

O K T P

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## GEE'S BEND AT PAULSON PRESS

Mary Lee Bendolph

**M**ary Lee Bendolph comes from a strong tradition of quilt-making. She was born in 1935 in Gee's Bend, a small rural community in southwestern Alabama enclosed on three sides by a sharp bend in the Alabama River. Its geographical isolation has left it largely separate from the rest of the world since the early 1800s, when a planter named Joseph Gee first staked his claim and began growing cotton crops with the help of black slaves. After emancipation, those slaves became

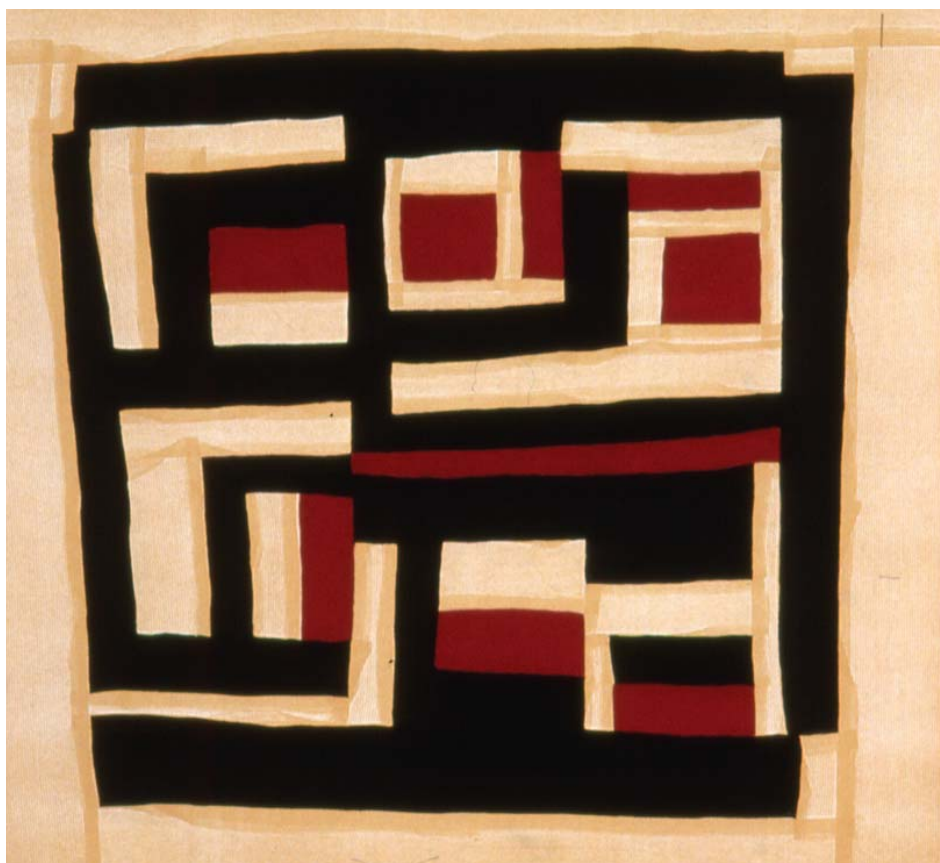
tenant farmers on the land. Then in 1937, the U.S. government bought much of Gee's Bend and sold it to the former slaves and their descendents. As a result, the community has enjoyed unusual continuity for generations.

The women of Gee's Bend have been gathering regularly to make quilts, influencing each other and developing a shared style of improvisation that upends the usual quilting conventions, while also developing their own unique artistic voices within that tradition. Often they work

without patterns, thriftily recycling worn-out clothing and letting the quirks of the material determine the form. In the late 1960s and 1970s their unorthodox patterns and vivid colors brought the tradition of the community to national attention. In 2002-2003, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited a wide selection of quilts made between the late thirties and 2000. A new exhibition of quilts will open in early June of 2006 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and travel to seven additional museums, ending its tour at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2008.

Mary Lee is one of the keepers of Gee's Bend's memories. She knows everybody there, and everybody knows her. During the Civil Rights demonstrations in 1965, she marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. One day she watched in awe while he drank from a "whites only" fountain in Selma—then she took a taste herself. Her quilting style displays the same boldness, drawing on influences from the extended families of both her mother's and mother-in-law's families. She works rapidly, putting together big geometric shapes and bright hues. Used clothes are her preferred material, everything from old shirts to blue jeans, corduroy pants to polyester leisure suits.

*(continued on next page)*



**Housetop Blocks / Purple, 2005**

Image size: 24" x 24"; Paper size: 33" x 30 1/2"  
Color softground, aquatint

Paulson Press invited Mary Lee and her daughter-in-law Louisiana Bendolph, also an accomplished quilt maker from Gee's Bend, to come to Berkeley to make a series of prints. The pair spent two weeks at the press in June 2005, bringing with them some "pieces" they had already sewn at home. During her visit, Mary Lee worked with clothing from the local Goodwill and Out of the Closet stores to create her compositions. Though life in Gee's Bend has greatly improved in recent years, and Ms. Bendolph has access to whatever materials she now chooses, she still prefers to work with previously worn clothes as they "have the love of the people who have worn them." By working with clothes from Berkeley area thrift stores, Ms. Bendolph was able to incorporate the spirit of the Bay Area into her new works.

Working with master printers Pam Paulson and Renée Bott, Mary Lee decided which of her quilts would become etchings—two were quilts from home, the other four from the sessions at Paulson Press. Using a technique called softground, each quilt was laid on a copper plate coated with beeswax to produce an impression of the quilt. Next, the soft ground was etched in acid, transferring the impression of the quilt piece to the copper plate and recording all the seams, textures, and nuances of each different fabric. Mary Lee hand-worked the copper plates using the spitbite method, wielding a brush to paint a mixture of nitric acid, gum arabic, and water directly on the plate to create a watercolor effect. Once all of the plates had been made they were printed together to produce the final image.

In the transition from a beautiful and functional object to a fine art print, the highly sophisticated abstract patterns are brought into sharper focus.

During a break in the printmaking, we spoke with Mary Lee about her experience.

**Q:** Since you've seen this process of making prints, has that influenced the pieces that you're making?

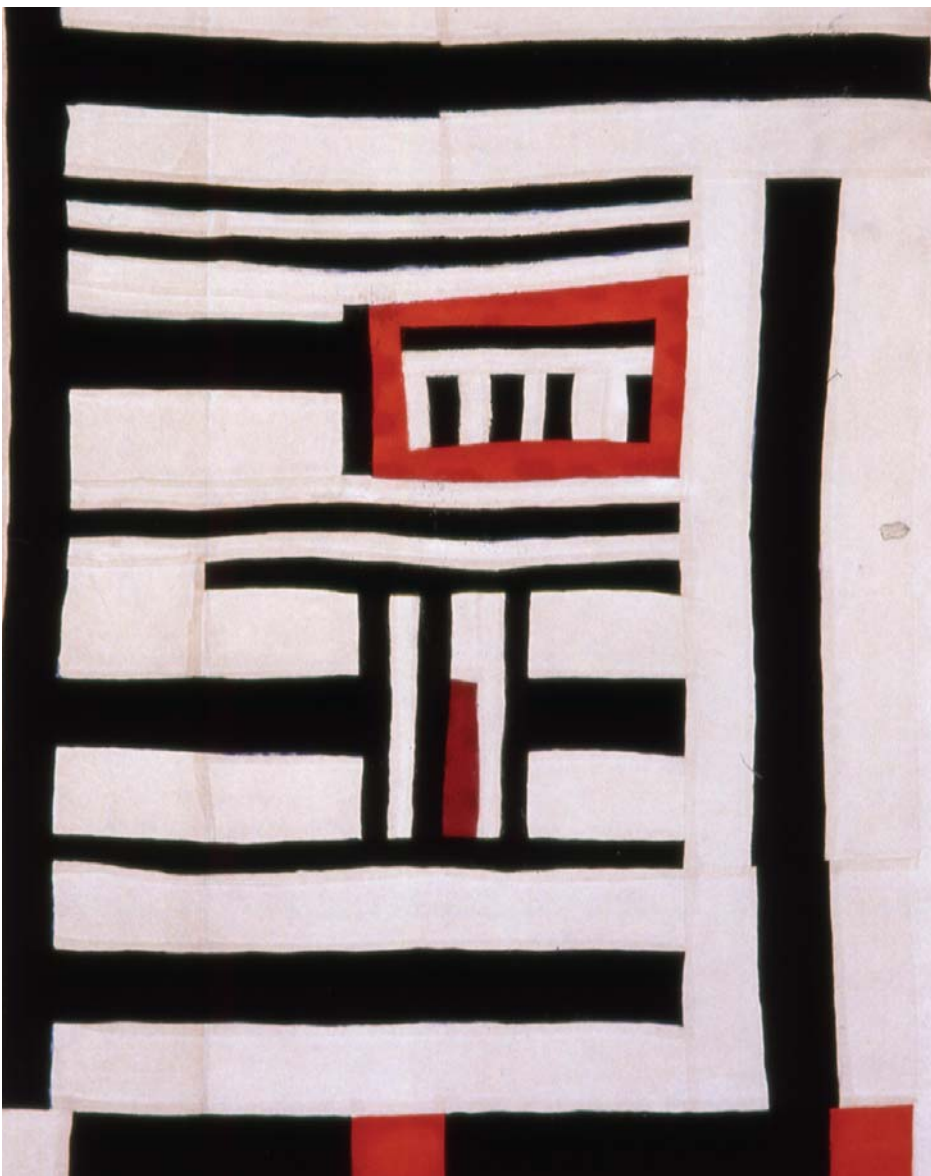
**MLB:** It's just the same. We are the ones who make it but they are the ones who create it. Well, we create it and they make it, it goes like that, too.

**Q:** How does it feel to take a quilt with a utilitarian purpose, although quite beautiful, and turn it into something else that is not going to keep someone warm?

**MLB:** I can say it makes me feel good to see it on the wall. Because I used to go in places and see the pictures up in the wall, I just wanted to know, how did they get to be up on the wall like that? I've really enjoyed seeing my quilts on the walls in museums and galleries. I hope the prints will warm people's hearts when they see them.

**Q:** What do you use to make your quilts?

**MLB:** I mostly work with clothes people don't want. It causes a lot of sewing and doing a lot of tearing and cutting. I just love to use something over. I don't like to see things thrown away and wasted.



**Black and Brown, 2005**

Image size: 24" x 24"; Paper size: 33" x 30 1/2"

Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

**Mama's Song, 2005**

Image size: 33" x 24"; Paper size: 42 1/2" x 32"

Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

**Q:** Do you use any new fabric in your work?

**MLB:** Every now and then when I'm at home. Since I've been up here I've used all old material, that somebody don't want. That's what I use. Now, all of that's shirts or pants. Both of them. And then I sew them together, piece style that go crossway, no pattern at all. I just sew them together. I don't cut them out. I tear them a little, tear them apart, and just sew. And then if it don't look like I want it to, I take it out and put another piece in there to try to make it look like I want it to look.

**Q:** What is it like to work here at the press?

**MLB:** They work just like family. They work together, just like they are sisters and brothers.

**Q:** Do you feel that it's work or play, making the quilts or the prints?

**MLB:** Same. Work and play. I enjoy working. I love to work. And I love to work here, making quilts and prints. I don't hardly get tired. I don't get hungry as long as I'm sitting down there working. And here I don't have to strain to do it, I don't have to be in a hurry, I don't have to sit there at the machine and sew all day. It just feels good, but I do it because I love to do it.

**Q:** When you start making a quilt, do you have an idea of the whole thing?

**MLB:** I have an idea. I'm going to make it just like that because of the seam of the pants. I go by the pattern in the pants. That's what I go by. It's not that I have a pattern in my head to do.

**Q:** So a lot of your pattern is determined by how the pants were made.

**MLB:** Right. And the ideas that come to me as I'm putting the pieces together. I know how I want it to look, but it usually comes out looking better than it did in my mind.

**Q:** You colored the blue jeans in the print?

**MLB:** We added some of the color.

### **Past and Gone, 2005**

Image size: 31" x 27"; Paper size: 40 1/2" x 35"  
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

**Q:** You were brushing the plate?

**MLB:** Pam showed me how to do it, and then I just got the brush and put it down on there and it worked out like I wanted it to.

**Q:** But it was a different experience, because what you're usually doing is stitching, and here you are doing something more like painting.

**MLB:** Painting. Right.

**Q:** How did that feel?

**MLB:** Nervous. At first when I did it I was nervous, but the next time I did it I wasn't nervous like the first time, because the first time doing something make you kind of nervous. But it was a great experience again, and I just feel good about it.

Paulson Press would like to thank Matt Arnett for his invaluable help in making this project a success.



### **To Honor Mr Dial, 2005**

Image size: 46" x 28"; Paper size: 55 1/2" x 36"  
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.





Mary Lee Bendolph watching Cheyenne Sylvester pull print.

**Lonnie Holley's Freedom, 2005**

Image size: 32" x 36"; Paper size: 41" x 44"

Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

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