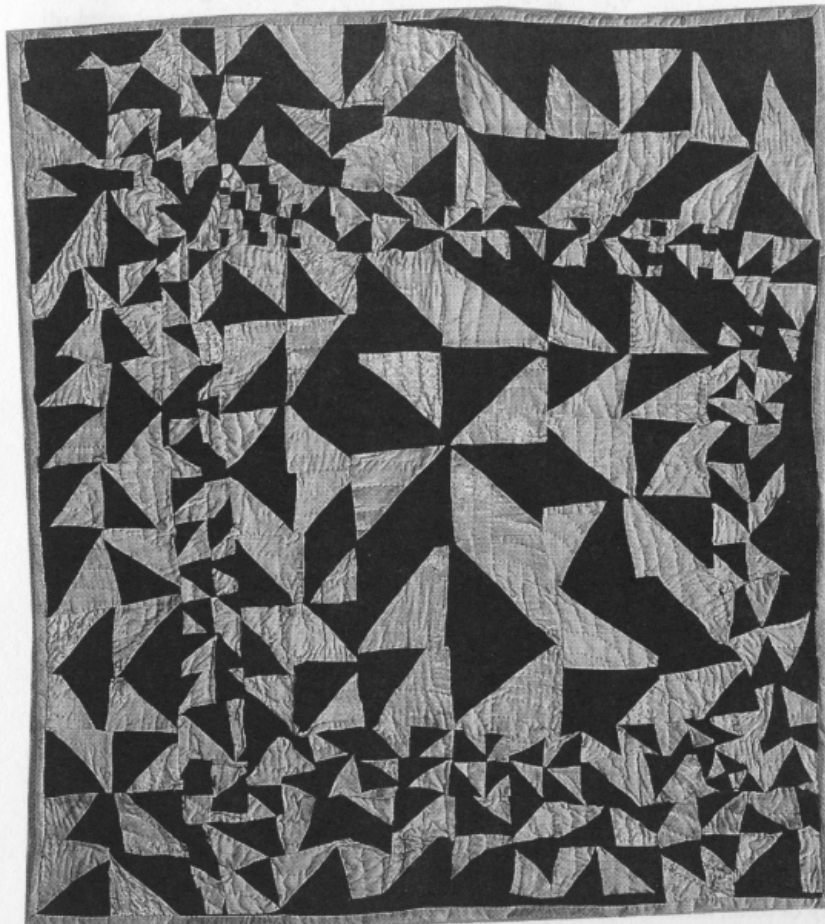


Rosie Lee Tompkins
MATRIX/Berkeley 173

University of California
Berkeley Art Museum
Pacific Film Archive
early June - mid August 1997



Untitled, 1997, collection of Gwen Head
photo: Sharon Risedorph

Rosie Lee Tompkins's work is usually understood within the context of her African-American heritage. The various aspects of her style and technique—stylistic diversity and experimentation, brilliant and contrasted color, sensuous handling of diverse materials, and daringly irregular compositions—have been identified as typifying an important tradition in African-American quilt making. Some scholars have argued convincingly that the patchwork aspect of such work derives from the deprived economic condition of the makers, while Tompkins's particular treatment of composition has been traced by quilt scholar Eli Leon to aesthetic models handed down from a pre-diasporic African cultural experience.¹ Conversely, others have pointed to potential influences from non-African sources and noted that, while the characteristics that one finds in Tompkins's work may be pervasive in African-American quilt traditions, they cannot be isolated as exemplifying a quintessentially African style.²

The visceral impact of Tompkins's art recalls the claims for expressiveness made by, and on behalf of, many twentieth-century abstract painters. While Modernism's transcendentalist claims, particularly the notion of the autonomy of the work of art, have succumbed to a view of art as lodged firmly in the socio-historical fabric, in front of Tompkins's work I feel that certain Modernist ambitions may in fact be achievable. Here are feelings of awe, elation, and sublimity; here is an absolute mastery of color, texture, and composition; here is inventiveness and originality so palpable and intense that each work seems like a new and total risk, a risk so extreme that only utter faith in the power of the creative spirit could have engendered it. Nevertheless, Tompkins's affinities to Modernist ideals, while compelling, are no less speculative than

her affinities to African aesthetics. No matter in which context we choose to place her work, Tompkins's art asserts its extraordinary uniqueness, beauty, and emotional power.

Visually, these works cohere by the slimmest of margins; they jumble and burst and seem to try to twist from our grasp. Yet, finally, they do cohere; as in fractal geometry, small bits of her compositions echo and sustain the intensity of the overall design. To be sure, Tompkins utilizes a variety of traditional quilter's compositional devices: the repeated pattern, the medallion, the strip, the half-square. Yet, in her work, these components do not simply remain aggregate parts in an overall design. Tompkins teases and adjusts the elements of her works until every patch is alive with intention and "self-awareness."

Tompkins seems to delight in reminding us of long-forgotten hues, in fashioning bold and unexpected harmonies, and in keenly sensing the emotional nuances of various registers of color. In some of Tompkins's quilts, color appears as a material fact, emotionless as a numeral in a mathematical equation, yet exquisite in its abstract precision. In some cases, the quilts suggest an irrepressible exuberance; in others, a feeling of loneliness and sorrow.

Color in Tompkins's art is inseparable from texture. The varied qualities of her magnificent blues, reds, whites, and greens depend entirely on the type of fabric used. She is particularly drawn to velvet, a material that can simultaneously sharpen and soften the impression of a hue. Other fabrics common in her work are cotton, polyester and a special kind of glittery material that she calls "Christmas fabric". In some works Tompkins incorporates, whole or in part, various found

elements. In the largest of these, a *tour de force* of compositional agility and complexity, she has assembled, among many other elements, a devotional piece depicting Jesus Christ, sections of the American flag, an old fabric calendar, and a batik wall-hanging.

In the creation of Tompkins's works, the artist typically arranges and sews together only the various patches that comprise the top, visible layer of the quilt. Another person—in the case of these works, either Willia Ette Graham, Irene Bankhead, or Johnnie Wade—then attaches this top layer to underlayers of batting and backing. Technically speaking, the role that Tompkins typically performs is called "piecing" and the attaching of secondary layers is called "quilting."

Rosie Lee Tompkins lives and works in Richmond, California, barely ten miles from this museum. Yet, until recently, I knew nothing of her extraordinary work. Tompkins's quilts make an eloquent case for a more inclusive view of contemporary art, one which transcends the boundaries between art and craft and between European and African traditions. As we continue the enjoyable task of expanding globally our view of contemporary art practice, it is important not to overlook the greatness near at hand.

Lawrence Rinder
Curator

Notes

1. See Eli Leon, *Models in the Mind: African Prototypes in American Patchwork* (Winston-Salem: The Diggs Gallery and Winston-Salem State University, 1992).
2. See Cuesta Benberry, "African American Quilts: Paradigms of Black Diversity," in *The International Review of African American Art* (Vol. 12, No. 3, 1995), pp. 30-37.

Works in MATRIX

All works collection of Eli Leon unless otherwise noted.

1. Untitled, 1980, quilted by Rosie Lee Tompkins, velvet, velveteen, cotton, cotton yarn, 50 x 39 in.
2. Untitled, 1982, costume jewelry, velvet-covered tin cans, 17 x 5 in.
3. Untitled, 1984, quilted by Irene Bankhead, Hawaiian shirts, 102 x 76 in.
4. Untitled, 1984, quilted by Willia Ette Graham, Lurex-blend polyester, rayon jacquards, brocades, knits, cotton yarn, 99 x 97 in.
5. *String*, 1985, restructured and quilted by Willia Ette Graham, velvet, velveteen, 100 x 86 in.
6. Untitled, 1985, quilted by Willia Ette Graham, velvet, velveteen, rayon chenille, 80 x 74 in.
7. Untitled, 1986, quilted by Willia Ette Graham, velvet, velveteen, 85 x 77 in.
8. Untitled, 1986, quilted by Irene Bankhead, velvet, velveteen, 75 x 49 in.
9. *Three Sixes*, 1986, quilted by Willia Ette Graham, polyester, polyester double-knit, wool jersey, 83 x 70 in.
10. Untitled, 1987, quilted by Willia Ette Graham and Johnnie Wade, velvet, velveteen, 55 x 49 in., collection of Gwen Head
11. Untitled, 1992, quilted by Irene Bankhead, velvet, velveteen, velour, 67 x 51 in.
12. Untitled, 1996, quilted by Willia Ette Graham and Johnnie Wade, velvet, velveteen, 66 x 50 in.
13. Untitled, 1996, quilted by Rosie Lee Tompkins, cotton, polyester doeskin, Calcutta cloth, gabardine blends, polyester doubleknit, 27 x 30 in.
14. Untitled, 1996, quilted by Irene Bankhead, cotton, cotton flannel, cotton feed sack, linen, rayon, flocked satin, velvet, cotton-synthetic blend, cotton-acrylic jersey, acrylic double-weave, cotton-polyester, polyester doubleknit, acrylic and cotton tapestry, silk batik, polyester velour, rayon or acrylic embroidery on cotton, wool, needlepoint, shisha-mirror embroidery, 88 x 146 in.
15. *Thirty-six Nine-patch*, 1996, quilted by Irene Bankhead, polyester, polyester doubleknit, terrycloth, shantung, cotton knit, 120 x 86 in.
16. Untitled, 1996, quilted by Irene Bankhead, wool flannel, wool, velvet, rayon, cotton lace, cotton yarn, spangled trim, 30 x 12 in.
17. Untitled, 1996, quilted by Irene Bankhead, wool flannel, wool, velvet, rayon, cotton lace, cotton yarn, spangled trim, 29 x 12 in.

Exhibitions

Museum of African-American Life and Culture, Dallas, *Rambling On My Mind: Black Folk Art of the Southwest*, Dallas, TX, '87; San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quiltmaking*, curated by Eli Leon, San Francisco, CA, '88 (catalog; traveled); The Diggs Gallery at Winston-Salem State University, *Models in the Mind: African Prototypes in American Patchwork*, curated by Eli Leon, Winston-Salem, NC, '92 (catalog; traveled); High Museum of Art, *No Two Alike: African-American Improvisational Quilts*, co-curated by Eli Leon and Joanne Cubbs, Atlanta, GA, '96; Richmond Art Center, *"Showing Up": African-American Maximum-Contrast Quilts*, curated by Eli Leon, Richmond, CA, '96 (brochure); African American Museum and Library at Oakland (AAMLO), *Quilts in the Hood: East Bay African American Improvisational Quilts*, co-curated by Eli Leon and Robert Haynes, Oakland, CA, '97; University Gallery Fine Arts Center, University of Massachusetts, *Something Else to See: Improvisational Borders on African-American Quilts*, curated by Eli Leon, Amherst, MA, '97 (catalog).

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