



## **Routed West: Quilts as Cultural Testimony**



*Photography Courtesy of Chris Grunder*

**By Jasmine Narkita Wiley**

"Quilts tell the truth. They are weapons with undeniable power. They are at times tender, expressing pain and loss. They are also incendiary, serving as records of historic injustices that reverberate today. Quilts counter stereotypes and tropes. They challenge erasure and stand as evidence of self-determination, love, joy, and resistance."

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*Walking into Routed West: Twentieth-Century African American Quilts in California* at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) is an affirmation—a declaration of Black existence and creativity, a record of migration both forced and chosen. The quilts, amassed by collector Eli Leon, are more than aesthetics. They document survival, grief, genius, and the ability to create beauty under duress. These works made of needle, thread, and cloth reveal connections to place. A cultural continuity expressed through fabric.



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On opening day, aunts swarmed the building alongside friends, family, and scholars eager to witness the culmination of curator Elaine Yau's incredible, steadfast, multiyear project. Some visitors were the makers themselves, there to see their work displayed on museum walls. Others were proud family members who stood beside their family heirlooms, telling passersby that the quilts were made by the very hands that raised them. It was a family affair,



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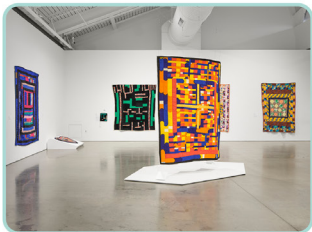
a celebration of a tradition that found spirit in the mundane—fabric scraps, samples from suit catalogs, clothing from deceased family members, and a collection of neckties—transforming them into profound artistic statements deserving recognition.

From traditional quilt patterns to abstract works, questions emerged about the makers of these time machines: How did Jane Traylor incorporate quilting into her daily life? What fabrics did Monin Brown and Hattie Mitchell use? What was Emma Hall's day-to-day existence? What does it mean to them—many no longer with us—to show their quilts? What does it mean for their families to see their legacies celebrated?

The quilts on display at *Routed West* subvert power and speak volumes, giving voice to people whose contributions often go unrecognized. No wonder some prefer these histories be erased, unpreserved, silenced. Quilts tell the truth. They are weapons with undeniable power. They are at times tender, expressing pain and loss. They are also in-

cendiary, serving as records of historic injustices that reverberate today. Quilts counter stereotypes and tropes. They challenge erasure and stand as evidence of self-determination, love, joy, and resistance. *Routed West* is the quilting bee we all needed—a collection of textile paintings that echo a different story, a triumphant one.

Quilting is a tradition firmly rooted in African American experience. Embedded in quilts are the narratives of a people. They document heritage. But in museums, quilts often become static. At BAMPFA, the curatorial team made intentional choices, incorporating story, history, and touch—perhaps an answer to this tension, this disconnect from their original function. Yet even in celebration, complex dynamics persist. What does it mean when a quilt meant to keep one warm becomes the subject of art? Who dictates which stories are told? How are these traditions and practices preserved? So much is found, yet simultaneously, lost.



Photography Courtesy of Chris Gunder

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is an interdisciplinary artist and writer working across craft, (text)iles, photography, and imaging. Her practice encompasses installation, performance, and social practice. She draws inspiration from the archive, oral histories, spiritual traditions, womanism, and critical theory. Wiley earned her MA in Arts Politics from Tisch School of the Arts, NYU in 2022 and is currently a MFA Fine Arts candidate at California College of the Arts.

