Building on tropes of “Americanist abstract-art” and “improvisational African-American-art” that emerged as systems of quilt evaluation in the 1970s, this book promotes recognition of a distinctive vernacular cross-racial-group quilt aesthetic. Author-collector Roderick Kiracofe presents about one hundred forty five quilts and quilt-tops chosen not for traits that suggest a maker who had extensive time, money, and needlework skill, but for graphic designs that are “quirky” and “improvisational,” have “soul and self-expression,” are “bold” and “real, made to be used,” that “break the rules” and are “sculptural” (the latter referring to quilts that are held together with bits of string or yarn rather than quilting stitches) (12-14). Given that traits such as variable (scrap-friendly) color schemes and vernacular design and construction methods place most of these pieces in a thrift-and-necessity-oriented utility-quilt tradition, their makers probably would be surprised to see them cast here as art in fine photographs and eight scholarly essays. However, two autobiographical essays speak to the rural southern context that spawned many of the works.

Most pieces are anonymous, but about one hundred thirty are listed with locations (often just a state name) where they were made or “found,” about forty are listed with the maker’s name, and about fifteen are listed as having African American makers. There is no information on white maker ethnicity although improvisational quilt traits have been attributed to Anglo-Appalachian and Scots Irish American makers. Of the total pieces shown here, about ninety four (65 percent) are listed in southern states (about forty of them from Alabama), 37 in northern states, one as “possibly Canada,” and 13 unknown.

Although the title sets a 1950-2000 time frame, many patterns and construction methods here date to the early 1900s, late 1800s, and earlier. Janneken Smucker’s essay addresses this issue, and the antecedent tropes that I mentioned above, which were disseminated in traveling quilt exhibitions, also document this heritage. The Americanist abstract-art paradigm emerges from Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof’s 1971 exhibition, “The American Pieced Quilt,” first shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, with quilts dating from approximately 1850 to 1940. With the U.S. Bicentennial looming, Holstein cast these quilts as “a quintessentially American product, combining economy and utility with strong, spare and original design” (1972:11). In a catalogue, he marvels that “the skillful and inventive woman, using energy, taste and ingenuity, could create from otherwise useless scraps a pieced quilt masterpiece,” whose “particularly American design traits” included “vigorou, innovative forms” and “the bold use of color” [in contrast to “elegant,” “pretty” appliqué quilts] (12-14). He attributes 81 of the 84 quilts to the Middle Atlantic and New England (56 to Pennsylvania) (91-94). Ethnicity is not listed except for five Amish-made quilts, but the makers likely are Anglo- and German-Americans.

Reviewed by Teri Klassen


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The improvisational African-American art paradigm, introduced about 1978, retains Holstein’s emphasis on utility, individual ingenuity (vs. vernacular [inherited and shared] competence), art-world (not quilt-world) terminology, and color-based design rather than needlework skill. But it discards his characterization of southern quilts as “elegant,” which apparently had overlooked the southern population of small-farm black and white households; and his exclusion of any role for improvisation, as indicated by his comment: “The design of these quilts was in no sense haphazard or naïve, even the ‘crazy’ quilts showing the most careful planning for aesthetic ends” (1972:13-14). This cultural-critique-oriented adaptation of Holstein’s American exceptionalist paradigm is perceivable in the terms that collector William Arnett uses in framing African-American-made quilts from rural Gee’s Bend, Alabama, as modern art: “stripped-down formalism,” “outside the boundaries,” “preference for high abstraction,” and “a distinctively African American panoply of preferences for asymmetry, strong contrast, and affective color changes, syncopation and pattern breaks, and an improvisational flair” (2006:27, 30-31).

The improvisational trope has a different social base (black women with roots in the rural South, including some who resettled in the urban North and West) and a later timespan: about 1925 to the present. Publicized by folklorist John Michael Vlach’s 1978 exhibition, “The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts” (first seen at the Cleveland Museum of Fine Art), it endures in the work of scholars and collectors including Gladys-Marie Fry, Robert Farris Thompson, Maude Southwell Wahlman, Eli Leon, Robert Cargo, Arnett, and Janet Catherine Berlo.

Whereas the present volume echoes the terminology of these earlier aesthetic paradigms (as cited above “quirky,” “improvisational,” “bold,” “real, made to be used,” “break the rules” [12-14]), Kiracofe breaks new ground in presenting works by both black and white makers and from locations across the U.S. (22 states). Essay contributor Ulysses Grant Dietz, Newark Museum decorative arts curator, notes this commonality:

Kiracofe’s collection shows that…the women of Gee’s Bend were still working within the even larger tradition shared by all women across American cultural history—the tradition of scraps and frugality, the tradition of channeling artistic impulses into practical ends. [140]

Dietz here posits a dynamic vernacular genre of utility-quiltmaking that provides a repertoire of designs and construction methods by which a maker expresses her values as well as her taste while collaborating with contingent conditions (Denyse Schmidt’s essay also speaks to this issue).

Kiracofe and several of the essayists are outsiders to the living conditions and cultural heritages that spawned many of these quilts and tops. (In his earlier book, The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750-1950, Kiracofe posits “the South” as a foreign land and his readership as tourists, thanking co-writer Mary Elizabeth Johnson “for showing me the South as few ever get to see it” [1993:ix]). Those who write in his present volume as decorative arts curators, professors, professional quiltmakers, artists, and quilting teachers are Amelia Peck (“In Dialogue with an Anonymous Quilt”), Smucker (“Unconventional Wisdom: The Myths and Quilts That Came Before”), Elissa Author (“A Brief History of Quilts in Contemporary Art”), Dietz (“From Under the Bedcovers: A Culture Curator’s Perspective”), Allison Smith (“Quilts
Are Quilts”), Kaffe Fassett (“The Joyous Anarchy of Color and Pattern”), Schmidt (“The Beauty of Making Do”), and Abner Nolan (“This Picture Is Not a Family Heirloom”). These essayists relate the quilts to material culture and creativity theory, curatorship issues, modern art, quilt studies, and personal experiences.

Contributors Natalie “Alabama” Chanin (white) and Sherry Ann Byrd (black) on the other hand, are insiders. They provide ethnographic context for the many pieces with rural southern roots. Chanin (“Never Seen a Blanket”) shares memories of growing up with quilts in 1960s Alabama (source of 40 quilts). Byrd (interviewed in “A Texas Quiltmaker’s Life”) tells of quiltership in 1950s and 1960s Texas (source of 15 quilts). She says:

If quilts survived one winter season to the next they were doing well, considering that they were created from textiles and materials that were already quite worn. Roderick, you have quite an extensive array of this type of utility quilt in your collection. These are mostly the types that filled my everyday life when growing up on South Bateman Road in Freestone County, Texas. [55-57]

For many native southerners, then, these pieces are not unexpected or below the radar.

Observing reactions of art critics to Gee’s Bend quilts in his exhibition, Arnett noted “an expansive gulf that persists...between mainstream cultural criticism and the vernacular artistic practices of black Americans, especially those from the South” (2006:13). One interpretation of Kiracofe’s present work is to view it as a strategy for bridging such a gap, enlisting credentialed interpreters to teach a mainstream audience to appreciate an exotic material culture genre. In this case, the gulf is largely between the urban middle-class North and the small-farm South (posited as mixed-racial-group).

Although the present volume mentions the abstract-art and African-American-art paradigms, another piece of pieced-utility-quilt research flies below its radar. I found no mention of Geraldine Johnson’s study of black- and Anglo-Appalachian quiltership (1982) or of Fawn Valentine’s work on West Virginia Scots-Irish quiltership (1995; 2002), although they discuss traits that are seen in some of the quilts and tops presented here. Johnson and Valentine posit regional and economic conditions and white ethnic identity (Anglo or Scots Irish vs. German) as factors in improvisational utility-quiltership. Merikay Waldvogel’s work with linsey quilts in the post-Civil War South also bears on the development of utility-quilt traits (1994). See also my dissertation on black and white quilters in the Tennessee Delta, especially chapter five (Klassen 2014).

In captions, Kiracofe in some cases interprets quilts in terms of modern art or maker originality but seems to overlook ethnographic and quilt historical contexts such as a maker’s use of vernacular methods or published patterns. Thus, a found-in-Alabama top with repeating-block figures of a boot is cast as “A stunning example of Pop Art” but not linked to the quilt made around 1890 with a “Lady’s Shoe” pattern (attributed to Fanny Cork of Kentucky) in a seminal book on African American quilts (74-75; Benberry 1992:91). Is Cork’s quilt also pop art? The “Unknown Pattern” on pages 186-187 is in the Encyclopedia of Pieced Quilt Patterns with published names including Wrench, Churn Dash, and Hole in the Barn Door (Brackman
Makers created the “unknown” patterns on pages 51 and 95 by applying the vernacular string-piecing technique to a pattern that has been published as Lattice Block and Kansas Dugout (72-73, #433). And the “Original Design” on pages 86-87 uses well-known vernacular methods (strip-piecing, sashing strips, crosses, variable color scheme and piecing) and a few published patterns (20 of the 30 blocks are in the “Economy” pattern [238-239, #1873]).

Scholars and curators who engage with genres that have both expressive and practical components will welcome this book for its insights into utility-quilt aesthetics and quilt-style diversity. It encourages museums to recognize specimens of such genres as cultural treasures. The field of quilt studies is ripe for research on vernacular construction and design methods, those that makers have developed interactively, often over generations and in conjunction with published pattern sources. It is these repertoires that structure how makers engage with particularistic conditions that they do not control to create aesthetic products that serve practical needs and values.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.19612