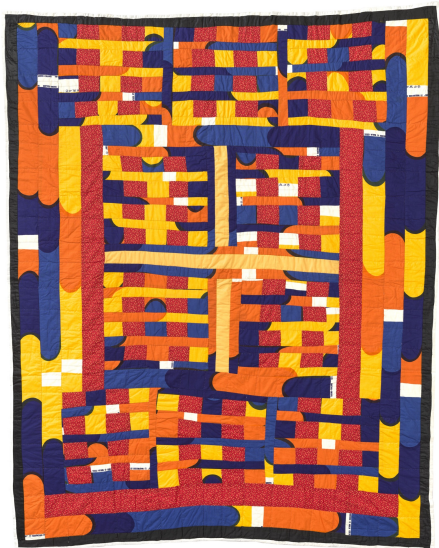


## **BAMPFA to Mount First Major Museum Survey from the World's Largest Collection of African American Quilts**

### ***Routed West: Twentieth-Century African American Quilts in California* Advances New Scholarship to Illuminate Stories of Westward Migration and Black Artmaking Traditions**

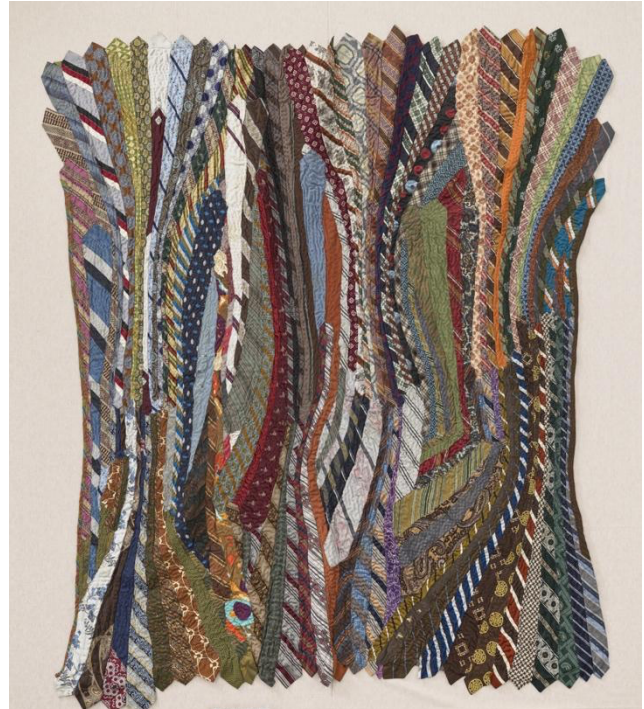
**On View from June 8 through November 30, 2025**



(Berkeley, CA) March 10, 2025—The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is organizing an exhibition of more than one hundred quilts by approximately eighty artists, the most expansive presentation to date of a transformative bequest of African American quilts that the museum received in 2019. Opening in Berkeley this summer, *Routed West: Twentieth-Century African American Quilts in California* is a groundbreaking historical survey of the relationship between quiltmaking traditions and the history of Black migration to California from the southern United States. The exhibition highlights the ongoing work

of an ambitious multi-year initiative that BAMPFA has undertaken to research, catalog, and conserve the nearly three thousand African American quilts and several hundred unattributed

quilts in its care, which are believed to comprise the largest collection of its kind. Also featured in the exhibition are nearly a dozen recent artworks by Black quilt artists in the Bay Area, including members of the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland.



*Routed West* highlights the history of the Second Great Migration, a period from roughly 1940 through 1970 when millions of African Americans emigrated from the southern United States in search of greater economic opportunities and freedom from the region's racial violence. Hundreds of thousands of these families settled in California, bringing with them quilts and quilting traditions from the communities they had left behind. Approximately one fourth of the quilts in the exhibition were completed in the South prior to 1950; others were created in California during the postwar era, a period when many of these artists quietly revitalized the quilting practices that had been passed down through their families for decades. Taken together, the quilts in *Routed West* explore the medium's unique capacity for holding memory and ancestral knowledge in the context of movement and diaspora, while sustaining communal and spiritual ties across multiple generations of Black life.

To illuminate this underexplored history, the exhibition will draw from a bequest of quilts and related textile objects that BAMPFA received from the estate of Eli Leon, who passed away in 2018. A self-taught quilt scholar and collector, Leon spent more than thirty years assembling the world's largest privately held collection of African American quilts, which includes works by lesser-known quiltmakers and those whom he championed for formal recognition—including National Heritage Fellows Gussie Wells and Laverne Brackens, along with Rosie Lee Tompkins, who was the subject of an internationally acclaimed retrospective that opened at BAMPFA in

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February 2020. BAMPFA learned only after Leon's death that he had chosen to leave the entirety of his collection to the museum, a monumental bequest that now comprises nearly one fifth of BAMPFA's total art holdings. Since receiving this bequest, BAMPFA has embarked on a long-term project of cataloging, conserving, researching, and exhibiting these works, the first time in the collection's history that it has received this level of institutional stewardship. As part of this ongoing commitment, BAMPFA established a grant-funded curatorial position in 2020 dedicated to this collection, appointing Dr. Elaine Yau—an art historian working at the intersection of folk and modern art, who holds a PhD in History of Art from UC Berkeley—to lead this important work. In 2024, Dr. Yau was promoted to the full-time position of Associate Curator and Academic Liaison at BAMPFA.

As the curator of *Routed West*, Yau has conducted unprecedented research into the provenance of the quilts in the exhibition. Working with Curatorial Associate Matthew Miranda, Yau has been working to establish channels of communication with individual quilt artists and their surviving family members, in order to build a deeper understanding of the personal, familial, and communal histories that are embedded in these works as well as how quilts are objects of cultural heritage: vital parts in the work of affirmation, healing, and collective care within African American communities. This ongoing research process is not only vital for advancing scholarship around these quilts, but also for honoring the artists who created them, almost all of whom are Black women whose contributions have been historically underrecognized within the canon of American art history.

As part of this work, Yau has also established new partnerships with Black quilt artists and guilds who are renewing these historical traditions in the twenty-first century. As a coda to the exhibition's historical narrative, the final section of *Routed West* will display the work of multiple living quilters based in the Bay Area, including members of the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland, who are also contributing photographs and other ephemera from the group's archives alongside those of other African American quilt guilds in California. Also featured in this section is new work by William Rhodes, a contemporary artist based in San Francisco who with Stacey

Carter created an iconic quilt series that emerged from the African American Shipyard History Quilt Project, a collaboration with fellow artist Stacey Carter and seniors from San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood.

*Routed West* is accompanied by an exhibition catalog that will be published this spring, the first scholarly publication dedicated to African American quilting practices in California. Co-published by Delmonico | D.A.P., this fully illustrated catalog features essays by Yau and Wendy Thompson that situate individual quilt stories within the larger history of Black Life in the Bay Area; essays by Daphne Brooks and artists Basil Kincaid and Adia Millett on the contemporary relevance of African American quilts; and unpublished essays by Eli Leon that give personal insight into his collecting practices. In a transcribed roundtable conversation, Sharbreon Plummer, Carolyn Mazloomi, and A'donna Richardson, discuss the historical inequities of quilt collecting, while a closing essay by Bridget R. Cooks historically contextualizes Eli Leon's collecting and proposes how art museums can redress these exclusions in the future.

BAMPFA plans to offer a robust slate of public programs in conjunction with *Routed West*, including panel discussions with contemporary quilters and quilt historians, performances, and other programs in partnership with the recently founded African American Quilt Documentation Study Group. A full roster of programs will be announced later this spring; visit [bampfa.org](http://bampfa.org) for the latest updates.

"With *Routed West*, we're activating the extraordinary collection of African American quilts at BAMPFA to honor the stories of the individuals and communities whose vibrant artistic traditions are indispensable to—but too often omitted from—the larger narrative of American art history, and of our own history here in California," said Yau. "These magnificent quilts carry within them stories of resilience, creativity, self-determination, and ingenuity—narratives that not only define a distinctive period of artistic production but also inform a deeper understanding of the intergenerational ties that continue to sustain Black life in the United States."

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“We are excited to build on the great success of the Rosie Lee Tompkins exhibition a few years ago by presenting more of this unique quilt collection for our community to enjoy,” said BAMPFA’s Executive Director Julie Rodrigues Widholm. “Quilts play a profound role in so many families’ lives and we look forward to connecting people through this important art form.”

### **About BAMPFA**

Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) ignites cultural change for a more inclusive and artistic world. BAMPFA has been uniquely dedicated to art and film since 1970, with international programming that is locally connected and globally relevant. It holds more than 25,000 artworks and 18,000 films and videos in its collection, with particular strengths in modern and contemporary art and historical Chinese painting, as well as the world’s largest collection of African American quilts. As part of the University of California, Berkeley, BAMPFA is committed to artistic diversity through its robust slate of art exhibitions, film screenings, artist talks, live performances, and educational programs that shed new light on the art of the past and connect our audiences with leading filmmakers and artists of our time. BAMPFA sits on the edge of campus and downtown Berkeley, where it welcomes visitors from across and beyond the Bay Area in a repurposed building designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

### **Sponsorship**

*Routed West: Twentieth Century African American Quilts in California* is curated by Elaine Y. Yau, Associate Curator and Academic Liaison, with Matthew Villar Miranda, Curatorial Associate.

The exhibition is made possible by generous lead support from the Henry Luce Foundation. Funding for the conservation of works in the exhibition was provided through a grant from the Bank of America Art Conservation Project.

### **Image credits**

1. Sherry Byrd: pieced 1990; Irene Bankhead, quilted 1990. *Untitled* (Medallion); 95 x 75 1/2 in.; Bequest of the Eli Leon Living Trust, BAMPFA. Photo: Kevin Candland
2. Gerstine Scott, 1989; *Untitled* (Necktie quilt); Bequest of the Eli Leon Living Trust, BAMPFA. Photo: Kevin Candland

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## **Visitor Information**

### Hours

Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

### Tickets

\$14 general admission

\$12 non-UC Berkeley students, disabled, 65+

FREE BAMPFA members; UC Berkeley students, faculty, staff; 18 and under; one adult per child

13 and under; and artists in the BAMPFA collection/MATRIX

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