but they told me I couldn’t go back. I cried again.¹⁹

In 1955 at the age of twenty, Bendolph married Rubin, and with him she had another seven children, all boys except for one daughter, Essie. During the early years of her marriage, Bendolph had to stop making quilts because she was “having babies too

fast.”²⁰ Finally, when her youngest child turned two years old, she began creating patchworks again. She also continued to farm, first with Rubin and then, when he found other employment, with the help of her children.

When Bendolph was in her early thirties, the civil rights movement made its way to Gee’s Bend. Blessed with a talent for prophetic dreaming, she had a vision that something big was about to happen. And on the day in 1965 when Martin Luther King Jr. visited the Bend, she knew that she had been right. While traveling through the South with his voting rights crusade, King had heard about Gee’s Bend, and on one rainy February night, he made his way down long, muddy roads to deliver a sermon at the community’s Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. Bendolph was one of the very first to greet him. As she recounted, “Five of them got out of the car, including Martin Luther King. I opened the door to the church and stood on the step. I was so glad to see that man. I wanted to see that man next to Jesus. And when he stood up and talked, I listened. . . . I didn’t miss nothing.”²¹

Inspired by King, many from Gee’s Bend, including Bendolph, crossed the river to march on the Camden courthouse. Frequently they withstood threats of violence and retribution for such acts. “I was involved with a lot of protest in Camden,” recalls Bendolph, “singing and marching, taking in that tear gas, so I could become a registered voter.”²² On one occasion, she joined King as he drank from a “whites-only” fountain there. “I never saw a black person do a thing like that!” Bendolph exclaimed. “I was so glad, I said, ‘I’m going to get me a taste for my own self.’ . . . My sister Lillie Mae told me, ‘You can’t, because those people are going to beat you up.’ I said, ‘I’ve been wanting to drink some of that white water and I’m going to drink some today.’”²³ As it turned out, her sister grabbed her by the coat, and by the time she could free herself, King had left and she was afraid to go ahead alone. Later, when she finally did take a drink, Bendolph discovered that “the water was just water.”²⁴

Many Gee’s Benders accompanied King on some of the most famous civil rights marches of the era, often facing beatings, jail time, and firings by white employers. In the middle of all this, the Benders also woke one morning to find that white officials from Camden, acting without any public notice, had discontinued the ferry that Gee’s Bend residents used to cross the river. The ferry was stopped in order to keep them from going over to Camden to protest. And its closure would now force them to travel long, punishing distances on unpaved roads, up and around the curve in the river, to obtain groceries, medical care, and other basic necessities. While the marching stopped many years ago, the ferry has never been restored.

The decade of the 1960s also saw the founding of the Freedom Quilting Bee, a sewing cooperative organized by an Episcopal priest, Reverend Francis X. Walter. While traveling through the region and documenting civil rights abuses, Walter came upon some patchworks hanging outdoors that astonished him. Later, with quiltmakers from the Gee’s Bend area, he developed an organization to bring sewing jobs and income to local women. Within two years of its inception, the Bee was sewing quilts for Bloomingdale’s department stores, and in the late 1960s, national attention came to the Bend when the cooperative was featured in an article in the *New York Times*.²⁵

Some of the quiltmakers from Gee’s Bend objected to the Freedom Quilting Bee’s standardized assembly-line methods, and others, like Bendolph, left the cooperative after a short time because they felt that the pay was too low and intermittent. But for a

number of women, the Bee offered the first gainful employment aside from farm labor and provided an alternative to the collapsing agricultural economy in the area. For many years, settlements of small farms throughout the country had been suffering vast losses in the face of large-scale mechanized farming endeavors. This fact of history would mark the end of most farming in Gee's Bend and initiate its final episode of decline.

"I'm satisfied right where I'm at"

No one knows better than Mary Lee Bendolph that life in Gee's Bend has not always been easy. There was no electricity there until the end of the 1960s, telephones and indoor plumbing did not arrive until the 1970s, and her own home did not get central heating until just a decade ago. While a lot of folks continue to tend small gardens or keep a few animals, the farming practice, upon which the place was founded, has all but vanished. In order to make ends meet, Bendolph began in the 1970s to commute all the way to Camden and Selma for jobs as a seamstress at clothing mills and factories. Still, when describing what others have dubbed "one of the most poverty-stricken areas of the country," she expresses only feelings of affection: "We have a good community. I thank the Lord for the peoples here. We hardly have a killing here. You don't have to worry about locking up things. . . . I'm satisfied right where I'm at. I'll go visit some place. But to live there? No."²⁶

Today, Bendolph continues to reside in her small Roosevelt house. Some rooms have been added to the back, and it is now painted apricot yellow. But it is the same house that her husband, Rubin, long ago inherited from his grandfather, one of the first project houses to have been built in the Bend in the late 1930s. And it is the same house that she lived in all those years with her family. Except now she lives there alone. Rubin died in 1992. While her daughter, Essie, lives next door, all of her other children have moved away. And even her grandchildren, three of whom had been under her sole care for many years, are grown and gone.

At this point, one might be expecting to find Bendolph's life slowing down. Instead, there have been many new and unexpected adventures. In 1999, journalist J. R. Moehring wrote an extended feature on Bendolph and Gee's Bend for the *Los Angeles Times*, which earned him a Pulitzer Prize. Around the same time, William Arnett, a collector and historian of southern vernacular art, came to the Bend in search of a quiltmaker whose patchwork he had seen in a book. What he found was an entire community of quiltmakers, with a small cadre of particularly brilliant artists at its core, and Bendolph was one of them. Not too long afterward, a number of surprising events ensued: a thirteen-city museum tour, two books, countless exhibition openings, travel, quilt sales, copyrighted products, notoriety, and perhaps most importantly, artistic recognition.

As a result of all this attention, Bendolph's universe has expanded dramatically. She now travels to large museums in large cities. She has spoken in front of hundreds of people, held workshops for groups of children, and talked to a seemingly endless stream of reporters. And when she returns home, individuals come to visit her. In years past, the small, isolated community of Gee's Bend captured the fascination of many outsiders—writers, students, journalists, folklorists, photographers, sociologists, and political

activists—all wanting to know something about the place. And now outsiders are coming again. This time, it is curators, collectors, art historians, and critics, each eager to learn more about the quilts and their makers.

“The needles and thimbles our mothers gave to us”

For many women in Gee’s Bend, the first memory of quilting takes them back to their early childhood, when they sat and played beneath vast stretches of colorful patchworks, and gatherings of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, friends, and neighbors sewed above them. They recall watching, with great curiosity, the mysterious rhythm of needles suddenly poking through the cloth, disappearing and then reappearing, over and over again. Although women created and pieced their quilt designs by themselves, they typically came together in groups for the more tedious tasks of adding the cotton batting and sewing the back lining to the quilt front. With thousands of tiny collaborative stitches, they ritually reinscribed their highly unique patterns back into the domains of community and shared tradition.

Somewhere between the ages of nine and thirteen, most girls undertake their first quilts, a moment anticipated by years of watching the women around them. Describing her initial attempt at quilting, Bendolph recounted, “My momma, she always sit in the yard piecing quilt, or patching something like that, because we didn’t have anything. One day, I decided I wanted to learn how to do it, too, and so Momma told me how you piece quilt. . . . She got some pieces and gave them to me. It wasn’t anything but some old raggy pants. She gave me a needle and thread and showed me how to lay the pieces. . . . I try to see how it looks by me stripping it, and then I put a red piece in there, and I put a brown piece in there, and if it didn’t look too sweet to me, I’d take it back off.”²⁷

Bendolph’s mother, Aolar Mosely, was herself a gifted artist who created highly original, meticulously pieced patterns. Mary Lee was also inspired by the patchworks of her older sister Lillie Mae, her aunts Louella and Virginia, her mother’s cousin Deborah Young, and her mother’s friend Martha Jane Pettway. Despite the strong emphasis on individual creativity within the Gee’s Bend aesthetic, many women, including Bendolph, readily acknowledge the influence of their foremothers, even as they still assert the distinctiveness of their own vision. In fact, there is a commonly held sentiment in the Bend that “every quilt remembers the ones that came before it.”²⁸ In a similar gesture of tribute, Bendolph once conceded that there is always something of her mother in her patchworks: “I took the piecing from my mama. Mostly all my quilts are a little like the quilts she made.”²⁹

In turn, Bendolph has passed her quilting skills on to her daughter, Essie Bendolph Pettway. Representing a third generation in this famous quilt genealogy, Essie has become an acclaimed quilter in her own right and is one of the youngest women in the Bend to continue its patchwork tradition. Although Essie works all day long at a sewing machine in a clothing factory, she loves to stitch quilts at night. Reveling in the creative freedom of her own quilting, she once explained with some humor, “The work I do is military work. We sew camouflage fatigue jackets for the army, and everything’s got to be exactly right. So when I get home, I can mess up like I want to.

Because it's mine."³⁰

Like many of the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Essie improvises her own patterns, likening the unpredictability of her process with its constantly shifting shapes and colors to a "game of musical chairs." She also envisions her quilts in highly expressive ways. Within one of her patchworks, a mazelike pattern of broken lines becomes, for her, a metaphor of troubled times, an abstract rendering of a moment in her life when she felt emotionally trapped, with "no way of getting out."³¹ Embedded throughout the labyrinth are bands of fabric printed with floral designs and musical instruments. "But even in the light of my darkness," she said, "I had music, I had the flowers"³² (page 22). While Essie prefers to use new fabric for her patchworks, she shares some of her mother's passion for salvaging cloth scraps. In one of her recent efforts, she fashioned a quilt with fabric remnants of the dresses that she sewed for herself and her mother, a sort of cross-generational portrait in a kaleidoscope of pinwheel shapes and green floral prints (above).

Another younger woman to carry on the quiltmaking tradition from Gee's Bend is Bendolph's daughter-in-law Louisiana P. Bendolph. Now living in Mobile, Louisiana stopped making quilts in her early twenties. Then in 2002, she accompanied her mother, Rita Mae Pettway, and Mary Lee to the first opening of the Gee's Bend quilt exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. There she suddenly felt overwhelmed and inspired by the vast corpus of extraordinary work that had been produced over the decades by the women from her community. While traveling home on the bus, she started having "visions of quilts,"³³ ideas for images and patterns that she had never seen before. Soon afterward, she began to translate them into her own patchworks.

Viewing the quiltmaking tradition of Gee's Bend as a kind of artistic "inheritance," Louisiana P. Bendolph has created a new generation of patchworks that explore and reshape the aesthetic practices of her community. As if rethinking the very structures of standard quilt designs, her patterns often break apart into fields of fractured forms that, both literally and figuratively, end up off the grid. In one of her "Housetops" from 2003, squared bands of color disintegrate into random dashes of light on a black backdrop, like blinking circuits on a computer board (page 25). In another "Housetop" variation, red and white bars explode into a random collage of shards, becoming virtually patternless (page 24). In still another example, she creates a dense, colorful block of fragmented squares and strips, placing it in the center of a pristine white ground—the most rudimentary elements of the patchwork tradition, dissected and reassembled, within a new conceptual frame (above right). To create such imagery, Louisiana often cuts apart an existing quilt and reworks its fragments into another patchwork, a physical act that becomes a potent metaphor for her deconstruction of familiar quiltmaking conventions.

While seeming to be a new phenomenon, Louisiana's reconceptualization of Gee's Bend quilt patterns is merely a more pronounced version of an old custom in the Bend. For women there have always borrowed and embellished, revised and reinvented the patchwork designs of one another and the quiltmakers who preceded them. Within the parlance of African American vernacular culture, this practice of improvising off the established texts of earlier makers is called "signifying," a dialogic process of "call and response" in which an individual challenges or pushes beyond past discursive boundaries. In the canons of mainstream art history, this dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, between inherited forms and individual creativity, finds expression in

the widespread rhetoric of artistic originality and in countless stories of avant-garde painters and sculptors marching against the orthodoxy of the past. Within the Bend, a similar ideology inspires both the quilts and the assertions of the women who make them, a privileging of the individual imagination amidst the potency of tradition that is perhaps best expressed by Mertlene Perkins. She said, “I don’t follow nobody’s ideas but my own.”³⁴

“Our mothers’ gardens”

From the earliest patchworks fashioned from rags by tired and hurried hands, to the masterful creations of Mary Lee Bendolph and to the contemporary reinventions of Louisiana P. Bendolph, the quilts of Gee’s Bend comprise a vast conversation across many generations of women, an extended artistic dialogue encoded in the language of a “mother tongue.” For the most part, these voices have remained outside the dominant tales of history. Often rendered silent and invisible, women’s creative speech is only a shadow narrative within the mainstream discourse on the past.

Many have long contemplated the difficulty of establishing a history of women’s voices, a memory of their creative and rhetorical past—especially because, for most of that past, women have been barred from public speech and denied access to education, literacy, and the forums of knowledge and power. This is particularly true for impoverished black women from the rural South. In Alice Walker’s classic essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” she ponders this dilemma and asks:

How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year, century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist?³⁵

In the end, Walker finds the answer to her question in the day-to-day creativity of her own mother—in the clothes that she made for her children, in the fruits and vegetables that she canned, in the quilts that she made on winter evenings to cover all the beds, and most of all, in the creation of her garden. In Walker’s words, “Whatever she planted grew as if by magic. . . . Whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity . . . even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms.”³⁶

And so it was with the women of Gee’s Bend, whose creativity, like that of Walker’s mother, has long flourished within the mediums of their everyday lives. In ordinary bedcovers, they expressed their sense of beauty, history and memory, dreams and desires. Within a universe of humble things, they created a vast profusion of color, shape, and pattern. Far from the privileged realms of recognized art, they fashioned their own art world.

Like all communities of artists, the women of Gee’s Bend continually found ways to share their ideas with each other and view the latest developments in each other’s works. Ironically, the functional nature of their art—the life of their objects as quilts—assisted in the dissemination of their aesthetic efforts. The utility of their creations,

which would compromise their identity as “art” in other cultural worlds, made them more ubiquitous and ever available for viewing and contemplation.

In addition to the frequent gatherings of quiltmaking groups, larger public showings occurred once a year in the spring, when it was time for the women to “air out” their patchworks (above). Mary Lee Bendolph recounts how groups of women would visit each other’s houses and travel to different neighborhoods to see quilts hanging on wire fences and on clotheslines. According to her, “It was just like going to a museum. . . . We would go from house to house looking at quilts and getting ideas. . . . People go from museum to museum checking out other people’s work. Sometimes they like it, sometimes they don’t. They go home and try to make it, too. I think that was the same thing we was doing back then.” The only difference, she notes, was “they have a name for it—art—and we didn’t. And ours was hanging on the outside.”³⁷

Describing the inspiration offered by these outdoor shows, Bendolph’s daughter, Essie, similarly recalled, “When they finished making those quilts, they hang them on the line, and boy, you could see them a good ways off the highway. And they was beautiful and they had such a radiant color to them. That’s mostly what I want to have in my quilts, a color that would just take your attention away . . . just have you amazed.”³⁸

“It’s a beautiful thing”

It was not easy to make art in the black rural communities of Alabama and throughout the Deep South. There was too much hard work and too little time left for aesthetic flights of fancy. As Walker described in a passage about her mother, “During the ‘working’ day, she labored beside—not behind—my father in the fields. Her day began before sunup, and did not end until late at night. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children.”³⁹

But somehow, the greater difficulty of creating art amidst these hardships also made it more necessary to do so. Beyond the newspaper and magazine clippings plastered to walls for insulation, quilts offered the only color and decoration in otherwise unadorned houses. Through their aesthetic magic, the women’s patchworks turned these often miserably drab spaces into inviting dwellings for both the body and the spirit. They did so, not in the sweet, cozy way that we are used to thinking about women’s gestures, but as unexpectedly radical efforts to defy the deprivations of the world, to create counterexpressions of warmth and nurturance, beauty and pleasure, where there had been none.

According to bell hooks, the creation of such places by black women had a political aspect, linked to its aesthetic and spiritual ones. Such “home-making,” she asserts, was a subversive act, especially in relationship to white oppression and the economic and social structures that denied blacks any sense of home. As she explained:

Historically, African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could

resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.⁴⁰

The patchworks that lifted the spirit of the Gee's Bend community played a similar role in the individual lives of their makers. Bendolph often talks about how quilting renewed those women who had "worn themselves out." "It keeps your spirit up," she asserts, "and keeps your mind well together."⁴¹ Her neighbor Arlonzia Pettway also viewed quilting as a respite from the otherwise relentless demands of life in the Bend. "That was a pleasure to us, to sit and quilt," she explains, "In those days, we didn't have anything to look forward to. . . . When we gather our crop, that's the only pleasure we had, to sit around the quilt and talk and sing."⁴²

Like quilting, singing was an emancipatory act and an essential form of self-expression that sustained nearly all of the women of Gee's Bend. In fact, singing and quilting often went together, an outpouring of haunting gospel harmonies and ecstatic, spontaneous prayers amidst the endless rhythms of stitching. "When I think about my mom," said Essie Bendolph Pettway, "I see those ladies gathered around the quilt quilting, and they was always singing and moaning hymns, and they was praying and talking to the Lord, and they had that spirit."⁴³ In a tribute to her own mother's singing and quilting, Bendolph recently produced an image called "Mama's Song," an intaglio print that she was invited to make at a fine art press in California (page 33). In that piece and in several of the quilts that she fashioned after it, Bendolph envisions the spirit of her mother in a scattering of brilliant red squares (pages 30–31). She embeds these patches of color and light in a dynamic field of black and white patterning that evokes the visual cadences of piano keys and musical notes, symbols of her mother's creative "voice."

Within the discourse of their everyday lives, the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend discovered their voices. They found a way to speak their minds and identities through the persistent mending together of cloth shards, discarded bits of history, and errant musical notes—the fragments of things that no one else valued or desired. They reclaimed these unwanted remnants and, in the process, they reclaimed themselves. As Mary Lee Bendolph recently mused, "It's a beautiful thing, to know how to piece a quilt."⁴⁴

Opposite

Mary Lee Bendolph

MAMA'S SONG. 2005

Color aquatint, spitbite aquatint,
and softground etching

Image size: 33 × 24 inches

