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How Quiltmaking's Deep Traditions Are Influencing Contemporary Art

By Isis Davis-Marks

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Bisa Butler, *Les Sapeurs*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Claire Oliver Gallery, New York.

When I was younger, my great aunt gave me a quilt of patchworked hearts and squares with shiny red threads and a plum-colored border. The quilt kept me warm at night; I would run my fingers across it as I counted sheep. The quilt was a labor of love, passed down from one generation to the next. It was also a beautiful work of art that could be treasured and held. Perhaps I love that quilt because it makes me feel at home.

Quilts have long been associated with nostalgia and domesticity, but they aren't just beautiful utilitarian items relegated to the home. Quilts have long been recognized for their aesthetic value, and in recent years, the art world has been increasingly taking notice.

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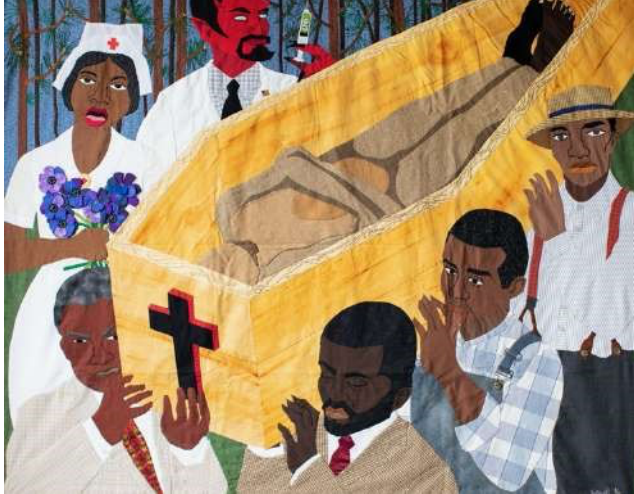
Loretta Pettway Bennett (Gee's Bend)
AQUARIUM, 2008
Greg Kucera Gallery
\$12,500



Gee's Bend Quiltmakers
[Annie Mae Young] Columns of Blocks Quilt, n.d.
Andrew Edlin Gallery
Contact for price

This increasing recognition can be traced back to the 2002 exhibition “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, which traveled to the Whitney Museum of American Art and several other esteemed U.S. institutions. The show featured quilts from Gee’s Bend, Alabama, a town where women have been making quilts out of scrap fabric for generations. These quilts are multicolored and abstract; artists such as Jessie T. Pettway and Gloria Hoppin incorporated various geometric forms in their work, and many critics drew comparisons to abstract masters like Piet Mondrian. After this vital show, quilts entered the realm of fine art in a pivotal way, and critics at publications like the *New York Times* lauded them as virtuosic works of art. Now, quilts are far more common in fine art. Generations of emerging and established artists are being recognized for embracing the medium: Bisa Butler, Tracey Emin, Dawn Williams Boyd, Faith Ringgold, Michael A. Cummings, Rosie Lee Tompkins, Bhasha Chakrabarti, and Sanford Biggers all feature quilting prominently in their practices.

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Dawn Williams Boyd, *Bad Blood: Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments* – Macon County, AL 1932 – 1972, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

Recently, a number of artists have displayed such quilts in shows. For example, the late Rosie Lee Tompkins's work was recently displayed at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. And other shows, such as the forthcoming "Radical Tradition: American Quilts and Social Change" at the Toledo Museum of Art, explore the ways that quilts have been used to address social issues since the 19th century.

In a January 2020 article for Artsy, writer and curator Glenn Adamson reflected on the art world's recent enthusiasm for both historical and contemporary artists working with textiles, ceramics, and other mediums and techniques traditionally associated with craft. "At a time when our collective attention is dangerously adrift," Adamson wrote, "trapped in the freefall of our social-media feeds and snared in a pit of fake facts, handwork provides a firm anchor. It cannot be spun. It gives us something to believe in."

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Rosie Lee Tompkins
Untitled, 1987
"Architecture of Life" at UC Berkeley Art
Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley



Dawn William Boyd, Peaches and Evangeline:
Bibbs County, FL 1942, 2004. Courtesy of the
artist and Fort Gansevoort.

Although the art world has only recently embraced quilting, contemporary artists engaging with the medium belong to a time-honored tradition. The history of quilting is a long one: The earliest evidence of quilts appeared around 3400 B.C.E. on a statue of an Egyptian pharaoh, and the word "quilt," which stems from the Latin word *culcita* (meaning mattress or cushion), dates back to circa 1300 B.C.E.

In the Americas, colonists began making quilts in the 17th century. Eventually others—including enslaved and indigenous peoples—also began to make quilts. These works were often relegated to the category of craft, seldom transcending to the level of fine art. However, quilting (and other forms of fiber art) are increasingly beginning to be accepted in fine art circle.

A number of contemporary Black artists build upon this enduring and complex history of quiltmaking. C. Daniel Dawson, a professor of African American art and African diaspora studies at Columbia University, has noted that the tradition of quilting in African American communities dates back to chattel slavery and draws inspiration from African textiles.

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Faith Ringgold
Listen to the Trees, 2012
The Brodsky Center at PAFA
\$12,000



Faith Ringgold
Tar Beach 2, 1990
Goodman Gallery
Contact for price

“If you look at African American quilts, they’re basically a kind of pieced quilt too, but for the most part they don’t become geometric. That’s based on an African idea of textiles,” Dawson said in the PBS documentary *Craft in America: QUILTS* (2019). “The use of the narrative is using the quilt as a storyteller. That’s also an important African element. The whole idea of celebrating the culture that came out of the slave ships.”

Faith Ringgold—a well-known contemporary artist, now in her nineties, who has often used quilting in her work— leans into this history. She is known for her “Story Quilts,” brightly colored quilted pieces that incorporate figuration and narrative. Last year, many of those quilts were featured in a retrospective at the Serpentine Galleries in London. One piece, *Ancestors Part II* (2017), features figures from different ethnic backgrounds dancing and paying tribute to their ancestors. The work shows us a communal act and blurs distinctions between past, present, and future. Ringgold’s practice often explores community and ancestry. Her mother taught her about sewing, and they bonded through it, even making some of Ringgold’s quilts together.

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Faith Ringgold Ancestor's Part II, 2017 Goodman Gallery Contact for price

For many years, quilting has played an important role in Black women's social circles. Floris Barnett Cash, a professor of Africana studies and history at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, outlined the importance of quilting to women in African American communities in her article "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African American Tradition."

"Female slaves would get together in the evenings or on Saturday afternoons to spin, weave, and sew," Barnett Cash wrote, explaining the role of quilting in the kinship networks of enslaved women. "A former slave recalled that her mother worked in the field all day and pieced quilts all night. African-American women recycled cloth as a means of survival. They designed their quilts to accommodate the scraps and rags which were available to them. Slave women exchanged old blankets and thick cloth among themselves."



Bisa Butler, Zouave, 2020.
Courtesy of the Artist and
Claire Oliver Gallery, New York.



Bisa Butler, The Tea, 2018.
Courtesy of the Artist and
Claire Oliver Gallery, New York.

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Bisa Butler, who is celebrated for her brightly colored quilted portraits, acknowledges this history of her medium in her practice. And her dynamic quilts are gaining renown: Her first solo museum exhibition, “Bisa Butler: Portraits,” opened at the Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, New York, this past summer, and institutions including the Newark Museum and the Toledo Museum of Art have recently acquired her works. Many of Butler’s quilted paintings, such as *The Safety Patrol* (2018), pay homage to themes of Black femininity, resilience, and history.

The Safety Patrol shows a unified group of young Black girls shielded by a central figure. The figures appear otherworldly, saturated in lush reds and pinks; floral-printed and -textured fabrics add depth to the composition. “I use West African wax printed fabric, kente cloth and Dutch wax prints to communicate that my figures are of African descent and have a long, rich history behind them,” Butler said in a recent interview for *Smithsonian* magazine. “I choose bright technicolor cloth to represent our skin, because these colors are how African Americans refer to our complexions.”



Dawn Williams Boyd, *Baptizing Our Children in a River of Blood*, 2017.

Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

More recently, curators have created exhibitions that contextualize quilting within contemporary society. For example, Minneapolis’s Textile Center and the Women of Color Quilters Network (WCQN) recently launched a multiveneue initiative “We Are the Story,” which consists of several

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online and in-person exhibitions across U.S. cities. The initiative was created in response to the death of George Floyd, and it acknowledges Minneapolis as a center for protests against police brutality.

“George Floyd’s cry to his Mama for maternal help, mirrors a symbolic guttural cry for help from the belly of our nation,” Carolyn Mazloomi, the curator of the exhibition, said in a press release.

“In response to that cry, and to help educate the public on brutality, inequities, and racism in America...the exhibition quilts will tell the unsung stories that affect our understanding and inspire our resolve to end this unholy trinity of societal ills.”



Dawn Williams Boyd, *The Trump Era: Racism No Longer Has the Decency to Hide its Face*, 2019
Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.



Dawn Williams Boyd, *We Overcome 2017*
Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort.

Artists such as Dawn Williams Boyd are also creating quilts that respond to the current racial unrest. Her online exhibition “Cloth Paintings,” through New York gallery Fort Gansevoort through November 7th, features works like *The Trump Era: Racism No Longer Has the Decency to Hide its Face* (2019), showing a smug-looking Klansman wielding an upside-down American flag. Boyd’s decision to use fabric as a material speaks to the impossibility of separating issues of race in America from chattel slavery, which often relied on a specific cash crop: cotton. Quilts’ inherent associations with warmth, nostalgia, and community make them particularly appealing now, in the midst of the pandemic and widespread division and inequity. Perhaps this fraught reality can account for, at least in part, why contemporary artists are drawn to quilting as a means to express

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themselves. The tactility of quilted fabric inevitably conjures domesticity, and every stitch—every precisely placed patchwork—brings us back to that feeling of the comfort and safety of home.

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