Inbetween Spaces:
Textured Imaginings of African-American Lives

Quilts designed and created by Heather Williams

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum
The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History

September 21 – December 6, 2006

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
The exhibition, *Inbetween Spaces: Textured Imaginings of African-American Lives*, features twenty-one quilts designed and created by Heather Williams between 1995 and 2006. Born in Jamaica, she is an assistant history professor at UNC at Chapel Hill. Williams began quilting in 1985 and has exhibited her work in several northeastern venues. The artist employs a masterful sense of color and texture to explore her interest in the complexities of black people’s lives and their history in her hand-quilted works. She uses a diverse combination of materials including photographic transfers, and appliqué techniques. Works such as, *Self-Taught* and *African-American History* foreground Williams’ pedagogical mode, while *Night Landscape*, *Romare’s Garden* and *Baby Suggs* highlight poetic allusions. This collection, ranging from large-scale to intimate window-pane sizes, translates human exuberance, sorrow, fragility, and endurance into a unified whole made up of disparate shards of various pasts, current moments and future prospects.

**About the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum**
The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture and campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center’s commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through the formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture.

*front image: History Quilt (51 x 60)*

*This Exhibit is Supported by the Generous Contributions of*
The Friends of the Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History
The Friends of the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

*Special Thanks to*
Karima Abdusamad
Crystal Feimster
Lynese Williams
Karen Hibbert
Pamela Sunstrum
Lynese Williams
Olympia Friday
Randy Simmons
Jerma Jackson
Robin Vander
Candace Thomas
and, as always, Clay Williams
Inbetween Spaces: Textured Imaginings of African-American Lives

Introduction

By Lyneise Williams

Heather Williams has a lot to say about the idea of wholeness. Using the textile medium in quilts, she engages color, design, texture, and photographic imagery to examine the complexities of African-American lives. The exhibition’s title, Inbetween Spaces: Textured Imaginings of African-American Lives, hints that her consideration of this subject extends beyond the predictable. The choice to create the word “inbetween” rather than the expected “in between” asserts her willingness to create room for reclaims of ignored and forgotten people and for personal introspections in her quilts. As such, in twenty-one works Williams subtly broadens the way we think of quilts, those who construct them, and those depicted in them.

The History Quilt explores the medium in ways that are more than the play of patterns in traditional quilts and the syncopated asymmetry and improvisation popularized by some African-American quilters. She recontextualizes historical documents within a broad narrative that enhances their individual, inherent emotional qualities. The quilt features several historical photographic images and textual documents transferred onto light-colored fabric pieces framed by bands of deep, red fabric, and strips of batik wax prints common in West Africa. The photographic and text prints draw the eye through a Williams pieced together over a two year period between 1999 and 2001 as she researched her dissertation. That project recovered the ways African-Americans sought to educate themselves against tremendous odds during slavery and post-emancipation in the United States while her quilt provides historical precedents of such involvement.

Williams is not alone in her strategy to use quilts to convey narratives. African-Americans like 19th century ex-slave Harriet Powers and more recently, artist Faith Ringgold employed techniques like appliqué and painted text and scenes to accomplish this endeavor. Heather’s use of historical imagery, uncommon in traditional quilts, gives her access to emotional complexity and rich moral dilemma(s). The image of an African-American soldier of the American Civil War takes on additional meanings when positioned alongside the Emancipation Proclamation. The uniformed soldier confronts and challenges viewers as he stands with his arms bent slightly by his rifle with one foot forward suggesting movement. He is ready for
action, undercutting the prevailing notion that a benevolent Abraham Lincoln freed “helpless” black slaves. African-Americans like this man were participants in their emancipation. Such often unrecognized images counter commonplace depictions and understandings of compliant slaves carrying out their master’s orders like the juxtaposed representation of slaves wielding cotton bundles on their heads in an orderly fashion. That makes this quilt a psychological investigation. While it may be made of thread and soft fabric typically seen in bed coverings, *The History Quilt* opposes the instinct to cover and give warmth. Its haunting images may be the last thing you see at night.

The color red invokes many associations like blood, life force, and southern soil. Its rich tone frames the burnt orange, green and ochre batik bands that evoke stacked bodies, train tracks north, the Ohio River, and Jacob’s ladder as they direct the eye upwards, and across the quilt. Circular forms on batiks, suggesting watchful eyes, underscore the ongoing participation of African ancestors who bear witness to ignored acts of bravery like the soldier’s contribution. The color red draws together various individual African-Americans from slave ships, cotton fields, farms, auction pens, and battle grounds into a community of sorts, reminding viewers that coming together was one of the ways black people solved their problems. In this way, Williams reclaims the wholeness of African-American history, inserting the dimension of psychology to create something new. Viewing this on a wall within the context of the exhibition gives life to her story of African-Americans’ resistance, participation and endurance alongside oppression and suffering. To view *The History Quilt* is to be nourished and strengthened mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

In the work, *Romare’s Garden*, Williams adopts a different set of strategies to imagine wholeness. Inspired by the complexity of collages by African American artist, Romare Bearden, she recalled, “Early in 2004 I decided that I would make a quilt that would really challenge me. I got out a copy of a Romare Bearden collage that I had been carrying around for years and so began my fabric version of Bearden’s work, ‘Maudell Sleet’s Magic Garden.’” Calling attention to African American’s ability to find joy in the commonplace and produce the extraordinary from the seemingly mundane, Bearden and Williams’ works feature an older African-American woman at work tending a garden. Vivid color washes burst and bleed from plant to human to architecture in the Bearden work, successfully blending Maudell Sleet, a woman he recalled from his childhood in Charlotte, North Carolina, into the natural environment she inhabits.

Sleet, representing an African-American social type rarely discerned outside of her communities, is no ordinary gardener in Bearden or Heather’s imagination. By merging her arms...
with the surrounding flowers, Williams and Bearden suggest her transformative powers. A common patch of dirt is transformed into an environment electrified with color by the hands of an ostensibly average black woman. This formidable black female presence recalls Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland’s description in the film Freedom on My Mind of the southern black women who marched during the Civil Rights Era: “They be walkin’ heavy with such pride. Look like the earth would catch they feet and hold them.” Such women, who invest everything with a grandness that matches the heft of their unflagging faith, represent a particular cultural and political stance within African-American communities.

Williams’ choice to create a quilt inspired by Bearden connects quilting to collage in their common foregrounding of fragmentation and reassembling to construct new wholes. Poet and literary critic Elizabeth Alexander considers these qualities as strategies for making sense of life’s multiple aspects. She remarks:

Any discussion of the African-American collage must include a discussion of the quilt. Quilts embody the simultaneous continuity and chaos that characterize African-American history in all spheres. If African-American creativity is always in some ways grappling with African-American history by trying to knit together the fragmentation that forms its core and the paradox of fragmentation as a center, quilting is the motif for a creative response to that history.

Williams and Bearden employ their respective mediums for cultural reconfiguration, speaking to a perception that ruptures, pauses, imperfect reattachments, and transformation are part of the larger flow of African-Americans’ lives.

Heather Williams’ quilts offer fresh possibilities for imagining the broad spectrum of African-American lives. Playing up the creative process and narrative construction, she engages the new, the old, the ignored, and the unspeakable by inventing innovative places for them to co-exist in rich, meaningful ways. Taking on emotional and historical nuance, she allows her quilts to speak of joy, resistance, hope, suffering and self-empowerment. Materials like thread and fabric may be soft to the touch but once manipulated by Williams, they become unyielding announcements of heroism, human expansiveness and potential.

**Lyneise Williams** is an Assistant Professor in Art History in the Department of Art at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
FOR FURTHER READING

African American Quilts and Quiltmakers
A Bibliography Compiled by Raquel Von Cogell, Librarian, Stone Center Library


Freeman, Roland L. and Mississippi State Historical Museum. Something to Keep You Warm: The Roland Freeman Collection of Black American Quilts from the Mississippi Heartland: An Exhibition at the Mississippi State Historical Museum, a Division of the Department of Archives and History, June 14-August 9, 1981. Jackson, Miss.: The Department, 1981.


**Exhibit Listing**

**Chair** (44 x 58)
Wool, cotton, silk, velvet, synthetic fiber
Hand appliquéd and hand quilted
Northampton, 2004

**Church Lady** (46 x 54)
Cotton, synthetic fiber, yarn
Hand appliquéd, machine pieced, hand quilted
New Haven, 2001

**Rice Workers** (Asymmetrical)
Cotton, synthetic fiber
Hand appliquéd, hand pieced, hand quilted
Northampton, 2003

**Crazy Quilt** (51 x 54)
Velvet, silk, satin, synthetic fiber
Hand appliquéd, hand embroidered
New Haven, 2000

**Dewey Williams** (32 x 34)
Silk, satin, wool
Hand pieced, hand quilted
New Haven, 2000

**Baby Suggs Quilt (Life in the Raw)** (66 x 81)
Wool, silk
Hand appliquéd, hand pieced (No batting)
New Haven, 2000

**Jerma’s Quilt** (78 x 61)
Silk, velvet
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted
Chapel Hill, 2004

**Samantha (Who died giving birth in 1995)** (54 x 76)
Cotton
Hand and machine pieced, hand quilted
Brooklyn, 1995

**Mrs. Carver** (64 x 90)
Cotton
Hand appliquéd, machine pieced, hand quilted
Brooklyn, 1995

**History Quilt** (51 x 60)
Cotton
Hand pieced, hand quilted
New Haven, 2001

**Self-Taught** (23 x 25)
Cotton, wool, polyester
Hand pieced, hand quilted
New Haven, 2001

**Romare’s Garden** (55 x 59)
Cotton, wool, silk, synthetic fiber, velvet
Hand appliquéd, hand pieced, hand quilted
Northampton, 2004

**Light Within (Night Landscape)** (49 x 45)
Wool, velvet, silk
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted
Northampton, 2003

**Woman** (Asymmetrical)
Cotton, wool, silk
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted
Chapel Hill, 2006

**Woman #2** (30 x 47)
Mud cloth, silk, cotton, wool
Hand and machine pieced, hand quilted
Chapel Hill, 2006

**Waiting** (48 x 39)
Wool, cotton, mud cloth, silk
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted
Chapel Hill, 2006

**Washing of Feet** (25 x 32)
Silk; machine pieced, hand quilted
Chapel Hill 2005/2006

**Gee’s Bend** (63 x 76)
Wool, velvet
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted (No batting)
Chapel Hill, 2005/2006

**Return Home** (28 x 30)
Cotton, synthetic fiber, and silk
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted
Northampton, 2004

**Nothing is Ever Wasted** (85 x 98)
Cotton
Machine Pieced
Chapel Hill, 2006

**Full Circle (Ghana 2006)** (78 x 79)
Cotton, shedda (a blend of cotton and silk)
Hand appliquéd, hand quilted
Ghana, Chapel Hill, Charleston, July/August, 2006
The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History is part of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a center within the University’s Academic Affairs Division, we have a central role in supporting the University’s academic mission. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African-Americans and to encourage better understanding of the peoples of the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

Stone Center Art and Exhibitions Committee
Denise Murrell · Lynn Igoe · Michael Harris · Pamela Sunstrum

Gallery Staff
Pamela Sunstrum, Gallery Coordinator
Yahshanna Scott, Gallery Assistant
Allycia Whitman, Gallery Assistant
Christina Redd, Gallery Assistant
Randy Simmons, Facilities Manager

Gallery Hours: 10 a.m. – 7 p.m. weekdays; closed University holidays