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News from the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
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Acclaimed Gee's Bend quilter Mary Lee Bendolph subject of new exhibition at MHCAM

Related programming includes a lecture by noted art historian Dr. Alvia J. Wardlaw, a musical performance, and a quilt-themed community day

SOUTH HADLEY, Mass. — The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum presents “Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph,” the first solo exhibition of the acclaimed Gee's Bend, Alabama quilter, on view through May 27.



Using mostly hand-torn remnants of recycled clothing, Mary Lee Bendolph has created more than 150 quilts in her lifetime. Her improvisational style and bold adaptations of traditional African American quilting designs earned her a place in the watershed touring exhibitions “The Quilts of Gee's Bend” (2002) and “The Architecture of the Quilt” (2006) and an NEA National Heritage Fellowship. Her quilts have graced Hallmark cards and U.S. postage stamps.

“Piece Together” is Bendolph's first solo exhibition, and the first to examine works from five decades of her life. Accompanied by a richly-illustrated, 80-page scholarly catalogue, the exhibition considers the material and biographical significance of Bendolph's quilts, as well as the different spaces they occupy, from family beds to museum walls to the printing press. An adapted version of the exhibition will travel to the List Gallery, Swarthmore College from September 6 through October 28, 2018.

Bendolph was born at the height of the Great Depression in Gee's Bend, Alabama, an historically black community with a remarkable concentration of multi-generational quilters. The earliest quilt on view dates from 1965 and comprises clothing belonging to several of Bendolph's seven surviving children. At the time, her house had no electricity. Like many of Bendolph's female relatives and neighbors in Gee's Bend, she made quilts to keep her family warm and to make practical use of clothing she could no longer patch. Decades later, when she had access to a wider range of materials and more time for quilting, these motivations remained essential to her craft.

The exhibition includes more than a dozen quilts created after 2000, when Bendolph's creative energies were kindled by the national spotlight on Gee's Bend and its rich quilting tradition. Of particular note are three quilts made in memory of her husband, Rubin Bendolph Sr.—each an exuberant composition with surprising color combinations, textures, and patterns made from his work and dress clothes. Another highlight is a quilt honoring her mother, Aolar Carson Mosely, paired with audio of her favorite hymn performed by Bendolph and her daughter, fellow quilter Essie B. Pettway.



“Mary Lee Bendolph’s quilts are objects with many meanings,” says MHCAM’s Associate Curator and the exhibition’s chief organizer, Hannah W. Blunt, who worked closely on “Piece Together” with Bendolph’s son, Rubin Jr., and Weatherbie Curator of Education and Academic Programs Ellen M. Alvord. “It is impossible to categorize them as works of art or craft or utility—they are at once functional necessities and aesthetic wonders, family documents and symbolic memorials. This exhibition leaves definitions at the door and embraces the hybridity of Bendolph’s marvelous quilts.”

Visitors will enjoy touchable displays, a hands-on quilting activity, and an extensive timeline of Bendolph’s life and community, all of which provide context for her creations. One gallery is dedicated to works from Bendolph’s recent foray into printmaking through collaborations with Paulson Bott Press (now Paulson Fontaine). These lush images reveal her keen eye for the nuances of fabric, as translated from quilts to etchings.

“Piece Together: The Quilts of Mary Lee Bendolph” is the centerpiece of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum’s “Diverse Voices Initiative.” Supported by a grant from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation and the gifts of individual donors, the initiative aims to engage the College’s diverse undergraduates as well as K-12 students from nearby public schools through innovative exhibitions and community outreach.

Dr. Alvia J. Wardlaw to deliver opening lecture

A leading expert in African American art and history, Dr. Alvia J. Wardlaw will present the opening lecture “I Keep Dreaming That Dream: The Life and Creative Genius of Mary Lee Bendolph” for the exhibition on Wednesday, January 31, 2018 at 5:30 p.m. in Gamble Auditorium at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. She will discuss Bendolph’s life and her contributions to the history of quilting in the United States. A reception will follow the lecture.

Dr. Wardlaw is Professor of Art History and Director/Curator of the University Museum, Texas Southern University. She previously served for 22 years as the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where she organized over 75 exhibitions, including the nationally traveling exhibition “The Quilts of Gee’s Bend.” Dr. Wardlaw sits on the Scholarly Committee of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, and in August 2017, she received the Dr. John E. Fleming Award from the Association of African American Museums.

MHCAM will host several other programs in conjunction with the exhibition

Gallery Talk: The Circular Aesthetics of Mary Lee Bendolph and Toni Morrison

Assistant Professor of English and Africana Studies Kimberly Juanita Brown will give a gallery talk exploring parallels between Mary Lee Bendolph’s quilts and the writings of Toni Morrison at 4:30 p.m. on Thursday, February 22, in the Museum.

Performance: Reading Quilts as Music

A musical program inspired by Mary Lee Bendolph’s quilts and organized by violinist and MHCAM Art and Community Engagement Intern, Relyn Myrthil ’19, with composer David W. Sanford, Elizabeth T. Kennan Professor of Music, will take place in the Museum on Tuesday, March 27 at 4:30 p.m.

Community Day with Sisters in Stitches

The Museum will host a community celebration including family-friendly art activities, quiltmaking, and storytelling with the Boston-area quilting guild Sisters in Stitches Joined by the Cloth on Sunday, April 8 from 1:00-3:00 p.m.

About the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (MHCAM) aims to spark intellectual curiosity and creativity through direct engagement with works of art and material culture. Founded in 1876, the Museum’s collection comprises more than 24,000 objects, including exemplary Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities; art and artifacts from the indigenous Americas; paintings, sculpture and decorative art from Europe and the United States; photography, prints, ceramics and numismatics; and works by women artists. In recent years, the Museum has made significant acquisitions of global contemporary art, including important works by Zanele Muholi, Kiki Smith, Alec Soth, Lin Tianmiao, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems and others. Through thought-provoking exhibitions and educational programs, MHCAM serves as a nexus for experiential learning across academic disciplines and as a resource for the broader community.

MHCAM is free, open to the public and fully accessible. Hours are Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. For additional information, please visit artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu.

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Images: Mary Lee Bendolph, *Gee's Bend*, Alabama, August 20, 2016, Photo: Ellen Alvord; Mary Lee Bendolph (American, b. 1935), *Ghost Pockets*, 2003, mixed fabrics including denim, cotton, polyester, and synthetic wool, 85 x 72 in., Purchase with the Art Acquisition Endowment Fund, 2017.16, Photo: Laura Shea, courtesy Rubin Bendolph Jr.; Alvia J. Wardlaw, Photo: Earlie Hudnall Jr.