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For Generations, African American Women Have Used Quilting as a Powerful Tool of Survival, Resistance, and Artistic Expression

BY COLONY LITTLE

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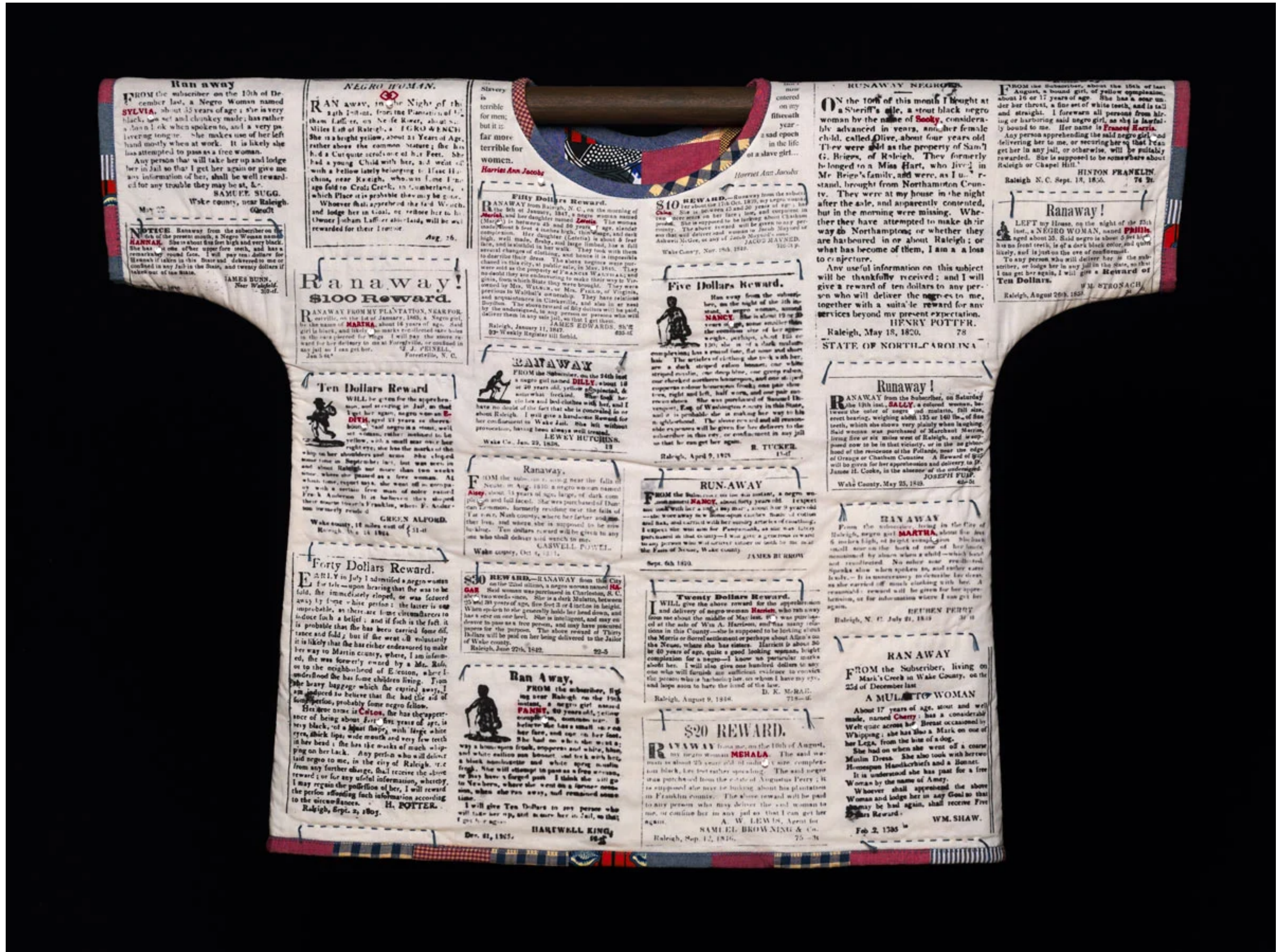


Precious Lovell, *Freedom Seekers*, 2019.
PHOTO SALLY VAN GORDER/COURTESY THE ARTIST

The art of quilting, the painstaking process of collaging and stitching layers of fabric together, has long been associated with so-called women's work. Though originally born out of necessity, the craft has now built a vast archival history that supersedes its relationship with objects of utility, comfort, and warmth.

For African Americans, the practice of quilting not only preserves memory through the use of repurposed fabrics, but also plays a vital role in protest, as artists have used—and continue to use—the medium to assert their voice to claim identity, tackle racism, and confront sexism. Practitioners of textile arts fuse material and message in expressions of freedom and liberation. This contemporary application of the craft has its historical antecedents in the American South. As a tool used for clandestine communication, quilts contained secret symbols that guided the enslaved to freedom through the Underground Railroad. The symbology contained in these quilts also harks back to African imagery, including the Kongolese cosmogram, a symbol that represents birth, life, death, and rebirth. For many enslaved people, these linkages to African roots became essential ties to home and identity that resisted erasure during slavery.

As articles of ancestry, quilts were passed down through generations as family heirlooms. But quilts are also important artifacts of a Black artistic legacy that is often overlooked. "We are all artists. Piecing is our work," artist Faith Ringgold once said. "We brought it straight from Africa. … That was what we did after a hard day's work in the field to keep our sanity and bring beauty into our lives."

The communal process of creating quilts—the quilting bee—is a gathering of women who work collaboratively, sharing skills, valuable information, and history with one another. With that in mind, below is a contemporary quilting bee, highlighting six Black women artists who have used the métier of cloth to share their stories and bear witness to world-shaping events. With every stitch, appliqué, and brushstroke they weave tales and references from the past with modern themes. Using traditions rooted in Southern vernacular craft traditions, these Black women conjure the memories of their foremothers, whose work was often relegated to the margins of art but who have now gained the attention they deserve.

Faith Ringgold

Faith Ringgold, *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles: The French Collection, Part I, #4*, 1991.
Photo : ©Faith Ringgold/ARS, NY and DACS, London/Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York/Collection Oprah Winfrey

Faith Ringgold has combined textiles and painting in a variety of contexts that attest to the power of craft as a tool for social and political consciousness. In the West Coast debut of her traveling retrospective "Faith Ringgold: American People" (on view through November 27), the de Young Museum in San Francisco presents a body of work that spans 50-plus years, including story quilts, soft sculptures, historical paintings, and political posters. In the show, textile works recall important moments in Black history and pay homage to leaders who fought for freedom and liberation. In one of her famed story quilts, Ringgold honors Black women from across time whose activism continues to resonate in the present. Within a verdant field of vibrantly painted sunflowers, a group of women joyfully gather, holding up a quilt that embodies their collective achievements. Around the border of their communal quilt are the names of the women pictured: Madam C. J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker. Standing in the field to the side of the group, Vincent van Gogh holds a vase of sunflowers, appearing to offer them to the women as a gesture of reverence. The piece, *The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles* (1991), is a celebration of Black women and the common ties that bind, sustain, and fortify them.

Nettie Pettway Young

Nettie Young, *(Untitled) Housetop*, 1970 (finished in 2003).

Photo : Photo Peter Paul Geoffrion/©Estate of Nettie Young/Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

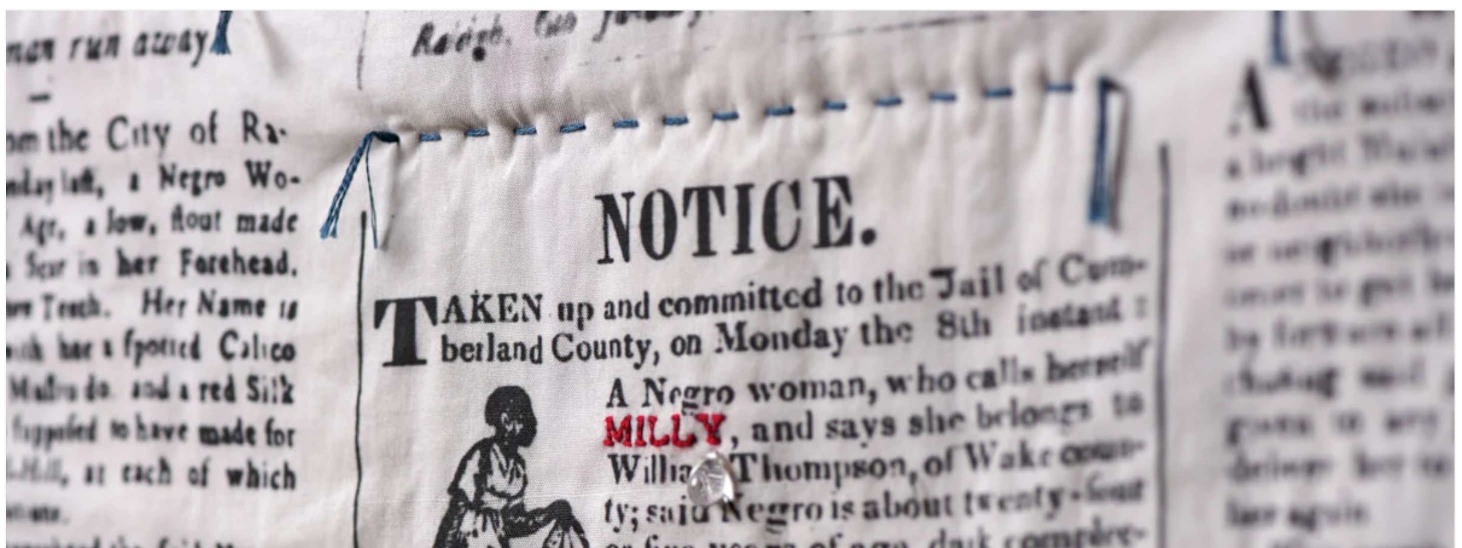
Southern quilting collectives, including Gee's Bend and the Freedom Quilting Bee, both in Alabama, preserved the lineage of the craft while creating an economic platform of self-reliance and political engagement for their members. Inspired by a 1965 visit from Martin Luther King, Jr., who encouraged the women of Gee's Bend to participate in the civil rights movement, the Freedom Quilting Bee was formed in 1966. By selling their handmade quilts, the collective raised essential funds that were funneled back into the community and

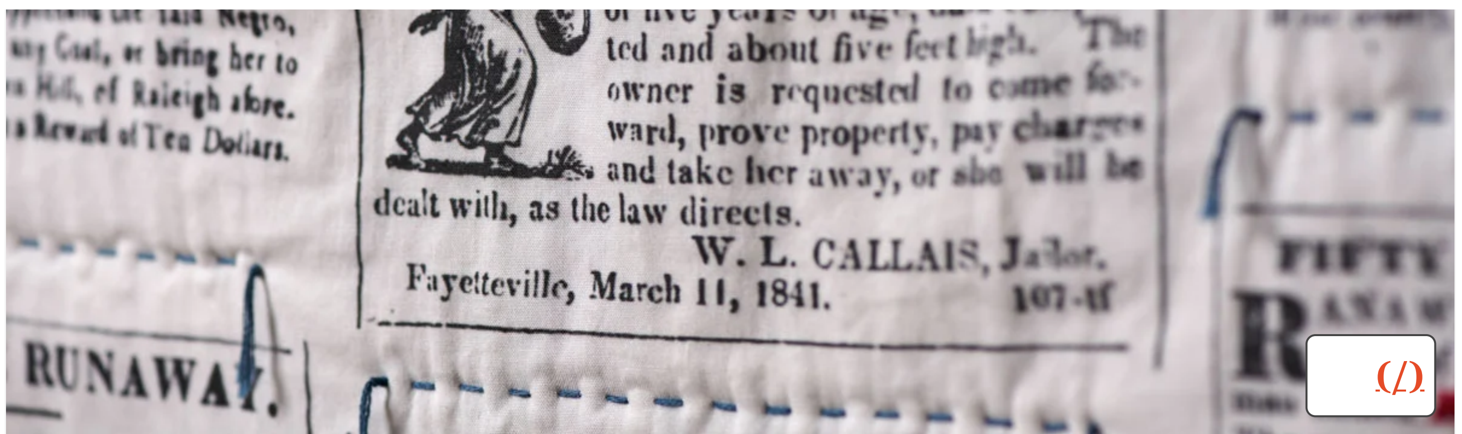
invested into civil rights activism. The techniques employed by these quilters—cutting repurposed items of clothing and other material into strips and using them to create intricate geometric patterns—were passed down from generation to generation. While many of the motifs were largely improvisational, some were well-known patterns familiar in quilting; others mirrored the randomly collaged pieces of newsprint used as insulation in the walls of the old homes in the area.

The concentric squares that form a familiar quilt pattern called "Housetop" in a 1970 quilt by Nettie Pettway Young exemplifies the abstracted style that sets Gee's Bend quilts apart from others. The quilt is currently held in the collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, which is exhibiting the work as part of a group exhibition "Beyond the Surface" (on view until May 14, 2023) that centers collage, mixed media, and textiles work. Curated by Lauren Haynes, who recently left the Nasher for the Queens Museum, the exhibition recognizes the career of Young, who has inspired generations of Gee's Bend quiltmakers and contemporary artists alike.

A founding member of the Freedom Quilting Bee, Young started quilting with family members when she was seven years old. "There's a timelessness to her work," Haynes told *ARTnews*. "The influence of Young and other Gee's Bend artists on the current generation of artists was one thing I was interested in examining in the exhibition at the Nasher." The Freedom Quilting Bee exemplified the strong sense of community, economic autonomy, and self-reliance that became an important lifeline to its members. "The Bee was the first business black people in Wilcox County owned," Young told the *New York Times* in 2002. "It was the first time I knew I was special, the first job I had, excusing cotton picking."

Precious Lovell





Precious Lovell, *Freedom Seekers* (detail), 2019.

Photo : Photo Sally Van Gorder/Courtesy the artist

North Carolina–based artist Precious Lovell worked in the garment industry in New York and taught fashion, fibers, and surface design before shifting her focus to visual art. Her work explores the narrative potential of cloth, depicting important moments in history and expressing social critique. “Although no longer the case, historically fiber arts were considered women’s work,” Lovell said in an interview. “However, even in the historical sense it has been a vehicle for activism, memory making, and historical preservation.”

Lovell started creating her “Warrior Women of the African Diaspora” series in 2008 to honor the memories of women freedom fighters overlooked in history. “These protective shirts are based on traditional African warrior/hunter shirts,” she said. In 2019 she created *Freedom Seekers War Shirt* for the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh, placed in conversation with an unfinished quilt from the 1940s by Bertha Bridges in an exhibition titled “QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women’s Voices Through Quilts.”

Freedom Seekers War Shirt is a quilted garment made from collaged newspaper clippings, which echoes the newspaper stabilizer that Bridges used. It also incorporates elements of African textiles, found in the detailed piping around the titular shirt. Nodding to the state’s strong connections to the textile industry while acknowledging the enslaved labor that built this industry, Lovell’s *War Shirt* includes newspaper clippings she found in a North Carolina database of “runaway” ads for 45 enslaved women from Wake County, which includes Raleigh. Their names are embroidered in bright red thread that symbolizes violence, courage, anger, power, and love. Next to each woman’s name, Lovell embeds a single crystal tear, a subtle expression of the loss and pain suffered by these women in their pursuit of freedom.

Sonya Clark

Sonya Clark, *Interwoven*, 2016.

Photo : Courtesy the artist

“Come stitch next to me, and I’ll tell you a story.” As a young child, these words beckoned artist Sonya Clark to the side of her maternal grandmother, who taught her how to sew. Clark’s work is a deep exploration of the meaning of heritage and the symbols used to preserve and distort identity. Using textiles, thread, and hair fibers, Clark has created a visual vocabulary that weaves material and storytelling together. “I believe our hair is a text,” Clark told *ARTnews*, “a scroll of our ancestry coiled in each tight curl that mimics the twist of our DNA. Hair is like the universe’s handwritten script of who we are, what we have endured, and our infinite possibility.” Over the years, the artist has created a unique font whose style mimics the coils, kinks, and curls of natural Black hair. Through this lexicon, as

seen in text-based works that are part of her “Twist” series, Clark renders the beauty and complexity of Blackness that is embedded into the fabric of the United States.

Her work also examines the ways Americans hold symbols of freedom dear, revealing deep fissures between perception and reality. Many of her woven works blend the U.S. and Confederate flags, replacing their distinctive features with unexpected elements like braided hair and Bantu knots. In a piece titled *Interwoven* (2016), the frayed edges of Confederate and American flags reveal their tenuous and symbiotic relationship. One cannot be dismantled without the other being radically altered, both physically and metaphorically. With this piece Clark asks an urgent question: “Where are we in removing white supremacy from the promise of Democracy?”

Aliyah Bonnette

Aliyah Bonnette, *Wading in the Waters of Oshun*, 2021.

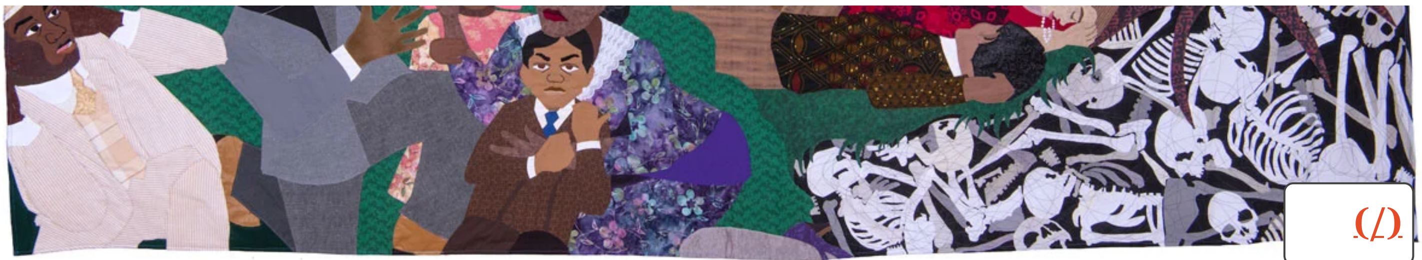
Photo : Courtesy the artist

Raleigh-based artist Aliyah Bonnette is also heavily influenced by her grandmother, whose memory inspires her work. The artist uses quilting, sewing, and painting to connect with her departed ancestors. Through her quilting process, which fuses portraiture with quilted and collaged cloth, Bonnette channels the past while empowering her subjects with a freedom of expression and bodily autonomy that weren't afforded to women of earlier generations.

In *Wading in the Waters of Oshun*, the artist depicts the Oshun, a Yoruba orisha of fertility and sensuality, wearing a crown of locs that are protected by a ring of cowrie shells. Cascading waters billow downward from the center of the quilt, beyond its edges. Bonnette began quilting after learning about the important role quilts played as mapping guides to the Underground Railroad. When she told her grandfather about her new craft, he showed her fabrics and quilts that her late grandmother had created.

"Over time," Bonnette said, "I have taught myself a process of improvisational quilting to physically connect to my grandmother and the practices of my women ancestors. By incorporating the very fabrics and unfinished quilts she touched and sewed herself, my practice becomes a space to stitch together the stories and memories of Black women across generations."

Dawn Williams Boyd



Dawn Williams Boyd, *Massacre on Black Wall Street*, 2022.
Photo : Photo Ron Witherspoon/©Dawn Williams Boyd/Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Textile painter Dawn Williams Boyd combines elements of quilting with narration to create large-scale tapestries that are filled with messages and wry commentary on America's social institutions. In "The Tip of the Iceberg," her first solo show at Fort Gansevoort in New York, Boyd presents works on racism, the imperilment of *Roe v. Wade*, the environment, voting rights, and police brutality in 12 works that candidly address these issues.

The largest piece in the show is an ambitious 10-foot cloth mural that depicts the destruction of Greenwood, an affluent Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In *Massacre on Black Wall Street* (2022), Boyd conjures the tragic events during the summer of 1921 when a white mob burned and looted homes, killed Black residents, and forced many to flee. (Many residents left for other states and never returned.) Boyd renders the smoke from that day in layers of black organza, while lushly colored green fabric hints at the bucolic setting that was set aflame by looters and by low-flying planes that dropped firebombs on the community.

In its brashness the piece shares the same haunting visual register as a painting by Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That piece depicts wanton violence experienced under the fearful, watchful eyes of young children. Similarly, Boyd's work pays tribute to the lives of those who were unaccounted for after the massacre: a pile of skeletons evokes a mass grave, while a large tree covered in West African Adinkra symbols represents spiritual and cultural ties to home. The tree acts as a memorial to the dead and a shield of protection for a family taking cover from the violence that surrounds them.

"This is chaos in defiance of law," Boyd said of the Greenwood massacre. "In defiance of who we as Americans say we are. This is the *truth* of who we actually are—this is not a mythology that we teach in school." Boyd's work calls out the inane cyclicality of the issues we continue to face that prevent us from addressing newer and equally insidious threats to humanity—and our survival.

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