

GEE'S BEND AT PAULSON PRESS

Louisiana Bendolph

Louisiana Pettway Bendolph is part of the new generation of Gee's Bend quilters. For hundreds of years, women in Gee's Bend, a rural black community in Wilcox, Alabama, have been handing down a unique quilt-making legacy. Largely isolated by a bend in the Alabama River on three sides, the community has its own approach to quilt making, born out of necessity (the houses

lacked central heating), thrifty reuse of worn-out clothing, and creative improvisation. Louisiana draws on the asymmetrical forms and vivid colors of the Gee's Bend tradition, adding a greater emphasis on variation than on repetition and a playful approach to space that gives her work a sculptural feel.

Louisiana is the daughter-in-law of Mary Lee Bendolph, profiled in the previous issue of OKTP. Born in Gee's Bend in 1960,

Louisiana grew up watching her mother and other family members making quilts. At age 20 she married Mary Lee's son Albert, and the two moved to Mobile, Alabama in the early 1980s, where their apartment was too small to leave much room for piecing quilts. As a result, she produced only a few during this period.

But when "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" exhibition opened in September 2002 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, she was deeply moved to see the quilts of her community on display—particularly those of Annie E. Pettway, her great-grandmother. Afterward, Louisiana resumed making quilts.

She visited Paulson Press with Mary Lee in June 2005 to make a series of prints from their quilt designs. This was the first time the two quilted together. Breaking with tradition, Louisiana prefers to work with new fabrics rather than used clothing, though she will, on occasion, work with material from old clothes.

This interview is based on a conversation at Paulson Press with writer Kenneth Caldwell and subsequent conversations with Matt Arnett.

Q: Can you tell us about some of your early memories of quilting?

LB: When we were young, we would play under the quilts while the older women quilted. I remember doing that as early as six or seven years old, but I'm sure we did it earlier than that. *(continued on next page)*

First, 2005

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



We would sit under the quilt and I would watch the needle going in and out of the fabric. I loved watching and playing under the quilts.

I made my first quilt when I was twelve, not long after “Mama” [Annie E. Pettway] died. I really started doing it because there wasn’t anything else to do. I played softball and I made quilts. That was really all there was to do as a young girl. I probably made about 20 quilts as a teenager.

Q: Who taught you quilting?

LB: I learned from my mother, from watching her do it.

Q: What was it like growing up in Gee’s Bend?

LB: Our year started in March because we started getting the field ready for planting. We were preparing the fields for cucumbers,

squash, corn, and peas. By June, it was time to start harvesting the first crops. This lasted until the end of July. Then it was time to start getting ready for cotton. We planted the cotton. We had to hoe it, and then hoe it again to make sure the grass stayed away. We had to do this every day, except Sunday. Sunday was saved for church. If it rained, we went to school. By the end of September some of the cotton would be ready to pick. This would take us until the middle of November. By the end of November, we were in school every day. We had a break for Christmas and went back to school in early January. By March, it was back to the fields.

Q: How long did you stay in Gee’s Bend?

LB: I was twenty when I got married, and shortly after that we moved to Mobile, Alabama so Albert could get a job. Home made

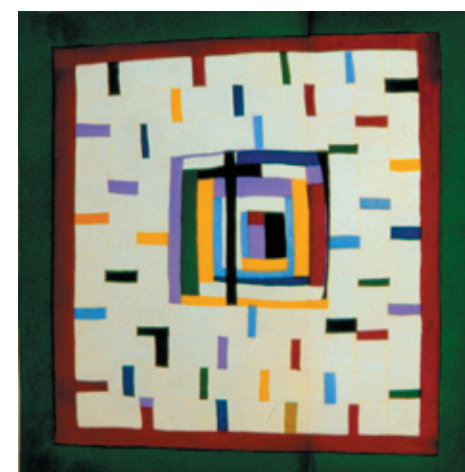
me who I am and I’m thankful for that, but my life growing up was so hard. But it built character. I see that now, but then, all I could think was, “my life shouldn’t be this hard.”

Q: Did you make any quilts after you moved to Mobile?

LB: I made a few quilts after I got married, but stopped because I had plenty of quilts to keep my family warm. I was living in an apartment with central heating and air, so the need for quilts didn’t really exist. I did crochet a little but I was busy working and raising a family. I really thought my days of making quilts were over, just part of my past, like planting corn and picking cotton. But then I went to Houston for the opening of The Quilts of Gee’s Bend exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts.

Q: What happened there?

LB: I had no idea what to expect. To see our history and our past up on the walls and realizing that Mama had left a legacy. She was gone. We hadn’t forgotten her, but no one else in the world knew who she was. And then to see her quilt hanging on the wall, it was so beautiful. When she had died she was just Mama, but now she had been reborn as someone who people were respecting and all of a sudden, she was important to other people in a way she had only been to us. It brought tears to my eyes and I was so overjoyed inside.



Going Home, 2005

Image size: 32" x 30"; Paper size: 41 1/2" x 38"
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

American Housetop (for the Arnett's), 2005

Image size: 36" x 30"; Paper size: 45 1/2" x 38"
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

She had helped to raise me. After her stroke, I helped take care of her. When I saw her beautiful artwork on the wall, it took me back in time, back to a time before I knew her, before I was born when she was a whole person with all of her abilities. I could now picture her in her happier times. She had done something important. I could see that now. She never got to go places or do anything. I felt like in spirit she was there with her quilt and with me. When I travel now, she is there with me.

Q: How did you start making quilts again?

LB: I was on the bus on the way home from Houston and started getting images that looked like quilts coming into my mind. I tried to ignore them. I said, ‘I really just don’t want to do that anymore. I’m done making quilts.’ But they wouldn’t leave me alone. I finally decided I would make the quilt and that would be the end of it. But the images didn’t stop. So I made another quilt, and then another, and then another. And I’ve kept on doing it because those images won’t leave me alone.

Q: How are your quilts different than Mary Lee’s? Do you lay the pieces out on a table?

LB: Well, basically, I’m the new generation now. I see it. And sometimes I’ll even take a little piece of paper and kind of draw it out.

Q: Are you determining the colors and the forms?

LB: I’m determining the form. And then I

look at the colors, and – a lot time I do see the colors and a lot of the time I don’t. But that’s one thing about my quilts, whenever they don’t fit together the way I want them to, it’s because they’re not right, so I have to cut them and redo something else.

Q: How do you feel now that your quilts are being seen and you are making fine art prints based on your quilt design?

LB: When Matt was explaining to us what the prints were we never figured that a small quilt would look so good on paper. I don’t read art books and so I really don’t know a whole lot of stuff about art. Now people claim “you are artists.” So we accept that.

Q: Has this process of making prints influenced the pieces that you are making?

LB: It’s still the same.

Q: What is it like to be called an artist?

LB: I had always wondered why I was born without any talent to do something good or important. When I was growing up, we weren’t taught to be proud or have pride in ourselves, or to have pride in what we did. Now when people celebrate our work or praise our talent it is hard for us to say we are proud. I’m so thankful that the exhibit and all that has followed has brought that pride to my community. And I’m learning how to take pride in what I do. Or at

least I’m working towards that. Part of me feels like I’m living in a dream and I’m going to wake up and realize that it has all been a dream. I hope not. In the meantime, I’m still learning to accept the fact that people think of me as an artist. And I’m proud of that, I really am. But to me, I’m still just plain and simple Lou.

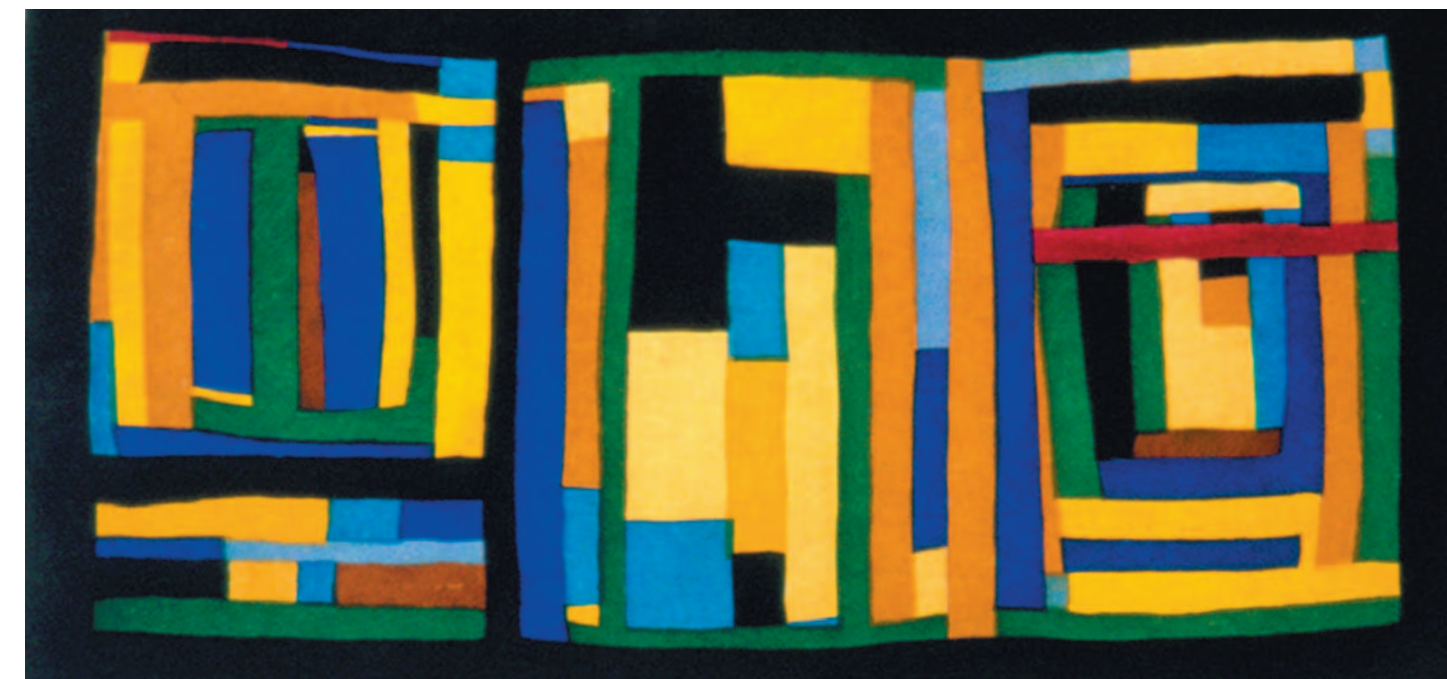


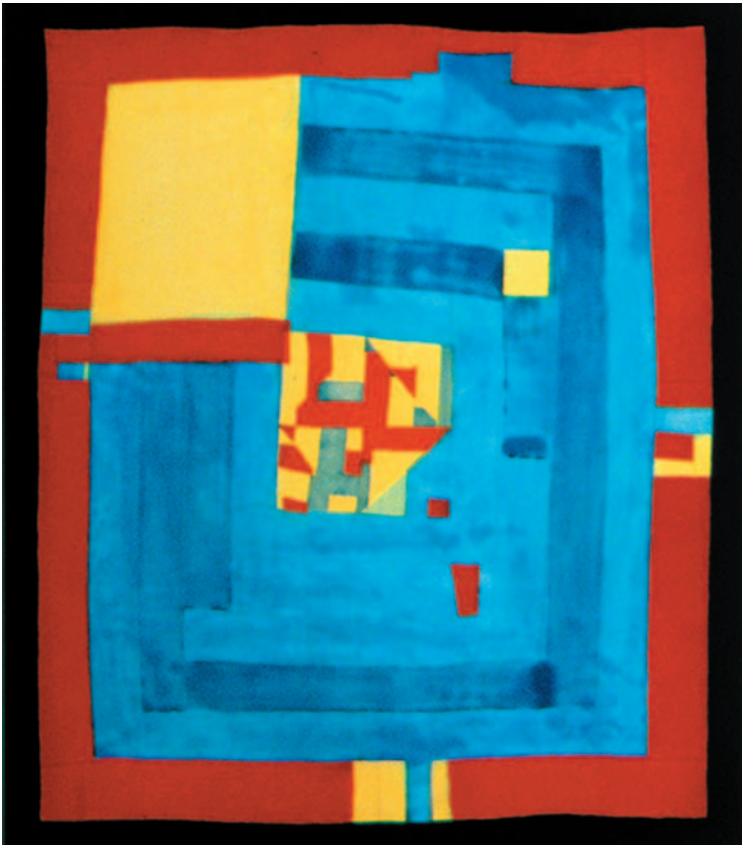
Triangles (After Annie E. Pettway), 2005

Image size: 20 1/2" x 16 1/2"; Paper size: 29 1/2" x 24 1/2"
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

Three Squares, 2005

Image size: 12" x 22"; Paper size: 21" x 30"
Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.





Louisiana Bendolph piecing quilt in studio.

Mayday, 2005

Image size: 32 1/2" x 27 1/2"; Paper size: 42" x 35 1/2"

Color softground, aquatint and spitbite aquatint.

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