

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT / ART

Domestic objects become objets d'art in quilt exhibit

QUILTS FROM PAGE B-14

Artworks first

The vibrant Western Pennsylvania exhibition displays another face of African American quilting: cosmopolitan, self-aware, these quilts were (with three exceptions) created foremostly as artworks, to convey ideas and style, not (physical) warmth. Their size, carefully selected materials and/or non-fiber embellishments preclude a functional role.

Exceptional contemporary works such as Tina Williams Brewer's "The Waves That Nurture Humanity," Sandra German's "Going Ginkgo," Julianne McAdoo's "Jewel Squares" and Bonita Porter McFadden's "Segami" would be difficult to ascribe to a particular ethnic background.

So too, use of traditional patterns blur ethnic lines, as in Michaeline Reed's prime "Drunken Bullseye" or Mattie Porter's (McFadden's mother) meticulously sewn "Memories," in which she memorializes her late daughter Fredronica Ernestine Porter, who died in 1991, by incorporating remnant green and white material from a dress she'd made for her in the 1940s.

But other artists drew specifically on their heritage, as in superb pieces by Vivian Benton, using Adinkra symbols in "Sankofa," and Marguerite Gloster, whose "A Real Challenge" includes African fabric and strip construction; Christine McCray-Bethea's novel tribute to real African-American cowboy Nat Love ("Deadwood Dick"); or the fanciful beaded and appliqué visions of Cathleen Richardson Bailey, "Mother in the Beginning, Up From the Sea," and Sandra Ford, "MA."

Underground Railroad

Painter and Kingsley Association instructor Ruth Ward's "The Guiding Star" projects a glowing spirituality and was inspired by stories of slaves escaping to freedom via the Underground Railroad.

While the railroad was functioning, quilts are thought to have conveyed more subtle messages, encoded in standard block design, some of which are described in a gallery handout. The extent to which the communication occurred is contested, and by including this reference, Black hopes to generate dialogue about it.

He also had a purpose in mind when he sought out quilt "preservers" — people who care for quilts — and the quilts exhibited in this category, made by Katie Louise Buggs Abernathy (1870-1956), Lillian Smith Carter (1899-1982) and Luella Baker Horton (1891-1920), are the three exceptions to the contemporary lean of the show. Completed in the 1920s to 1940s, these were working quilts that bring back memories to family members who on occasion smuggled be-



"The Guiding Star" by Pittsburgh quilter and painter Ruth Ward, was inspired by stories about the Underground Railroad, a network through which slaves escaped from slavery. It's in the exhibition "African American Quilters & Preservers of Western Pennsylvania" at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center.

ART REVIEW

"Bold Improvisation: 120 Years of African American Quilts" and "African American Quilters & Preservers of Western Pennsylvania"

- **WHERE:** Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, 1212 Smallman St., Strip District.
- **WHEN:** Through March 9.
- **ADMISSION:** \$6, \$4.50 seniors (62+) and students, \$3 ages 6-18, free to ages 5 and under and members.
- **HOURS:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.
- **PARKING:** \$3 for 4 hours across Smallman Street, with center validation.
- **PROGRAMS:** Lecture at 8 p.m. Feb. 6, "A Communion of the Spirits: A 25-Year Study of the World of African American Quilters and the Documentary Process," by Roland Freeman, author and Smithsonian research associate (\$15, members \$8). Children's workshops on Feb. 8, 15 and 22 by quilter Tina Brewer (preregistration required). Lecture at 8 p.m. Feb. 22, "The Relationship between African Traditions and African American Quiltmaking," by Carolyn Mazloomi, quilter, author and curator (\$15, members \$8).
- **INFORMATION:** 412-454-6000 or www.pghhistory.org.

neath them.

"Quilting is so much about family," Black said admirably when recounting some of the stories that accompanied the heritage

quilts.

Firdausi Bey, Abernathy's great-grandson and preserver of her handsome quilt, said, "My only living memory of my great-

grandmother [who died when he was young] was her tucking me and my brother into bed [under one of her quilts]. Made from clothing that belonged to his family's men, he says "This is a key that unlocks the door; it's like time travel. It's something of what was — that makes us who we are today."

Stories like this are of particular interest to Black, and he's taped interviews with each of the living quilters — those mentioned plus exhibitors Gerry Benton, Robin Crawford, Johnnie Howard, Virginia Peterson and Karen Womack — and with the preservers. These are being transcribed and will become part of the History Center archives.

Black's appointment as the first African American collections curator implies a commitment by the History Center to support research into the regional history of that group, as well as to add to its collection of artifact and archival material relating to African Americans in Western Pennsylvania. (Black is interested in receiving calls from anyone who may have items to contribute to the collection.)

These 20 fiber works and the biographical material associated with them form an introduction to an ongoing project that will enrich our region for generations to come.

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