

LAST CHANCE

# Memories, Stitched Together, for Gallery Walls



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**alt quilts:** Sabrina Gschwandtner, Luke Haynes, Stephen Sollins From left, in this exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum: “Untitled, Return to Sender after Mary Jane Smith,” by Stephen Sollins; and a Double Wedding Ring quilt by an unidentified artist. Linda Rosier for The New York Times

By Karen Rosenberg

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After a year of shows that combined folk and self-taught artists (a.k.a. “outsiders”) with M.F.A.-groomed “insiders,” we’re finally starting to recognize quilts as powerfully contemporary artworks. Last summer’s excellent Americana-theme group show “[Roving Signs](#),” for instance, organized by the artist Terry Winters for the Matthew Marks gallery, featured the dazzling abstract quilts of [Rosie Lee Tompkins](#) alongside works by Donald Judd, Rachel Harrison and Richard Aldrich.

Now the American Folk Art Museum is reinforcing that point with “[alt quilts: Sabrina Gschwandtner, Luke Haynes, Stephen Sollins](#),” which showcases three contemporary artists who have found their way into quilt making from other mediums and disciplines.

The show, organized by the museum's chief curator and director of exhibitions, Stacy C. Hollander, includes 10 older quilts from the museum's collection that exemplify classic patterns like Log Cabin, Double Wedding Ring and Tumbling Blocks. All of these designs reappear in the contemporary works, often with less abstract imagery added or with other materials substituted for the usual cloth remnants.

The "quilts" of Ms. Gschwandtner, for instance, are stitched together from strips of discarded 16-millimeter film arranged in the Log Cabin style. They make some fascinating connections between the filmmaking process, with its cutting and splicing, and the piecework involved in quilt making. And, implicitly, they question why one of these art forms has been dominated by men and the other by women.

Added resonance comes from the subjects of the films, which all relate to the history of quilt making and other textile crafts. (Ms. Gschwandtner obtained a rich stash of them from the library at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which deaccessioned its 16-millimeter films in 2009.) One is an industrial textile-manufacturing film, another the 1981 documentary "Quilts in Women's Lives."

Because the works are shown on LED light boxes, it's possible to see details in individual frames and appreciate the ways that different films interact in a single work. "Wave Hill Sunroom Square," for instance, combines "Quilts in Women's Lives" and the 1974 film "Enchanted Loom" with original footage from Ms.

Gschwandtner's recent artist residency at Wave Hill. It's complemented by a beautiful Log Cabin quilt from the museum's collection, sewn from the remnants of dresses worn by its maker and her daughter (who pinned a note to the quilt calling it "a sort of history of our early days").

Personal history also figures in the elaborately pieced quilts of Mr. Sollins, who follows traditional patterns but uses, in lieu of fabric, paper and Tyvek packaging from mail he's received. One work is made entirely from crinkly white FedEx pouches; in another, you can pick out the glaring orange of New York parking tickets. Several use the insides of security envelopes, an unexpected fount of color and pattern.

The idea of the mailbox as a modern-day sewing basket proves to be surprisingly profound, perhaps because snail mail is, much like the sewing basket, on the verge of obsolescence in many households. These works are, in other words, as conceptually loaded as Ms. Gschwandtner's. But quilting is also, for Mr. Sollins, a painstaking exercise in composition.

This is most apparent in his paper versions of particular quilts from the museum's collection. Notes on view in the exhibition reveal that he made an exhaustive study of one Log Cabin quilt from the early 1860s, puzzling over the breaks in its mostly symmetrical pattern. His own meticulous version of the quilt is also displayed, next to the original. The pairing reminds you that even an in-depth structural investigation won't fully reveal the intentions of the quilt's maker, the reasons for those small variations in the pattern.

In contrast to Ms. Gschwandtner and Mr. Sollins, who explore the geometric patterns of pieced quilts, Mr. Haynes makes representational quilts that are essentially Pop portraits. (One giant example merges Jay Z and Kanye West into a single, stylized face, and is based on C-prints by the artist [Troy Gua](#).)

Mr. Haynes's quilts look more brash and attitudinal than the other works here, and generally seem less engaged with the history and process of quilt making (even though Mr. Haynes, who trained as an architect, is now a full-time quilt maker and has made more than 100 quilts). His nods to Americana tend to take the form of hipster irony, as in the hunting trophy pictured in "[Man Stuff #4] Elk Head" or the anamorphic portrait of Benjamin Franklin that figures in a quilt displayed on an actual bed.

Somewhat better are Mr. Haynes's portraits of his friends, based on casual photographs and assembled from scraps of the subjects' clothing, which combine the longevity of the old-fashioned keepsake with the instantaneousness of social media. (For context, the museum is showing a quilt made entirely with soldiers' uniforms, in the tradition of the "convalescence quilts" that served as therapy for British military men recovering from the Crimean War.)



Mr. Haynes doesn't mesh with the other two artists in "alt\_quilts," who are more interested in the quilt as an abstract artwork and a conceptual object and whose works have more of a dialogue with contemporary painting. But the point to take away from this show is that quilt making was, and is, a highly personal art form, and that artists should feel free to tinker with it as they see fit.



"alt\_quilts: Sabrina Gschwandtner, Luke Haynes, Stephen Sollins" runs through Jan. 5 at the American Folk Art Museum, 2 Lincoln Square, Columbus Avenue at 66th Street; 212-595-9533, folkartmuseum.org.

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