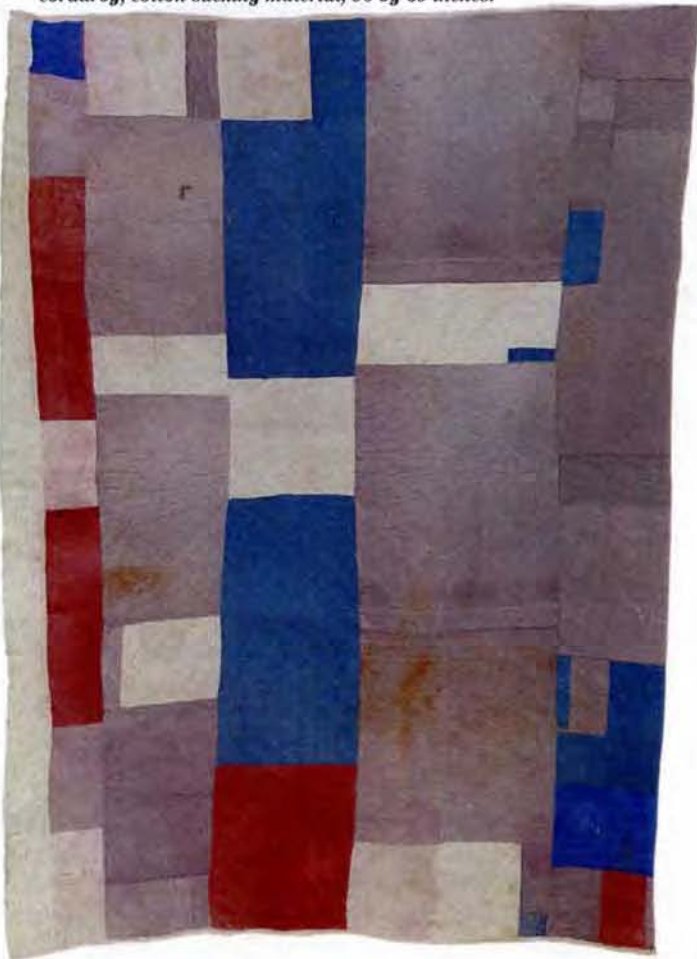


# Gee's Bend Modern



Gloria Hoppins: "Housetop" center medallion design, ca. 1975, corduroy, 91 by 88 inches.

Missouri Pettway: Blocks and strips work-clothes quilt, 1942, cotton, corduroy, cotton sacking material, 90 by 69 inches.



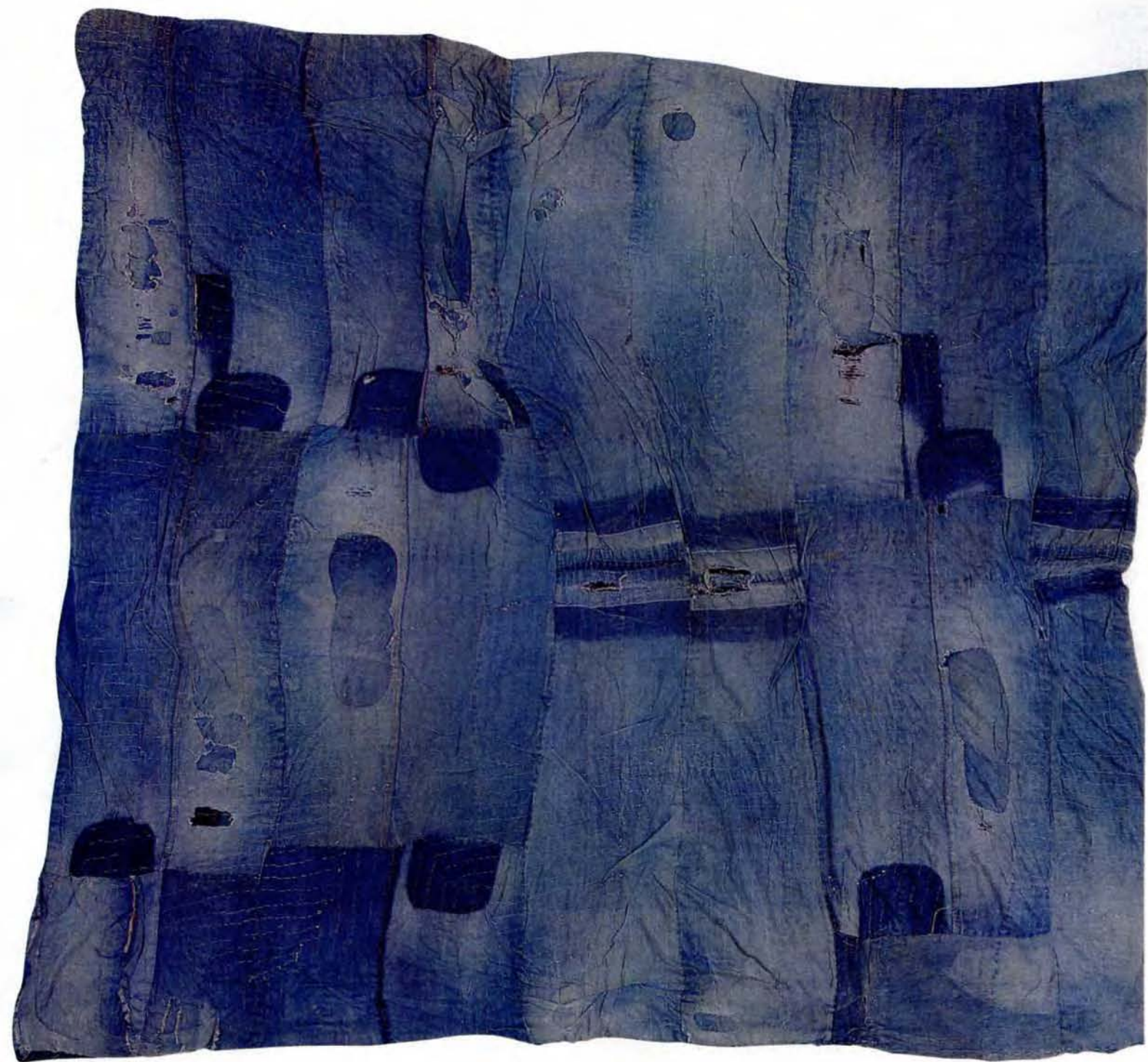
*The isolated Alabama community of Gee's Bend has long nurtured a quilting tradition that resonates deeply with aspects of modernist abstraction. Now the quilts are the subject of an exhibition that is touring U.S. museums.*

**BY RICHARD KALINA**

It is a given that most museum shows of recent art serve to ratify accepted tastes and standards. A Johns or Flavin retrospective, or a survey of Fluxus art, while certainly deepening our knowledge of the subject, is not about to change perceptions significantly. Even a large-scale review of a first-rate but underappreciated artist—the still traveling Joan Mitchell retrospective, for example—essentially rearranges the pieces on the board. 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 Quilts of Gee's Bend," organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and shown last winter at the Whitney Museum, does just that.

The 60 quilts in the exhibition were made by a group of women in a small, isolated farming community in central Alabama, southwest of Selma. Gee's Bend was and is an almost exclusively African-American hamlet. Surrounded on three sides by the Alabama River, it is virtually an island; after the residents began to assert their civil rights in the 1960s, its ferry service was terminated (probably not coincidentally), and its one access road, some 15 miles from the nearest highway, remained unpaved until 1967. Today the area is starting to become more connected with the outside world, and is at the same time losing its quilting tradition. The town's isolation during the '50s, '60s and '70s—the period when most of the quilts in the exhibition were done—made it nearly impossible for the quilters to have been exposed in any contextualized or coherent way to modern art, although images of abstract art or design may have crossed their paths via magazines and newspapers.<sup>1</sup> And yet these works seem to resonate harmonically with many strands of geometrically-based and materially innovative postwar American abstraction, as well as with that abstraction's European antecedents.



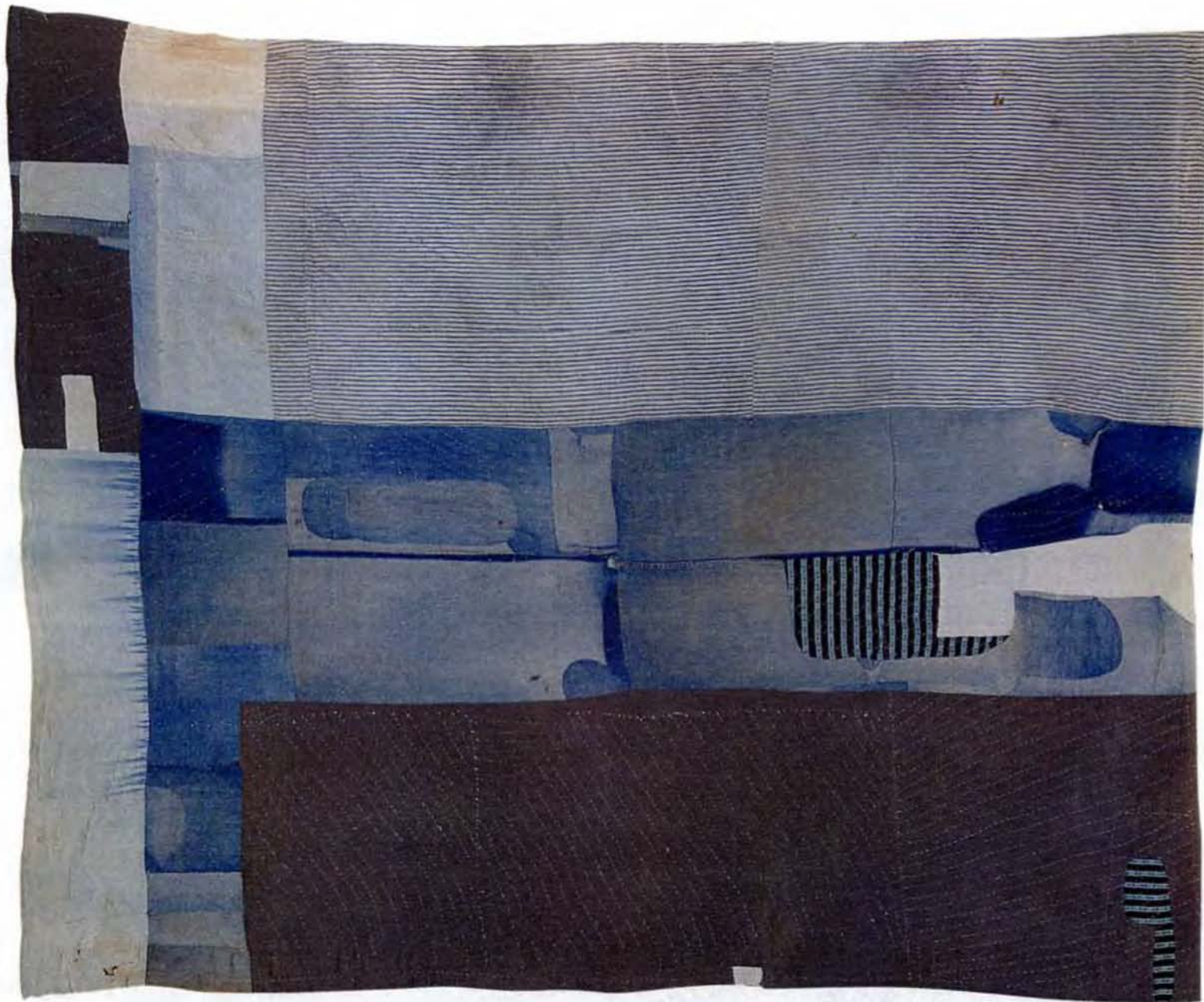


*Lutisha Pettway: "Bars" work-clothes quilt, ca. 1950, denim, cotton, 80 by 84 inches. All photos this article Pitkin Studio, Rockford, Ill.*

Although the Gee's Bend quilters were not part of the mainstream art world, it is important to understand that they formed an art world of their own, that is, a coherent social grouping dedicated to the construction of a visual language. They shared a sense of esthetic lineage (patterns and ways of working were handed down through extended families and known to the rest of the community), a recognized means of display (the quilts were hung out on clotheslines not just to dry, but to be seen), a concern with the interplay of individual and collaborative work and, importantly, a set of common limits. The women knew each other and were often related—of the 41 artists in the show, 18 belong to the Pettway family, which took its name from

the area's principal slave-owner. Religion also played a vital, unifying role in the lives of Gee's Benders. The Baptist church was the place where people not only prayed but organized their community and exchanged information, including ideas about sewing and quilting.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that Gee's Bend quilters were neither insular visionaries pursuing idiosyncratic personal paths, nor were they simply the skilled passers-on of traditional forms. Instead, they were like other artists of their time, adept, committed practitioners engaged in a measured and ongoing esthetic give-and-take.





*Rachel Carey George: One side of a two-sided work-clothes quilt, ca. 1935, denim, wool trousers, mattress ticking, cotton, 72 by 82 inches.*

**T**he quilts of Gee's Bend are quite unlike the quilts we are used to seeing—either the traditional or contemporary high-end ones, or the homey items readily available in stores or yard sales. Bold and declarative in design, material and format, they looked perfectly at ease on the Whitney's tall, white walls. While it is possible to understand the Gee's Bend quilts in the context of vernacular art, outsider art or craft, they are more than that. Their innovative power, combined with the restraints imposed by material, time and a compressed local tradition, argue for their examination as culturally informed and emotionally evocative *formal* objects.

To do so might seem like treading on dangerous ground. The history of 20th-century art is rife with attempts to rev up the contemporary and cosmopolitan with the raw power of the art of Africa, Oceania or the Americas, to infuse sophisticated studio products with the artlessness of children or the skewed sensibilities of the insane. In this way, "high art" can be bolstered by the art of the Other, and the transaction rendered morally frictionless by decontextualization in the ostensibly neutral space of a museum or gallery. The classic example of this was the 1984 exhibition "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The polemics

occasioned by that show, most notably Thomas McEvilley's article "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief" (*Artforum*, November 1984), made the art world considerably more aware of its ethnocentrism. It seems, as if to compensate for past errors, that we moved in the other direction—towards an over-contextualization (marked by the proliferation of wall text and supplementary material) that serves to cocoon the objects in question and can, in its own way, be every bit as condescending. I am scarcely advocating cultural insensitivity, but rather noting that too much stage-setting and explanation can reinforce the dichotomy of centrality and marginality.

Things, however, may have changed again, and this exhibition can be seen as one element of an expanded frame of reference for both the making and viewing of art. The art we look at now comes from far more places physically, conceptually and emotionally than it did before. This decentralization, evident in the diversity of image-based art, applies to abstraction as well; for abstraction, by virtue of its looser mimetic anchoring to the world around it, is particularly able to cast itself in a



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variety of forms, to entertain multiple readings. The Gee's Bend quilts are exemplars of that broadened approach to abstraction. Their allusive complexity—their scale, their reference to the body, to physical work, to social structures and to the land—greatly enriches our perception of them. But there is something else. The quilts are remarkably powerful and compelling *visual* statements. They declare themselves viscerally, directly. I believe that they are entitled, every bit as much as a Frank Stella or a Kenneth Noland painting of that period, to lay claim to an unfettered optical reading as well, in other words, to participate fully in the esthetics of modernism.

One of the things that makes ordinary quilts so likable is the way that they typically frame a wealth of detail in smallish, repeating patterns. You can look at a part of them and easily deduce the whole. There may be some framing devices, but essentially the pattern could repeat endlessly. The Gee's Bend quilts don't do that. They are bounded, unique and rarely symmetrical. Even when symmetry is there, it is given a savvy, destabilizing push. In Gloria Hoppins's "Housetop" pattern quilt (ca. 1975), for example, she inserts one thin vertical red stripe on the left-hand side of the orange center portion of a set of off-kilter nested

Annie Mae Young: *Center medallion strips with multiple borders*, ca. 1965, cotton, corduroy, sheeting, polyester, wool, 91 by 81 inches.



Loretta Pettway: *"Log Cabin—Courthouse Steps—Bricklayer,"* single-block variation, ca. 1970, denim, 84 by 66 inches.

squares.<sup>3</sup> That stripe snaps the quilt into place, as does the dark vertical denim band balanced by three smaller, similarly colored edge pieces in Lorraine Pettway's light gray medallion patterned quilt of 1974. Identified by three alternate pattern names, Loretta Pettway's "Log Cabin—Courthouse Steps—Bricklayer" (ca. 1970) juxtaposes a stepped series of vertical dark blue pieces edged in white with similarly sized light blue pieces on the horizontal. The pieces get smaller as they approach the center, creating the look of one-point perspective. The bars, however, warp, and their thickness is never uniform. So instead of being locked-in and static, the composition opens up and moves. It displays the wit and whimsical variation of a Paul Klee architectural fantasy, with logic used, paradoxically, to subvert order. It is almost as if symmetry in the Gee's Bend quilts is a condition established precisely so that it may be creatively violated.

If symmetry is important in traditional quilts, a more or less evenly weighted display of detail seems equally essential. Detail in the Gee's Bend quilts functions differently. Rather than being the substance of the quilt, it is, more often than not, an accent, a fillip or a formal destabilizer. Simple vertical and horizontal forms tend to predominate, and since quilting is an additive process, a reasonably straightforward design can be given piquancy and personality by sewing in something small and unexpected. In Arlonzia Pettway's "Lazy Gal (Bars)," ca. 1975, a motif of bold green and white vertical stripes is bordered at the top and bottom by just a hint of a delicate floral pattern. The change in formal and emotional scale is finely calibrated and tremendously satisfying. Irene Williams's "Bars" (ca. 1965)





Sue Willie Seltzer: "Housetop" nine-block, "Half-Log Cabin" variation, ca. 1955, cotton, synthetic blends, 80 by 76 inches.

features a composition of four thick vertical bars in solid cream and black, topped with a similarly sized horizontal in deep blue-green. This architectural structure is offset by a flower-patterned border on both sides and the bottom. It is, however, the narrow top border that gives the quilt its kick. The right-hand half of the border is the same blue-green as the horizontal bar directly below it, while the left-hand half is divided into three sections—gray and cream, a small light-blue grid and a slice of vibrant red completely out of chromatic character with the rest of the quilt. That foot or so of crimson makes the quilt. It's a formal move that incorporates a sure sense of scale with a use of off-complementaries worthy of Josef Albers.

**S**imple, forceful design, unencumbered by fussiness, is a hallmark of the Gee's Bend quilts. The quilts speak of a work ethic, not a "make-work" one. Quilting was often a social activity, particularly during the labor-intensive stage of sewing the designed front onto the backing and thus sandwiching in the cotton filler. But it was not a hobby, a way of whiling away the hours. The women quilters were vital parts of a barely self-sustaining agricultural society, and their labor was needed in the fields during the day. The field work was tiring, and there were household duties on top of that—chores not assisted by the time- and labor-saving devices so common in the rest of American society. One reason for the quilts' relative simplicity is purely practical: the quilters

Annie Mae Young: Strips, ca. 1975, corduroy, 95 by 105 inches.

**Ordinary quilts tend to frame details in regularly repeating patterns. Gee's Bend quilts don't do that. They are bounded, unique and rarely symmetrical.**

wanted to finish them reasonably quickly so that they could be used for their intended purpose—to keep warm. Gee's Bend was a very poor community that could ill afford luxuries like store-bought blankets and bed coverings. Even if, like Loretta Pettway, one of the most talented of the Gee's Bend quilters, you didn't like to sew, there wasn't much choice in the matter. As she said, "I had a lot of work to do. Feed hogs, work in the field, take care of my handicapped brother. Had to go to the field. Had to walk about fifty miles in the field every day. Get home too tired to do no sewing. My grandmama, Prissy Pettway, told me, 'You better make quilts. You going to need them.' I said, 'I ain't going to need no quilts.' but when I got me a house, a raggy old house, then I needed them to keep warm."<sup>4</sup>

The Gee's Bend quilts embody a moral as well as a formal economy. In contrast to the larger culture of obsolescence, waste and disposability, in Gee's Bend nothing usable was thrown away (although not everything was worn; some polyester leisure suits sent down from the north were so out of style that they could only be recycled into bedding). Scraps of cloth were saved up for quilting—any sort of cotton, corduroy, knit or synthetic fabric was fine. Clothing was worn until it was worn out, and then ripped up into quilt material rather than being discarded.

Used clothing is scarcely a neutral art material. Not only does it embrace a range of social signs, but it can also carry the physical imprint of the wearer, the trace of his or her body. We can see the pressure of elbows and knees, feel the stretch of fabric under the neatly applied patches. Denim clothing shows this to particular advantage, and some of the most emotionally affecting quilts were made from sun- and wash-faded work clothes. Missouri Pettway's daughter, Arlonzia, spoke of her late mother's quilt, a blue, white, reddish-brown and gray block-and-strip design made in 1942. "It was when Daddy died. I was about seventeen, eighteen. He stayed sick about eight months and passed on. Mama say, 'I







*Irene Williams: "Bars" variation, ca. 1965, wool knit, linen, polyester double knit, cotton drapery material, 84 by 79 inches.*

going to take his work clothes, shape them into a quilt to remember him, and cover up under it for love."<sup>5</sup>

In these work-clothes quilts the quietness of the colors—blues, grays, creams, browns—allows for an extremely subtle interplay of hue and value, and also for the counterpoint of darker passages: sewn-on patches, the unfaded area under removed pants pockets, or seams that had, prior to ripping, been unexposed. The clothes, by virtue of their hard use, were sometimes stained with earth, rust and sweat. That discoloration, rather than diminishing the power of the quilts, gives them a physical and emotional patina. This can be clearly seen in Rachel Carey George's quilt from around 1935, made of denim, wool trousers, mattress ticking and cotton. In it, a large horizontal rectangle of stained blue-and-white tick-

ing is contrasted with wide strips of oval-patched pants legs and another large rectangle of white-stitched gray wool. The staining of the mattress ticking is echoed by similar brown areas in other parts of the quilt, particularly in the pants legs. The sense of time's passage, of difficulties endured and overcome, is palpable.

Something similar can be felt in Loretta Pettway's "Lazy Gal (Bars)," ca. 1965. One of the seemingly simplest works on view, it consists solely

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## Gee's Bend

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of vertical bars. There is a border on the left and right of dark navy (edged with a hint of pattern), a field of quiet blue-violet, and left of center, two equal-sized white bands. Measuring a bit under 7 by 6 feet, this quilt cannot help recalling, for today's viewer, Barnett Newman's paintings. As with Newman, it carries with it the air of the spiritual. Indeed, the current of faith runs deep in Gee's Bend, and while the quilts are not part of a specific spiritual practice in their making or their iconography, it is not unreasonable to assume that the effects of such a religiously inflected life are to be seen in the community's art.

**P**robably the most viscerally powerful work-clothes quilt in the show is Lutisha Pettway's "Bars" (ca. 1950). Composed entirely of faded and patched denim pants legs, laid out in vertical bands, the heavy quilt sags, bends and buckles. Edging it on the right are a pair of pants legs, wide at the waist and narrow at the ankles. They are sewn together at the small ends, and their symmetrical mirroring gives the right edge a sharp bow inwards, in clear contrast to the relatively straight bottom, top, and left sides. While other quilts use cut-up clothing in small enough pieces so that we are often forced to infer its original use, this quilt uses pants legs in virtually their entirety, and as such, the sense of the body underneath the clothing remains particularly strong. Color, too, makes a major contribution—its monochrome quality adding purposefulness, consistency and intensity.

Denim, while heavy and hard to work with, brings with it a coloristic bonus. Its fading creates a wide variety of blues, from deep indigo to the palest pinked azure, a color range naturally suggestive of sky and atmosphere. That property is used to marvelous effect in a 1976 work by Annie Mae Young, an artist whose originality and compositional bravura stand out in this remarkably talented group. The quilt floats a central vertically striped portion against a field of variously faded denim bars. The striped area is divided in half horizontally. The top portion alternates red and yellow stripes, the bottom red and brown. The two sections don't quite match up—the stripes are of different widths and are drawn (there is no other word for it) with a loose, expressive line. The center striped section has an emblematic, flaglike quality that seems both to embed the stripes in the atmospheric blue field and suspend them above it.

One gets the sense of a flag or a heraldic banner in Young's 1975 corduroy quilt as well. This large horizontally displayed piece, a bit under 8 by 9 feet, is one of the high points of the exhibition. A series of thin horizontal stripes—alternating red and brown on the top half, reds, browns, greens, blues and oranges on the bottom half—marks off the right-hand quarter of the quilt. On the left edge is a thin column of vertical multicolored stripes divided roughly into thirds horizontally. The remainder, approximately two-thirds of the area of the entire quilt, is an astonishingly rich cerulean. Composed of horizontal strips of closely valued fabric, this section allows for a complex visual interplay between its subtlety and the boldness of the stripes flanking it, and also for an interchange between the horizontality and verticality of the two striped sections. Words can hardly do justice to the sophisticated and satisfying play of visual elements—the way the same blue as the center sneaks into the stripes on the sides, or how the heft of the horizontally striped area perfectly balances the narrower verticals, or why the alternating of red and brown stripes on the upper portion of the right hand section puts just the right amount of weight and pressure on the slightly thinner multicolored stripes below them.

The use of corduroy by Young and a number of other Gee's Benders is a study in fortuity. In 1972, Sears, Roebuck and Company contracted with the local quilting cooperative to produce low-priced corduroy pillow shams. They sent down bolts of the material, and while the shams were mechanical piecework, the corduroy was soon incorporated into the



*Sally Bennett Jones: Center medallion of triangles with multiple borders, 1966, cotton, 86 by 77 inches.*

area's quilting style. Corduroy has real limitations—it works best when cut at right angles; it tends to pull, distort and fray when cut on the diagonal. These constraints are offset by the cloth's rich color, sensual light-reflecting qualities and softness. In practical terms, the material was virtually free, and it was very warm. The fabric posed challenges, but art often thrives when the variables are reduced.

In any case, boldness of design and rectilinearity are characteristics of the Gee's Bend quilts; and for some quilters, corduroy called forth their best efforts. China Pettway's block quilt, (ca. 1975), for example, is Bauhausian in its asymmetrical simplicity and elegance. There are only six color areas, each in a rich but muted earth tone. Small and large, vertical and horizontal, dark and light are blended in a composition, classical in its form and balance. Arcola Pettway's "Lazy Gal (Bars)" variation from 1976, the year of the Bicentennial, has the rough composition of an American flag, with 13 more or less equal horizontal stripes and a small square area in the upper left where the stars go—except in this case the "stars" are three additional vertical stripes, and the colors, instead of red, white and blue, are apple green, tan, corn yellow, rusty brown, slate blue, crimson and orange-red. Color and form work together to artfully undermine expectations, and the quilt is both delightful and moving.

**T**he Gee's Bend quilts are so evocative, so emotionally and esthetically fulfilling, as well as so individual, that it feels unfair not to mention more artists and describe more quilts. Fortunately, many more people around the country will now get the chance to see them. The exhibition was to have stopped with the Whitney, but it has generated such a groundswell of interest that eight other museums have signed on to take the show, and it will travel for three years. This seems like the perfect moment for this exhibition, even though Gee's Bend has been



known to the wider art world for decades. Interest in the quilts over the years has been sporadic—there was a spike in New York in the late '60s, and in 1967 an appreciative Lee Krasner visited Gee's Bend with her dealer and bought a number of them. This was the time, too, when artists were entranced by Navajo blankets. These enthusiasms faded, quite possibly because quilts and blankets, although resembling the art being made then, shared few of its stated premises.

Now, however, the Gee's Bend quilts have a deeper connection to current concerns. They speak to the widening base of art production, as well as to an interest in ethnicity and identity. This interest seems to thrive in the exploration of the territory which lies between cultural sign and individuality, that is, between the more easily chartable products of a bounded group identity and the open-ended activities of the individual. The quilts are very much of a time, place, gender and ethnic group; but they are also intensely personal and inventive. Patterns are often not used at all, or when they are, they are freely adapted to the artist's own interests and history.

There is also an interest, these days, in the use of nontraditional materials in abstraction. This often leads to an investigation of the inherent three-dimensionality of "flat" work. A Gee's Bend quilt is not, as is a stretched rectangular canvas, a historically given depictive arena that also happens to be made of cloth and whose materiality might be tacitly acknowledged by, for example, staining the canvas. A quilt is both an image and a constructed, pliable physical object. The shape of the quilt—the irregularity of its edge and the waviness of its surface—is a natural product of its making, and its use creates an inherent ambiguity of orientation. Its two-dimensionality is also conditional since it can just as easily be flat or draped.

Another artistic concern today is layering. Multiplicity of purpose and form is a given in these quilts. Not only are they, at heart, assemblages (with all the complexity of facture and reference that implies), but the rhythmic, patterned stitching or the gridded yarn ties that hold the front to the back are aspects of the quilt that function semi-independently. Frequently done by more than one person, the stitching sets up a quiet but complex counterpoint to the larger design. Finally, the growing interest in craftlike methodologies among artists also speaks to the lessened authority of the brush. No longer valorized as an extension of the artist's persona, a guarantor of painterly, gestural (and often male) authenticity, it has become another tool, an option in a wide menu of artmaking procedures. Piecing and stitching has proven to be as sensitive, energetic and direct a means of expression as the most adept brushwork.

Painting in general, and abstract painting in particular, seems to have lost its centrality. That does not mean that the two-dimensional abstract object has surrendered its power or allure. Imbued with art-historical reference, inherently metaphorical and capable of great focus, it still exerts a strong pull on our imaginations. If great art can be found in this arena today, the question becomes, why shouldn't it be in the form of a quilt and, more specifically, why not *these* quilts? I found myself unexpectedly moved and excited by this exhibition, and that feeling has been shared by many others. "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" has turned out, rather surprisingly, to be one of the most talked-about shows in recent years. I expect and hope that its influence will be deep and long-lasting. □

1. In terms of influences, it has been noted that there are certain similarities between the Gee's Bend quilts and West and Central African textiles, but given the lack of historical evidence, this connection can only be speculative.

2. A double CD of gospel music recorded in Gee's Bend in 1941 and 2002, *How We Got Over: The Sacred Songs of Gee's Bend*, is available in conjunction with the show. A number of the quilters in the exhibition sing on these CDs.

3. It should be noted that indications of vertical or horizontal refer to the orientation of the quilts as displayed. Since they were intended as bed coverings, not wall hangings, distinctions between left and right and up and down are somewhat arbitrary.

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4. From the exhibition catalogue, *The Quilts of Gee's Bend*, Atlanta and Houston, Tinwood Books in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2002, p. 72.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

"The Quilts of Gee's Bend" was organized for the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, by William Arnett, John Beardley, Jane Livingston and Alvia Wardlaw, with assistance at the Whitney Museum of American Art from Debra Singer. Exhibition dates: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston [Sept. 8-Nov. 10, 2002]; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York [Nov. 27, 2002-Mar. 2, 2003]; Mobile Museum of Art [June 14-Aug. 31]; Milwaukee Art Museum [Sept. 27-Jan. 4, 2004]; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. [Feb. 14-May 17, 2004]; Cleveland Museum of Art [June 12-Sept. 14, 2004]; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk [Oct. 15, 2004-Jan. 2, 2005]; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art [Feb. 13-May 8, 2005]; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston [June-July, 2005]; High Museum of Art, Atlanta [December 2005-February 2006].

Two volumes have been published by Tinwood Books, Atlanta, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in conjunction with the exhibition: *The Quilts of Gee's Bend and Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*.

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Loretta Pettway: String-pieced quilt, 1960, cotton twill, synthetic material (men's clothing), 94 by 76 inches.