



Gees Bend and Me

by Christine Restall

In 2002, the Fine Arts Museum in Houston and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York organised an exhibition of the quilts of Gees Bend, Alabama, and we – five members of the exhibiting quilt group ColourFX, which existed between 1998 and about 2013 – decided to go to New York to see them. We had a wonderful trip and saw the exhibition several times. I can safely say that it changed the way I made quilts from then on. I saw for the first time what improvised quilts were and understood how to make them. Some great artists have had a similar revelation from seeing the Gees Bend quilts, Nancy Crow in textiles and Lee Krasner in painting, to name but two.

I have dear friends in Alabama. How they ended up there is a long story, but in brief, he is from Boston and she is from Prague, and after a posting in southern Alabama they decided to stay. We used to visit them every year and, in 2007, the four of us decided to go to Gees Bend for our annual jaunt around their beautiful state. We drove slowly to Camden, via many picturesque small towns, antebellum estates with red dirt roads, farm shacks – and Hank Williams' birthplace. Camden is a medium-sized town about 30 miles from Selma.

The mighty Alabama River flows through Selma, with its fine wide bridge made famous by the Civil Rights march led by Martin Luther King, and then it flows south into Wilcox County. There, it forms several large meanders. The biggest of these is Gees Bend, a deep U-shaped bend, almost a loop, about ten miles long and four miles wide. The main settlement there is Boykin at the bottom of the bend, from where the famous ferry ran which provided access to Camden on the other side, and which was shut down during the Civil Rights struggles to prevent blacks in Gees Bend from voting.

The Gees Bend quilts were 'discovered' in 1964 by Father X Walter, a white Episcopal priest who had come to that part of Alabama to fight the rampant racism there. He spotted some quilts airing on a line and was taken with them. In due course he arranged for some to be sent to an auction in New York. He had found a potent black culture with many active quiltmakers. Based on a steadfast faith in God, it was a homogeneous network across the county, with many self-supporting

skills and informal co-operatives, but struggling with deep poverty. In New York, a friend, Tom Scriven, who was a carpet rep, organised the auctions and sent back fabric. By 1966, the auctions were so successful that several thousand dollars had been raised and a more formal enterprise, the Freedom Quilting Bee, was set up in Camden. Initially the quilts were taken up by opinion leaders like Jackie Kennedy, Peggy Guggenheim and Diana Vreeland, but gradually the need to fulfil regular contracts meant that uniformity of design, size and fabric choice became priorities, quashing the individualism that had been such a feature of the original quilts. Gradually fashions changed as well, and by the 1990s the Bee had fizzled out. Father Walter had moved to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1972. Callie Young of Gees Bend said of him, 'He was a spotless, nice man and wheresoever he be at today, I love him'. With his intervention, Gees Bend quilts became known as notable works of folk art during the great flowering of popular culture in the late sixties, and the grinding poverty in Gees Bend was alleviated.

We spent the night in a motel in Camden. The next day we set off for Gees Bend. Knowing there was no ferry, we had to drive around three sides of a square to get there, about 40 miles. The roads were empty, the countryside undulating with fine trees, red earth and cotton fields, like so much of this state. Just before we crossed the river, we noticed a tiny sign to 'the ferry', so we diverted for a look at this surprise. We found a little landing stage in an overgrown creek with a medium-sized car ferry tied up, seemingly deserted. It was unclear when it operated, if at all.

Further on, just after the turning to Gees Bend (no sign, no traffic), we had another surprise – a large billboard with a lovely ochre-coloured quilt pictured on it and a sign, 'Quilt Trail No1'. But miles passed without further signage or indeed signs of life. Eventually we arrived at a very spread out settlement, with little wooden houses in various states of repair, a boarded-up garage, a small chapel in good condition and a closed general store. This, we deduced, was Boykin. Down by the river, which looked like a vast swampy lake, a solitary man sat on a kitchen chair by the side of the road. We parked and walked around and found a fine white-painted wooden building with a notice on the door, 'Gees Bend Quilters' – but it was barred and bolted, clearly out of use.

I went to speak with the man, who had been watching us carefully. I asked if there was anyone around who knew about the quilts and he pointed at a little house opposite. I walked up to the door and knocked, but no one came, although I had a strong feeling that someone was there. The man merely shrugged and could not, or would not, tell us anything, although he did mention that the ferry was arriving



soon, and pointed further down river. We had the distinct feeling of not being wanted and there was an air of hostility not necessarily directed at us but caused by an unknown issue. Everyone had disappeared.

Of course we discovered the story later. But soon the ferry from the Camden side arrived and disgorged quite a few cars with people returning from work. This new ferry,

the one we had seen earlier, had been established some years before and regularly made two trips a day for workers. The river had changed shape, with rising water levels, after a dam had been built down river in the mid sixties and the old ferry route was unviable. Gees Bend had been without a ferry for many years until this new, modern one arrived. We boarded and had a beautiful crossing back to Camden all to ourselves.

I do not know the details of the story of Gees Bend quilts after the exhibition at the Whitney Museum, but the gist of it is this: an art dealer and publisher named Bill Arnett and his two sons had to an extent taken over from Father Walter, in that their organisation (Tinwood Alliance) was ostensibly a not-for-profit one. They collected hundreds of Gees Bend quilts, especially early ones, which they claimed to have discovered, and were instrumental in setting up the Houston and New York exhibitions. These, as we know, managed to promote the work as fine art in the eyes of many in the art world, and enhanced prices hugely. But in the years after the exhibitions, the quiltmakers themselves became suspicious of the Arnetts' motives and financial dealings, culminating in a series of lawsuits in 2007 – the very year in which we visited. There was a settlement out of court in 2008, the details of which were not published. I have read that some quilts were returned, but also that these were ones deemed 'relatively worthless', and that the Arnetts retained others that had 'artistic merit', whatever that is.

The reason for the people of Boykin's wariness when we visited is crystal clear. Not only were we white strangers, but any quilting issues were sub judice. I would like to go again, but it is unlikely to happen. I am sure that the people are naturally hospitable, welcoming and kind.

A couple of postscripts can be added. In 2009 there was an exhibition of new Gees Bend quilts at the 15th European Patchwork Meeting at Ste Marie aux Mines, where I also was exhibiting. Oddly, this was curated by a young Czech man, quite knowledgeable and sympathetic, whose connection to the quilts was via an American agent met during his textile studies. But the quilts were very disappointing, often garish and ordinary, with nothing like the charisma of the older work.

Now, as many readers will know, an exhibition of much more interesting work both old and new is being shown at the Alison Jacques Gallery in London, currently closed during lockdown but available online. It is hoped that we will have a chance to see the real objects later in the year – introducing a new generation to Gees Bend textiles nearly 60 years after they were first 'discovered'. A little article in the *Financial Times* 'Collecting' pages on 10 January this year notes that the Tate has bought three pieces from the show and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art one, and that prices range between \$25,000 and \$50,000: high for folk art, low for fine art. A current website for more information is that of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

It is impossible to become involved with these quilts and their makers and not to ponder some big questions: whether textile art for domestic use can ever be fine art; whether women's arts are downgraded; whether most BAME people, and indeed artists of both sexes, are usually exploited; whether stitching together the worn fabrics you have out of necessity is simply an act of utility, or, as Lucy Pettway said, 'Something pertaining to God', or, alternatively, wonderful instinctive art. We will think about these things for a long time.

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