

TEACHERS' NOTES

The New Bend

Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 28 January 2023 – 8 May 2023



Legacy Russell, 2021. Courtesy Legacy Russell. Photo: Andreas Laszlo Konrath

About The New Bend

'The New Bend' is an exhibition that brings together 12 contemporary artists working in the raced, classed and gendered traditions of quilting and textile practice. It has been curated by Legacy Russell, Executive Director & Chief Curator of The Kitchen in New York, and travels from Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles to Somerset.

'The New Bend' is inspired by, and in homage to, the legacy of the Gee's Bend quilters and the groundbreaking exhibition 'The Quilters of Gee's Bend', first presented at The Whitney Museum of Art (2002 – 2003). The Gee's Bend quilters were an Alabama community of women whose quilts were created out of necessity and utility. Over time, a dynamic dialogue surrounding their work has expanded to international acclaim and enduring critical resonance.

'The New Bend' features work by Anthony Akinbola, Dawn Williams Boyd, Myrlande Constant, Ferren Gipson, Tomashi Jackson, Basil Kincaid, Eric N. Mack, Sojourner Truth Parsons, Tuesday Smillie, Rachel Eulena Williams, Qualeasha Wood and Zadie Xa.



Girl at Gee's Bend, 1937. Courtesy Arthur Rothstein Legacy Project. Photo: Arthur Rothstein

About The Gee's Bend Quilters

The Gee's Bend quilters come from the town of Boykin, also known as Gee's Bend. It is an intimate African American community located at the arc of a bend of the Alabama River within Wilcox County, Alabama, United States. The location was originally named for a landowner and slaveholder of the same surname, who in 1816, settled in the area and built a cotton plantation. Many of the residents of the area are descendants of the enslaved people who worked on this plantation. Therefore, they carry shared family names, such as Bendolph, Pettway and Young.

In the 1940s, the land of Boykin was sold in plots by the United States Government to local families still living in the Bend. In a complex twist, this made it possible for the Black and native residents of the area – once subject to the extractive labor and economic practices of enslavement and sharecropping – to gain ownership in part over the same land their families had once forcibly worked within.

The formation of the quilting tradition of Gee's Bend rises out of the 19th and 20th Century and carries on to the present day. The quilts were originally produced for functional purposes and family use. Over time, cooperatives such as The Freedom Quilting Bee (est. 1966 in Rehoboth, Alabama and remaining in operation until 2012) and the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective (est. 2003) were impactful in shaping an alternative economic model that allowed the quilters to raise funds for their community. The Freedom Quilting Bee also played a key role in political consciousness-raising, as active participants in the drives for voting rights and advocates within the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery.

This exhibition acknowledges the work of The Gee's Bend quilters such as Sarah Benning (b. 1933), Missouri Pettway (1902 – 1981), Lizzie Major (1922 – 2011), Sally Bennett Jones (1944 – 1988), Mary Lee Bendolph (b. 1935), and so many more, as central to expanded histories of abstraction and modernism.

What does the exhibition look like?

'The New Bend' is a group show of 12 contemporary artists who all work within the expanded field of textiles challenging historical, political and cultural preconceptions. The artists reference traditional modes of textile production such as quilting, weaving, cutting, patching, painting and embroidery, but propose new directions and modes of creation.

Who are the artists in 'The New Bend'?

Anthony Akinbola (b. 1991) is a first-generation Nigerian-American who was raised between Missouri and Nigeria. Foregoing conventional approaches to painting and sculpture, Akinbola reimagines identity construction through startling original treatments of color and texture. His self-developed techniques explore the possibilities of totemic materials such as palm oil, hairbrushes and durags – fiber scarves used in maintaining Black hair. Akinbola has characterized his works as 'metaphors for what a first-generation existence might look like' and unpacks the rituals and histories separating Africa from Black America in an attempt to mitigate that separation.

Dawn Williams Boyd's (b. 1952) self-described 'cloth paintings' reinterpret the traditional craft of quilt-making. Utilizing historical references, current events and religious tropes as narrative frameworks, her intricate textile compositions often chronicle seminal moments in African American history and quotidian scenes of Black American life.

Myrlande Constant (b. 1968) is known for her striking beaded and sequin embellished textile artworks which are in conversation with elements of Haiti's social, religious and cultural histories.



Dawn Williams Boyd, *The Right to (My) Life*, 2017 © Dawn Williams Boyd. Courtesy Fort Gansevoort, New York.
Photo: Ron Witherspoon



Myrlande Constant, La Sirene, 2003 © Myrlande Constant. Courtesy the Artist, Hauser & Wirth and Fort Gansevoort, New York. Photo: Jeff McLane

Ferren Gipson (b. 1986) explores in her work the intersections between art and popular culture, highlighting the work of women artists and political themes in modern Chinese art. Within her textile practice, she explores themes of labour, matrilineal connections, materiality and color.

Tomashi Jackson (b. 1980) combines practices of painting, printmaking and sculpture with archival research in areas of public infrastructure policy. The work interrogates intersections between formal languages of visual art and political languages that drive histories of segregation, voting rights, education, transportation, labor and housing in the United States.

Basil Kincaid (b. 1986) is a postdisciplinary artist who constructs, contemplates and revises self-imposed and conditioned limitations, exploring their fixity. Through quilting, collaging, photography, installation and performance – made primarily with found, salvaged and donated materials – Kincaid discards social mores while drafting alternative cultural fabrics.

Eric N. Mack (b. 1987) refers to himself as a painter, yet his works rarely observe the medium's traditional canvas-to-stretcher format. His use of color, form and material as elements in a compositional lexicon situate the origin of his practice in the investigation of painting in an expanded field, using stained or dyed fabrics as his principal medium.

Sojourner Truth Parsons's (b. 1984) paintings are personal yet fictional moments, driven by a desire to translate the psychological and the affective into visual form. Bodies, flora, fauna and the city – the touchstones of daily existence – are anchoring forms in her practice. They are images that stand in for the emotional acuties and atmospheric intensities that occupy her time in the studio.

Tuesday Smilie (b. 1981) is a visual artist working with textiles, collage, printmaking and watercolor. At the core of her work is the question of the individual and the group, the binary of inclusion and exclusion and the porous membrane between the two.



Sojourner Truth Parsons, *Walking alone II*, 2022 © Sojourner Truth Parsons. Courtesy the Artist and Foxy Production.
Photo: Thomas Barratt



Tuesday Smillie, *Sequin Light (Orange, with Kjerstin Rossi)*, 2021 © Tuesday Smillie. Courtesy the Artist.
Photo: Thomas Barratt

Rachel Eulena Williams (b. 1991) is an artist whose work displays an unusual level of candor, invention and lightness. Her painted constructions employ the language of abstract painting but are transformed through her own approach to material. Finding a balance between painting and sculpture, Williams applies large swaths of colour made from painted canvases that she subsequently cuts up and reconfigures. The collage-like works are tied together with sewing and rope, which acts both pictorially and creates marks inside her compositions.

Qualeasha Wood (b. 1996) is a textile artist whose work contemplates realities around Black female embodiment that do and might exist. Inspired by a familial relationship to textiles, queer craft, Microsoft Paint and Internet avatars, Wood's tufted and tapestry pieces mesh traditional craft and contemporary technological materials. Together, Wood navigates both an internet environment saturated in Black Femme figures and culture, and a political and economic environment that holds that embodiment at the margins.

Zadie Xa's (b. 1983) work is informed by her experiences within the Korean diaspora, traditional folk tales and mythology as well as the environmental and cultural context of the Pacific Northwest. Her work often features garments, including cloaks and masks, used for live performance and within installation or moving image.



Qualeasha Wood, Ctrl+Alt+Del, 2021 © Qualeasha Wood. Courtesy the Artist and Gallery Kendra Jayne Patrick.
Photo: Qualeasha Wood

What are the major themes within the exhibition?

Race and identity

The creation and production of textiles has a rich and important cultural position as a sociopolitical practice and many of the artists within 'The New Bend' use textile work to explore race, class and identity. For the women of Gee's Bend, textile work became an alternative economic model that allowed the women to raise funds for their community. The Gee's Bend quilters were also pushing towards social, economic and political freedom, establishing The Freedom Quilting Bee in 1966 and The Gee's Bend Quilters Collective in 2003. Members of The Freedom Quilting Bee participated in civil rights activism, such as the march from Selma to Montgomery, which was a drive for voting rights.

Gender politics

Textile work has often been labelled 'women's work' on account of its association to domesticity and femininity. In Western art history, textiles have historically been regarded as inferior to mediums such as painting and sculpture. They have not been exhibited or interpreted in the same locations or context in which we see and frame other histories of art. This gendered approach to narratives around textiles marginalizes the practice and further ignores the global histories, personhoods and experiences of people of color.

Domesticity and memory

The Gee's Bend quilts were originally produced for functional purposes and family use, and the practice was passed down over generations. Material incorporated into the quilts was often repurposed from clothing and textiles within the home. In this way, fabric can connect us to people and place, and speak to geographies and culture. It tells domestic stories that relate to family and community, but in so doing references localities and generations.

Textile work is collective work

The Gee's Bend quilts were produced in collective cooperation and creative economic production, by groups of Black American craftswomen who came together to cut, assemble and stitch. The creation of these quilts served as a meeting place, a prompt and as intergenerational inspiration.

Challenging narratives of modernism

This exhibition continues the legacy of The Gee's Bend as a challenge to the account of modern art, which engages abstraction as a critical tool of experimentation. However, the modern art movement has not always been inclusive of this group and the ways in which they continue to transform art history, visual culture and cultural production across localities and generations.

What other artists does the work relate to?

Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911) is recognized as one of the most important and influential artists of the 20th Century. Her career spanned over 70 years, during which time she employed a wide variety of working methods and materials, across genres of drawing, printmaking, painting, sculpture and textiles.

Frank Bowling (b. 1934) was born in Guyana and then later moved to London when he was 19 to pursue painting. Since the 1960s, he has developed a highly individual language of painting, which emerged from expressionistic figuration and pop art to autobiographical elements of the artist's sociopolitical concerns, fusing abstraction with personal memories.

Mark Bradford (b. 1961) is an American contemporary artist best known for his large-scale abstract paintings created out of paper.

Charles Gaines (b. 1944) is an American artist whose work interrogates the discourse of aesthetics, politics and philosophy.

Amy Sberald (b. 1973) is an American portraitist who documents contemporary African American experience in the United States through figurative paintings of Black people in straightforward portraits, moments of leisure or direct art historical references.

Sophie Taeuber-Arp (b. 1889) was a Swiss artist, painter, sculptor, textile designer, furniture and interior designer, architect and dancer.

Jack Whitten (b. 1939) was an American painter and sculptor. His work was a part of the abstract expressionism movement, but later became known for the experimental elements of the materials and terrains in his paintings.

Glossary

Abstraction

The quality of dealing with ideas rather than events and freedom from representational qualities in art.

Commodification

The action or process of treating something as a product that can be bought and sold.

Collective work

Collective work contains the works of several artists or makers assembled and created under the direction of one entity.

Cultural production

The social processes involved in the creation of cultural forms, practices, values and shared understandings.

Decolonial practice

Decolonial practice refers to taking back ownership of narratives and knowledge production while actively challenging Eurocentric power structures.

Domestic

Relating to the running of a home or to family relations.

Functional

Having a special activity, purpose or task.

Gender

The term gender is used to describe the characteristics of women and men that are socially constructed, while sex refers to those that are biologically determined. People are born female or male but learn to be girls and boys who grow into women and men. This learned behaviour makes up gender identity and determines gender roles.

Intergenerational

Relating to or affecting several generations.

Matrilineal

The tracing of kinship through the female line.

Modernism

A philosophical and arts movement that arose from broad transformations in Western society during the late 19th and early 20th Century.

Quilting

The process of joining together layers of fabric or padding with lines of stitching to form a quilt as a covering, garment or piece of décor.

Segregation

A process of setting apart one group of people from another based on racial difference through the legal system in the United States.

Sharecropping

A legal arrangement where a landlord allows a tenant to use the land in exchange for a large portion of the crop, known as shares, which perpetuated racial injustice in the United States in the 19th and 20th Century.

Sociopolitical practice

A sociopolitical practice refers to practices within a community regarding social and political life, perspectives and experiences.

Ideas for discussion

- How does textile work embody notions of family, locality and community?
- Why does Legacy Russell describe textile work as collective work? What are the advantages of creative collaboration?
- How can quilting and textile practice provide new points of view in contemporary art?
- In what ways does this exhibition challenge art historical narratives of modernism and abstraction in terms of gender, race and class?
- Do you think historical notions of what constitutes high and low art are still in evidence within the art world and art institutions? How does this exhibition challenge those notions?

Supplementary Research

Hauser & Wirth Somerset: The New Bend

[Hauser & Wirth Somerset: 'The New Bend' Exhibition Page](#)

Ursula: Legacies of the Gee's Bend Quilters

['Ursula' Conversation: The Heart Has Its Own Intelligence: Legacies of the Gee's Bend Quilters](#)

Hauser & Wirth: In conversation with Legacy Russell and Salome Asega

[Hauser & Wirth: In Conversation: Legacy Russell and Salome Asega](#)

Souls Grown Deep

[Souls Grown Deep Website Page: Gee's Bend](#)