

***Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt.* Paul Arnett, Joanne Cubbs, Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., eds. Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2006. 223 pp.\***

Reviewed by Teri Klassen

*Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt* offers about two hundred and ten photographs of quilts, including many from the exhibition by the same name, and essays by ten authors on aspects of Gee's Bend quiltmaking. Editors Paul Arnett, Joanne Cubbs, and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. say in the preface that this project builds on the earlier Gee's Bend quilt exhibition and catalogues (Beardsley, et al. 2002) by highlighting architecture as a design source and metaphor and by documenting the local quiltmaking renaissance inspired by the earlier exhibition's success. The catalogue continues earlier themes of aesthetic analysis; the role of family and community; and personal statements from artists.

In addition to exhibition curator William Arnett, whose Tinwood Alliance owns most of the quilts, the authors are art museum curators, an art critic, a quilt-book author, a material culture scholar, and three Gee's Bend quiltmakers. Topics include work-clothes quilts, corduroy quilts, a slave woman's local legacy, geometric pattern variations, and quilts as architecture. All essays are illustrated by color photographs of quilts that relate to their topic. Some include historical and contemporary photographs of quiltmakers and Gee's Bend, and all essays feature a few close-up shots of the Gee's Bend environment, such as barn siding, a fence, or a store front, that are intended to show that they influence quilt designs. Thus, the quilts are framed both by text and by selected images of the community in which they were made and used.

The catalogue's organization supports its themes in that: (1) the juxtaposition of environmental close-ups with quilts suggests a connection between quiltmaking and local architecture; (2) the post-2002 date of many of the quilts testifies to a Gee's Bend quiltmaking revival; and (3) written text highlights family and neighborhood connections that promote a sense of an isolated but internally integrated community with aesthetic continuity across generations.

Most of the quilts are shown spread flat against a white background. Many have an 11-by-13 inch page to themselves. Others are grouped two or four to a page, in some cases inserted into the text. A quilt detail is at the start of each essay, and a few photographs show women working with, holding, or sitting on quilts. In addition to this visual data, captions list name and birth date of maker, pattern name and date of quilt, fabrics, and size. The essays provide more subjective data in the form of aesthetic analysis, design influences, fabric sources, community history, biographies, and local uses.

Captions could have been improved by including data about quilting designs (the stitches that hold the cloth layers together), binding style, and use of hand- or machine-sewing. I also would have liked to see photographs of certain mainstream "pattern" quilts which some quiltmakers mention making in their essays, if these survive (Double Wedding Ring, Carpenter's Wheel, baby quilts). More regional and quilt historical contextualization would also have been useful,

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although Joanne Cubbs and Maggi McCormick Gordon cover some of this ground. More close-up shots of home interiors also would have been interesting.

A major strength of the catalogue is its presentation of many well-used, apparently low-status artifacts (in addition to the newer quilts created as art objects) in an opulent, coffee-table book that frames them as cultural treasures. It allows readers to develop their own object interpretations based on the quilt photographs alone, but tempts them to read the essays, look at the place-photos, and possibly to reconsider their value system. Other catalogue strengths are its representation of quiltmaker voices, although at least two of their essays are edited transcriptions, and its documentation of the quiltmakers' environment. Finally, the book produces interesting insights about quilting generally, as practiced in the United States by women of diverse races, regions and time periods. Bernard L. Herman's essay in particular offers important ethnographic data regarding social functions of quilting.

Weaknesses of the catalogue are its generally monolithic representations of African-American and European-American quilting, and the imposition of Western art-world vocabulary and aesthetic concepts onto a local vernacular expressive practice. Thus, essayists tend to define artistic agency in terms of control, intentionality, and rationality, using words like masterful, abstraction, and logic (see pp. 38, 49, 68, 95-96, 112, 148, for example), and validating the high-art status of the artists and their quilts by linking them to op art, pointillism, a "classical temple" (p. 37), Jackson Pollock, the Wyeth and Bach families, Vincent Van Gogh, and so on. At the same time, some scholars use words such as quirkiness (p. 92) and idiosyncratic (p. 143) to represent the quilts as outsider art, a form of heroic resistance in the face of oppression.

Future projects might involve an exhibition of quilts from Gee's Bend and nearby communities, or one that showed Gee's Bend Husetop quilts along with other versions of the mainstream Log Cabin quilt pattern on which it is said to be based (p. 34, 94-95). Another exhibition might feature styles and antecedents of the quilted designs used by Gee's Bend quiltmakers to hold the layers of cloth together. Such exhibitions would help locate Gee's Bend in regional and national quilting traditions.

The catalogue has no bibliography although some authors cite sources in footnotes. The essayists lean heavily on art-world discourse, on the first Gee's Bend exhibition catalogue, and on quiltmaker interviews. There is little reference to previous scholarship on quilt history or on outsider art, such as form major portions of the bibliography in Maude Southwell Wahlman's *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African-American Quilts* (1993) and Sally Anne Duncan's review of the first Gee's Bend exhibition (2005). The selection of essayists who are art museum curators and art critics seems geared to contextualize Gee's Bend quilting as primarily Western high art rather than as outsider art or as part of U.S. mainstream quilting, which is disparaged with words such as laborious and painstaking (p. 68) and in Creola Pettway's quoted remark that her mother "didn't use no pattern. She used her brains!" thus suggesting that using mainstream quilt patterns is like Xeroxing or number-painting (p. 212). While Cubbs and Gordon note some links between Gee's Bend quilts and mainstream quilts, citing authors such as Judy Elsley and Cuesta Benberry, they shift quickly to affirmations of Gee's Bend's otherness, asserting traits of asymmetry (p. 68) and syncopation (pp. 27, 31, 68, 126, 146) that apparently do not occur in mainstream quilting.

The inclusion of material culture scholar Herman fits this trope of separation in that he is oriented to the more masculine realms of architecture and cultural geography than to the relatively domestic feminine realm of quilt studies. The dominance of outdoors images in the environmental photographs supports this view of mainstream quilting as an immutably domestic craft from which Gee's Bend quilting must be separated if it is to be represented as high art. The catalogue's minimal representation of previous scholarship seems geared to frame Gee's Bend as a unique expressive culture that mystically sprouted and endured without antecedents or participation in wider social networks.

## **References Cited**

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