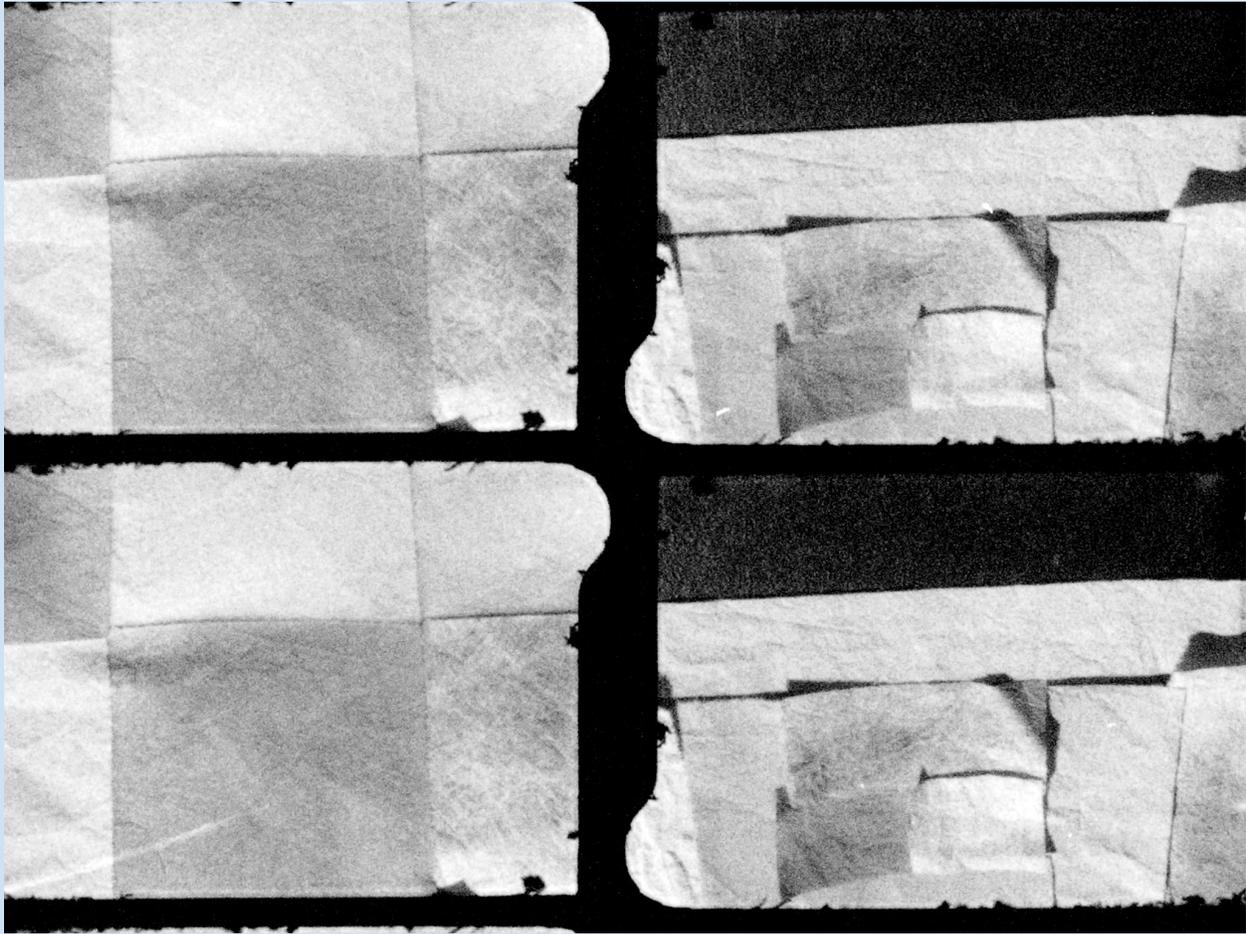


Bay Area Sampler Quilt

Oral Histories



These oral histories were conducted with seven local San Francisco Bay Area quilters who participated in my film *Bay Area Sampler Quilt*. The sentiments expressed cover how and why each quilter began quilting, their thoughts on creative process, quilting in community, and the regional specificity of Bay Area quilting. All seven oral histories were conducted one on one either at these quilters studios, homes, or community quilt spaces. Each interview took place for about one hour, and the oral histories are edited for clarity and staying within the subject matter of quilting.

Amy Reid
February 2026

Mabry Benson



Mabry admiring her quilt, "Trees."

Mabry Benson has been quilting for over 54 years and is one of the founding members of the East Bay Heritage Quilters Guild which began in 1978. A retired chemist for the Department of Agriculture, Mabry quilts or sews almost everyday in her Kennington home. She continues to quilt because of the community and friendships she's become a part of since beginning. Mabry loves learning new techniques and honing in on her craft, and for many years has been doing most of her quilts by machine. Though she's made many more quilts she's given away for donations and gifts, Mabry has 25 bed quilts she rotates for her own personal use. Never considering herself an artist in her younger years, Mabry now acknowledges she is an artist who makes beautiful, intricate, and dynamic quilts.

I usually start by asking, what is your name, and how long have you been quilting for?

Mabry Benson. How long have I been quilting for? I made my first quilt in 1972, because before that I had been sewing clothes but then I had this baby and wanted to make a quilt. Well, I was getting ready to have a baby, we had been in France, we had got home, like six weeks before the baby was born, so before Molly was born, so there was no point of me going back to work because they expected me to be gone for a year so I had free time [Laughs] that I hadn't really had. So, I decided to make a quilt. Because I had been wanting to make a quilt for a long time but didn't have the time or particularly any skills.

Sunset Magazine which was a longtime California "lifestyle" magazine and they had gardening, decorating, cooking, and projects that you could do around the house and they had a couple of times instructions for making a quilt so I decided to make a Log Cabin Quilt.

So, you started in 1972, six weeks before Molly was born. [Mabry: Yes] And did your mom quilt?

Actually, when I was quite small she did quilt and I grew up with an ABC quilt that she had appliqued and I dearly loved it. And so I knew that quilts existed but then, I think by the time she made it for me and my sister you know that was enough for quilt making. But, she made all our clothes, so I was used to sewing. She had tried to, [Laughs] teach me and my younger sister sewing. The way she did it was to [Laughs] we got to make pajamas and I just, that was just such an unrewarding project that I never did anymore! [Laughs]

How old were you?

About 10 or 12.

Ok, why was it unrewarding? Because, you were like, "I don't like pajamas"?

Well they were flannel pajamas, I wore pajamas. And, but... whoopie! I mean, she made most of my clothes, I didn't need to make much of my clothes and even after I went to work and was married I would bring her fabric and the pattern and get her to make me clothes. But then, when I had my oldest daughter and I saw how much children's clothes cost, I figured, "Ok, it's time for me to learn to do that." So, I went down to Albany Adult School. There was an evening, it was a consulting class for clothes and Misses Swenson was the elderly doyenne of fabric, sewing, and tailoring. The most useful thing I learned was how to set a sleeve in. So, that gave me the skills and then I was sewing my stuff and my kids.

What were the costs, do you have a vague memory?

A lot, it just felt like a lot.

More than what clothes can cost now.

Oh, it's all relative, and see at that point, there was Sears and there wasn't a Target. There was Mervin's, a very modest priced place. I just came from a family that sewed the clothes, because if it wasn't sewn it came from the thrift shop. I didn't come from a family who went to a store and bought clothes.

It's funny now, the cost of a pattern and fabric is more than it would to go to Walmart or....

And, that's right, there were a few Penny's. JC Penny's and at that time Mervin's, a semi-local chain had decent clothes for a decent price.

How old were you in 1972?

In '72 I was 30. So, I had my first one when I was 20. So, there's a 10 year difference.

So, to go back to quilting, was it because you didn't have time when you were younger?

That's right, I was going to school and I had a baby. [Laughs] So, ten years later I had more time and I did, because, and immediately after college I got a job from the Department of Agriculture in Albany, so I was working full time there for quite a few years, probably 10 to 12 years and then I probably went on half time, so only 20 hours a week.

When your kid...?

Yea, first there was Lynn and then there was Molly and Jenny so I was home in the afternoons, after school so that the kids... I was home in the afternoons.

And so you lived up here by that point?

No, we lived in another house to the north of here but a very similar situation. Well, I started making quilts and I started taking some of the local classes, doing quilts. There was this quilt store, Patience Corners, that was on Solano. A friend said, "Oh, there is this new fabric store." So, I went in there and they started having classes and one of the classes they had was in machine piecing because before that...What did I try making? A Log Cabin you could easily sew on the machine but things that were more complicated... So, anyways, those classes taught me the skills and I can show you like feathered stars. There was basic and then there was intermediate and then there was advanced and more tough stuff, so the whole series of classes just ended up that way because they were really popular to go early on Sunday morning and wait in line till the store opened to sign up for that list.

So, you started in '72 and after that you got the quilt bug, you just loved it and wanted to continue?

Yes, and then the guild was formed in '78, EBHQ. Actually, Miss Roberta Horton who taught at Albany Adult School and then Clandora Hudson who taught the machine piecing classes, several [classes] that I took; they got together and helped organize a show at the Oakland Auditorium and that precipitated the founding of the guild.

I helped set up the show. I had already made plans to go away for the weekend, so I didn't actually see the show but I helped set up the show on set up day. The other thing I did there, there was a really good collector, Jerry Roy and Paul Pilgrim, lent a lot of vintage quilts and one of them was a quilt made with a Revolutionary War soldier's gray coat that he wore. I went one afternoon to this lady's house and we were sewing the binding on it and so I got to help sew the binding. It just boggled me that there was still a quilt made with fabric from the Revolutionary War that the mere plebeians like me could touch to sew a sleeve on to help hang it up. [Laughs]

Is that part of why you like quilts, that you could use old materials from the past?

Yeah, I guess before the stores and whatever there was some quilting books that I collected and again I am blanking on the names of them but they were written in '30s, see my mother would have been making quilts in the '30s and there was a big thing about making patchwork quilts from scraps. You could imagine during the Depression and those books were classic ones that I bought and looked at and got some information out of it and tried a few things and I don't remember now what I explicitly made at that point. I just started making quilts for the kids and for myself.

So, anyway, then they got a quilting store there with classes and fabrics and so those classes started and pretty much those people in the classes decided we need to have a guild and we formed that in 1978. I went to the first meeting and I am not going to say, I've been to every meeting since, but a lot, and have been very active with it.

*How did you manage to quilt when your children were younger and you had a job?
What time of day would you spend quilting?*

That's a good question. Well, my second husband was very supportive and he would cook dinner and well then I went and got a master's degree [Laughs] during that time period. Actually, I finished up in '78, so that was before the guild started, but I must have been sewing some sort of clothes at that point. I just did it, and I am trying to think when I started working half time... The first time I asked they said, "No." But, I asked again and they realized I was going to quit if I didn't and I was a very useful employee. [Laughs] So, then I went down to 20 hours a week and that let me work 20 hours a week and then I had the afternoons to deal with the family and household stuff and as the kids got in school, well, I met all sorts of people and took all sorts of workshops in EBHQ. I mean, we had world famous quilters come to our guild and I took most of the workshops When I was program chair and that was one of my sales points, you might be missing something if you don't take the workshop because you don't necessarily know, even if it's a technique you don't want to know, you never know when you're going to want to use that technique and A) You get to work closely with the teacher, either one or two days, you get to learn new things, and you never know when you're going to use a skill you're going to pick up there. I can show you, I have done a lot of them. My machine applique with a stitch that I learned in one of the workshops that was a clothing workshop actually.

But, anyways, I just made it fit and then at some point a group of ladies had a mini group and they asked if I would join them. At some point we were going to various houses, for this one lady was harder for her to get around and she had a lot of room and she didn't have any family that she needed to tend to, so we would meet at her house every Monday morning, starting from ten and people came on, you brought your lunch and we'd quilt.

This was in the 80s?

This was the 80s and we rotated around. You'd get two months for everybody to work on your quilt and mostly we were doing hand quilting and sometimes we were piecing. So with my work schedule, 20 hours, I'd work two hours on Monday and [then] I'd go off to be with these ladies. [Laughs]

I was wondering, didn't you work in the mornings?

I was working in the laboratory and I could set up experiments, I had a number of experiments that would run overnight, so I could set up something when I left for the day and it was running over night, it didn't need me to do anything to it and then come in the next day and do [more]. So, hardly on Monday and never on Fridays, so I worked two hours on Monday six hours for the next three days, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and took Friday off. Friday I would go up and volunteer to help a teacher at my children's school. Then there was another day where I had the Girl Scout Troup. [Laughs]

Wow, so you really kind of quilted in these in between moments but you made a priority on Mondays to go to the group.

Yeah.

How many women were in that group too?

Six to eight, it was in Berkeley in this woman Carol's house, she was an older woman and her girls were living in different places. I am still very good friends with Karen who was part of that group. Carol died, she had a lot of health issues, all the time I knew her she had severe arthritis and got to where it was very hard for her to do the quilting but we still got together and somebody had something, and we'd just talk. So that was as much part of it as anything, just the, we'll just say the commiseration on whatever there needed commiserating or just suggestions, but just the companionship.

Yeah, do you think that's why you've stuck in quilting for so long, that it is such a community thing?

For sure.

Who were your friends before you started quilting? And who were the women you started to become friends with and quilt with? Would you say you shared similar lives and values, politics?

I am trying to think, who were my friends before I started quilting? I think I was involved with my children and then I saw a lot of my sister who lived in Marin County and her children so it was mostly family activities. We did not have, and we still don't have a wide friendship. Bill¹ worked up at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory and I worked down in Albany at the USDA as a chemist and he had a bigger group of friends from work because he had been a bachelor for a long time and all these people are willing to feed bachelors. [Laughs]

Before the quilt group did you have a community of friends from your work at the USDA?

Not really, there was a couple that we still see. She is an amazing cook but I did not socialize with that many of them, occasionally.

So it must have been really exciting to join a quilt group where there were lots of women?

Oh yeah.

And none of them, I am imagining, were scientists?

¹ Bill is Mabry's husband.

Occasionally there were. Most of them were stay-at-home but some of them, like the lady who makes these Ukrainian eggs, was a flautist. And, my friend Karen worked at a fabric store, but she was just part time and always just a stay-at-home mom. It just varied. But it was the quilting and all the classes and the inspiration of being introduced to all sorts of techniques. One of the classes I took at Patience Corner's, the fabric store, was a color class. And he [the instructor] basically gave us an Albers' course in the theory of color and by working with that it gave me confidence that I could work with color. Because, I never considered myself an artist. I was good at math and I was good at science but art, nothing. So having that color skill and having just all these teachers who were encouraging me to do something different.

You've started to describe a bit of your story, but why do you love to quilt? Can you explain a bit of what you enjoy about it? You said you used to not consider yourself an artist?

Now I guess I would consider myself a quilt artist, pleased and proud of the beautiful quilts I've made and I have more quilts that I and my family can use. They've all been given all sorts of quilts so that's why I am making for others. Because I think a lot of people realize that a quilt that is made by somebody is not just made in the store. It's taken some care and thought. Our guild gives, oh, 1,015 quilts a year to various projects. It makes me feel like I can make something beautiful out of fabric. Beautiful and useful. [Laughs]

Yeah, you like the practicality of it?

I do like the practicality of it.

Have you ever done any other crafts?

I've done some cross stitching. I have tried some cross stitch but a lot of those were kits. But I didn't do anything else, because I never thought I could draw, I never thought

I could be an artist, though now I think I am an artist and quilting is manageable. And, I took some classes and I've taken the skills classes and it's helped me develop. Working with all of these quilt teachers who are often very good artists, they teach you how to see things and look at things and I've got a work wall in there. So, even though it's a simple pattern I can put it up there and I can rearrange things, like one of the quilts that I am quilting next, I was pinning it just the other day.

And it also sounds like the community is a big aspect of it. I mean, you do like working alone but it sounds like you go about every week to EBHQ?

Well, no, not every week. There's a monthly meeting, of course see now everything is on Zoom and you don't get in person contact with the teacher or the speaker who gives a workshop. Now they're on Zoom and I can understand why, it's easier, particularly the teacher because they don't have to travel. I mean I've made wonderful quilting friends over the years with world class quilters who, like I said, have taught me to look and evaluate and just see. [Laughs] Which is a skill! Even if I can do it, who's always just been math and science [person] [Laughs] then anybody can develop in one shape or another.

Do you quilt or sew everyday?

Yeah. You can see how much fabric I've got to use up! It's very hard to downsize that! [Laughs]

How many quilts do you have that you've made?

I guess about twenty-five. I've refused to count because it's a moral embarrassment. So, every time we change the sheets I put another quilt on the bed. So I rotate and I see them and I say, "I love this quilt, I love seeing it." And I like the fact that I made it and I was able to create it, it's just beautiful.

Ora Clay



Ora with her quilt, "Nina."

Ora Clay, a retired school librarian has been quilting for over twelve years. She began through the mentorship of the renowned Oakland-based quilter Marion Coleman who took Ora under her wing and introduced her to the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland. Migrating from Alabama to California when she was just 16 years old to begin junior college at Pasadena City College, Ora's quilt roots go back generations. Working primarily with illustrative stories, Ora's quilts reflect personal memories, political moments in US history such as Brown vs. Board of Education, and notable Black figures such as Nina Simone. With a librarian's organizational mind, Ora spends time in her light-filled Oakland hills studio where she conceives and creates her quilt stories.

What are you working on right now?

Well, I don't know, it's still in the thinking process, but it's a baby quilt. They're having a shower and the theme is "A Cherry on Top." Their idea is this baby is the cherry on top of everything else, so I am trying to go with that idea. It's still in the thinking process.

But you know what the border is going to be?

Maybe, I don't know! I may use a longer strip because I have a really nice Valentine's fabric that says "love." So, I may just strip that, I don't know. I'll probably take a picture of the invitation and just keep working on it and see what happens in the end. [Laughs]

Is it a family member?

No, it's a good friend of mine. She's going to be a great grandmother and she asked me to make a quilt to give to her great grandbaby.

Oh wow, that's cute. It seems like if you're a quilter, you have to make a baby quilt?

Yep, yep.

And they don't seem too ... They're lower stakes because they're smaller?

You're right, it won't be really big. So yeah, I am working on it, I don't know quite how it will turn out. So, you put ideas, fabrics up on the design wall, and you keep on working on it and see what comes to you.

I feel that in terms of my film. I feel like with this project I need to sketch out things but it is just in my head. You know? I know I am going to have these sorts of portraits of individuals but then I am going to have documentation of the groups I've been meeting with and then I am going to do this other thing, where I am going to make quilt blocks

[Ora: Oh! Nice!] *But, we will see, I just bought oil for my Singer machine. I am interested in talking about processes with your work, like the “Cherry on Top” quilt and how you start with an idea. Maybe just walk me through how you begin a quilt, what do you do?*

[Laughs] You know, that’s how we begin. When I first started to quilt, when I took a class, that’s exactly what I said, “What do I do now?” You know, I was taking this class on fabric postcards. “Where do I start? What do I do?” And that’s what the beginning is. So, what happens with quilters is sometimes there is a call for certain types of quilts, I can talk about the most recent.

Elaine Yau at BAMPFA put a call out to the guild saying, “I’m going to be doing this exhibition and if you’d like to have a quilt in it, these are the guidelines.” She gave us the title of the exhibition and I used that and thought, “Ok, what can I do?” And a lot of quilters were asked, “Why don’t you put a quilt in Elaine’s show at BAMPFA?” Some said “I couldn’t think of anything, I didn’t know where to start, or I don’t know what to do.” I am often asked, “How long does a quilt take to make?” Most of the time it’s trying to decide what I’m going to do. Once I decide I’m going to do this square or I am going to do this triangle, then the quilt will start to come together. But, the first thing is design, what are you going to do, or how to answer a call for a certain kind of quilt.

Following this example, for Elaine’s exhibition titled “ Routed West,” talking about the people who moved from the South to California and brought their quilts with them... The exhibit is telling a story of those people through their quilts. I thought, “Ok, that sounds good. What I’ll do is I will do a quilt that tells my story.” That gave me a beginning. Once I had that idea, I could start to say, “What do I need to tell my story?” What kind of pictures, what kind of background, what do I need to tell my story? Once I decided that was going to be my topic, then trying to demonstrate what my journey was, then that’s the second step. So, I decided on the topic, now what am I going to do is to pull it together? A quilt is three parts, you work on the quilt top which is where the design takes place. Using a design wall I can decide if I want to include that or if that's too big and/or I have another picture here I want to include...So you do your quilt top

and once you have your quilt top you're going to sandwich it. Sandwich is when you decide what you're going to use for the back and what you're going to use for the batting. There's thick batting and there's real real thin batting, so, how do you want your quilt to look and feel in the end? So, those are the decisions that you make and once you sandwich it you temporarily use pins or you use a basting spray, or long stitches to hold the three layer, the sandwich together. Now you are ready to quilt it.

Because, you use those words interchangeably, "Oh, we're making a quilt." But, quilting is not until you sandwich it and then sew all those layers together. That's the quilting. The first part, the top, that's the piecing. So, those are just pieces there, I am not quilting anything until I finish the top, get some batting, and get a back and then I will quilt it. Once I finish quilting it, getting all of those three layers quilted, then you do the outside edges. This is the finishing part which is binding. Deciding what binding I am going to use is part of the process. For the baby quilt, I may use a red or I may go back to a white.

So, a lot of the quilts I have seen so far of yours are story quilts. Again, going back to the process of making something, how do you start to visualize? Do you begin by thinking about the story, like the Routed West show, maybe a young woman in Alabama [Ora: My memory.] Or, do you begin by thinking about colors and shapes?

I think they are mixed together because in telling a story like you said, you do think about colors. I am thinking about colors in the back of my mind, or you want it to be striking so you ask, "How do I do that?" You're thinking about design, the rule of three, is that working ok? So I think you're combining all of those. I did a quilt for a call, one of my first quilts, I have it in here somewhere, I used a lot of browns. I didn't realize it was a lot of browns but it just so happened I had a light orange bag I wanted to use and then I don't know why I used another brown, a woven fabric. But, it was just a lot of muted, muddy colors. And you know, when I pieced it all together, this person, my mentor, looked at it and said, "I see what you're trying to do." [Laughs] "I see where you're trying to go, but this event you're talking about was a gala affair, people were dressed up, it

was evening, there was a red carpet, there were limos, people were in evening gowns.” So, it was obvious my quilt wasn’t showing that, but that was what I was trying to do. The quilt wasn’t showing that at all, probably nobody wore brown to that event! So, I went and found some fabric that was shiny. I probably showed you that quilt. Some shiny blue fabric with sparklers you know so it looked like night time, I found some fabric that’s light and moves, we usually don’t use it in quilting but I used it as a skirt for the lady, I found some sequins I used for a top, so it was a completely different from the quilt I had started with.

You know, to tell a story I needed some colors to show night, something blue and sparkly to show night, I needed a dressy dress to show her and I needed sequins. So, it’s completely different now. If you don’t choose the right fabrics or the right things to show, then yeah, the story doesn’t work. So, I had to change my design.

And you started to quilt when Marion Coleman was teaching a postcard class about 13 years ago?

Yeah, I was trying to think, about 12 years ago. Because I took the class in 2011 and then I didn’t do any quilting. Well, I did some little stuff but I didn’t consider myself starting to quilt. I took the class, yes, but I don’t consider that’s when I began quilting, I didn’t consider myself a quilter then. And until I saw Marion about six months later, and she go, “Hey, whatcha doing?” And I said, “Well, you know...” She said, “Why don’t we set a play date and come over and sew.” And I thought, “Oh my goodness she means me?” And I did go over and I showed her some stuff I had been working on and she said, “Yeah, but you need to practice some more and why don’t we write this grant, to work together?” We were funded to work together for a year by ACTA [The Alliance for California Traditional Arts.] That’s when I did the quilt for the book on quilts about Oakland. [And] that’s when I consider myself starting to quilt because I had a goal, a purpose, I was trying to get something done. But the postcards were just me sort of playing, they’re quilted postcards but if I had just kept on making postcards I wouldn’t have called myself a quilter! [Laughs]

Yeah, that's understandable. I bought a bunch actually at the last guild meeting, at the market sale. Cary was selling a bunch of them, selling them for super cheap, like two for a dollar maybe. And I mailed them off to some quilters I know.

Yeah, they are fun!

So, you didn't quilt when you were growing up? Because I remember your journey to California... You were born in Alabama?

Yeah, Alabama. My mother quilted. I was born in Union Springs, Alabama which is 20 miles from Tuskegee, 50 miles from Montgomery so in that area of Alabama.

Like middle, southern?

Right, it's like lower, it's not central, but the lower central part of Alabama. [Amy: *Near Hale County?*] Well Bullock County, like I said Tuskegee, Montgomery, not Birmingham, Birmingham is above Montgomery.

Kind of close-ish, within an hour, to Boykin/ Gee's Bend?

That's right, I was going to say two counties over from Gee's Bend. My mother quilted. But, like I said, that was work. It was work for her because it meant we had covers for our beds, we didn't call them blankets, we called them covers. So, I had two or three quilts on my bed to keep me warm. To keep us warm, there were six of us. So, it was work because she had to do those quilts and the quilts were nice and colorful, but she used what we had. If there was a dress we no longer could wear because there were holes in it she would take the best parts of it and put it in a quilt. Or a shirt or pants. But, that was work! [Laughs] So, I wasn't really interested in that. And, even now, I am not excited about bed quilts but I do like doing art quilts, because for me that's fun, that's

creative. But my mother wasn't doing it because it was fun and creative, she was doing as I said because she had to, and I wasn't really interested in the work part of that.

And she never forced you to do it as a young teen?

No, no, I mean I guess I just never showed interest so she wasn't bothered by that. Plus, I left home when I was 16 so I was never a young adult at home, you know and the women in the community are the ones that did the quilting. It was an adult thing and I never bothered to learn. I mean, I had to do work at home but I never bothered to learn how to quilt.

And I guess you didn't have to take a home ec class in high school?

I did take home ec. But, we did an apron. I can't remember if I ever finished my apron. What else did we do? We did an apron, because I remember having to gather stitches. And then there was a session on cooking and stuff, but I don't remember quilting or a lot of hand sewing, other than the apron and I don't think I finished that apron! [Laughs]

And then you moved to California, I remember down to LA? [Ora: Pascadena] Where your sister was? And you were finishing high school there?

Yes, yes, because I was a senior in high school in Alabama, I was 16 when I was a senior. Actually I was 15 when I was a senior because my birthday is in October. I had a sister in California, I may have told you. I didn't know her, she was my father's daughter. And I didn't know her but she lived in California. But that's sort of [the way] with migration. If you have somebody in another country or another state or wherever, then, you go where they are and you stay with them for a while to get established. My sister was in California and there was no way for me to go to college at home because we lived on a farm and we didn't have the money. Tuskegee was a private school. I think I may have gone to Montgomery one time when I lived at home. But she said, "California has free college." So, California had free junior college and I came and lived with her

and went to PCC, Pasadena City College, for two years and then I transferred to San Jose State for my other two years. That was my reason for coming to California. And that's what happened in the Great Migration. People leave one place to find better conditions someplace else, and that was definitely what I was doing because it was an opportunity to go to college, and I took it. Not knowing that at 16, that's ridiculous to go across the country by yourself, not having been anywhere! [Laughs]

Yeah, you said you had only been to Montgomery once or twice! Did you have any other siblings that left Alabama?

I am the oldest of six. I left first and my brothers stayed to help on the farm. So then my sister, who's the fourth, she left, but she left for New York. And see, that's what happens from the south—we either go north, and I was one of the “weird” ones that went west. But most people go north or east. She went to New York because Aunt Bessie then lived in New York, so that's where she went.

Do you consider yourself more of a Californian at this point?

I do consider myself more of a Californian but, when I go home, then people claim me, so I am from home I guess. [Laughs] People are interested, especially people that don't travel a lot... They're interested in hearing what people do in California because they hear weird stories, you know, “You guys are doing all this weird stuff in California.” And it's not that much different but California has a reputation! [Laughs]

But that area of Alabama is very rural in a lot of ways.

It is, and I was talking to one of my friends about this the other day, it's very isolating. You socialize with people in your group. It's segregated in the sense that, this is who I want to be around. These are my friends, this is my family. You know? You go to movies and restaurants and you see people out. But, if you give a party or a picnic, then

everybody looks like you! [Laughs] So, in that sense, it's isolated but it's a chosen isolation you know? But it happens here too in California.

For sure, it happens here too, racially, economically... [Ora: Yeah.]

But the Bay Area is a lot more sprawling and people have their communities but it's not the same.

And it's easier I think. It's easy to go from Oakland to Berkeley to Albany. I mean, you don't even think about it. El Cerrito... But at home, if you're going from Union Springs to Midway, you sort of know, even though they're right next to each other. Now you know, "I am in Midway."

And so after San Jose State, I know you lived in New York with your husband for a bit, but you mostly lived in Oakland your whole life?

Well, I was in Pasadena and then Roger and I got married and we lived in Los Angeles. When he got ready to go to law school that's when we moved to Northern California. That was 50 years ago because I am thinking of Aaron, my son, was born in Los Angeles but when he was one year old when we moved, Roger went to UC Berkeley Law School. My daughter Niambi was born here in Oakland and she is in her 50s.

Did you move up to Oakland?

He went to UC Berkeley, but we lived in West Oakland when we moved up here. And we haven't lived in Berkeley or anywhere else, we've lived in Oakland this whole time.

What changes have you seen in the last 50 years here?

[Laughs] Goodness! When we moved to Oakland, we moved to West Oakland and that was during what was called "Urban Renewal" and "Redevelopment" time." They were

redoing all of those Victorian houses in West Oakland. But [ours] wasn't fixed up. So we could buy the house for \$3000, which was hard to find when you're a student in law school. We borrowed it from my brother. So, we bought our Victorian for \$3000 and the loan that we received was to fix the house up. To renovate it. We did two rental units on the bottom level.

Your kids finished high school there?

Aaron was a senior in high school when we moved to Skyline Boulevard and he wanted to finish high school in West Oakland, he went to McClymond's in West Oakland and he wanted to finish there. So yeah, we moved to Skyline while he was still a senior in high school. Niambi went to Skyline High School. We moved to Skyline and I was a mile away from Skyline High School and I got the job as a librarian at Skyline. I could walk to work, though, I think I still drove! [Laughs]

Skyline, talk about changes... There weren't nearly as many houses on Skyline Boulevard as there are now and they weren't these big huge mansions you see. We lived on Graham Place which had three houses, we were 1 Graham Place because there were only three houses! We lived there until we moved to New York. I was in New York for five years and then we came back to the Victorian in West Oakland and then we bought this house.

Oh, ok, do you still have your West Oakland property?

No, once we bought this one it was just too much so we just decided to sell it. We were there for a long time.

I feel like I still don't know a lot about Oakland, and even though I am close, I live near the lake,² I don't go to West Oakland much.

² "The lake" refers to Lake Merritt.

Unless you're going to the Bart station or something like that.

And that's a very industrial part of West Oakland.

I don't know the political changes, but down there used to be clubs. There were restaurants down there, where the Bart station is, where the Post Office is. I mean, the history of that section, that area, there were a lot of Black people that were moved out... That area has a history. We used to go down there to a soul food place we still talk about, "Remember the chicken!" I don't remember the name of the place but we used to get take out. And that was before the earthquake. Now they have Mandala Parkway coming down there now.

Oh really?

But that freeway used to be a high rise freeway that fell during the earthquake. It was torn down.

Have you ever made any quilts that are about Oakland or East Bay history?

That was what Marion Coleman was trying to do with her project "Neighborhoods Coming Together." My quilt was about the "Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame."

One last thing that seems really special about quilting, both here in the Bay and also elsewhere where I have filmed is the community. It sounds like Marion and a lot of the reason why you started taking quilting seriously was because of that friendship and her mentoring you and then your involvement with the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland. Can you talk about being in community with other quilters and what that does for you?

When you were talking about how I got into this, as I said, I've never quilted. But, when my daughter was in high school and there were proms or dinner dances, she could never find a dress that she liked. She'd look at a fashion magazine and would say, "This is what I want." [Chuckles] So, I wasn't quilting but I was making prom dresses for her from a picture in a magazine she'd see. I think part of that work with textiles or fashion helps with using fabric and quilting. So, next time I give a trunk show or talk, I am going to include some of those dresses I've made for her. Because, that was sort of the beginning. Also, for me, I may have talked about this, I never had art training but I liked art and when I was a librarian I liked working with the art teacher. I would always encourage her to bring her students to the library and we would talk about different artists, we would talk about different styles. I remember making a special effort to work with the art teacher and talk about art and to look at what they were doing. And, I think that was part of my starting to be into art. Meeting Marion Coleman was definitely the reason I do what I do now. When I retired, I needed something to do. People who are still working and not close to retirement have no idea what it means when the morning comes and you don't have to go to work! I mean, you want to go somewhere and do something. If you haven't thought about it and I was too busy all during my working years to even think about it...So it was like, "What do I do now?" And so, when Niambi took me to the postcard class I was like, "Oh yeah, I do like doing this and I *can do this*." At least I could do a postcard, I didn't know I could do a quilt.

And, meeting Marion Coleman definitely changed my life. [While] working with her she was president of the guild at the time and she said, "You have to join the guild." I would never have joined, there was just no reason for me to even think about joining a quilting guild, I wouldn't know where to start, I wouldn't know why I was there, and I didn't see it as a place to learn. I thought I needed to know something before I'd go to or join a guild.

To be an expert or something?

Yeah, I would have just felt so insecure. And, I sort of understand that about folks who come to our guild, who say, "How do I learn?" My working with Marion, because of the

kind of person she was, I think I was just really really fortunate to have met her and be able to learn with her. If I had been out there just wandering by myself I don't know if I would be quilting now. So, she was definitely the person that caused me to be doing what I am doing now.

I think I may have talked about this, but she was the kind of person that was just so giving and so generous with her time. I wrote a recommendation letter for when she received the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Award. In this letter I talked about the effect she had on me and how she made me feel I could do anything. I wrote this letter and I thought, "I'm special because she's just taking all this time with me." There were other letters of recommendation from people and they were saying the same thing! [Laughs] I thought I was special! But she made everybody feel that way, that was her talent.

Maybe the last question would be, what has quilting given you in terms of confidence or the ability to express yourself? What has this phase of your life as a quilter in the last ten or so years given you? Not that you weren't your true self before, but what has this allowed you to do in a way you hadn't been able to do before?

I loved being a librarian because I always wanted to work with students but I didn't want the pressure of being in a classroom. And I loved books, I loved reading. So, being a librarian was a perfect combination between reading and being able to work with students because the students who came to me wanted to be in the library. They wanted the help, they were cooperative. When they accomplished something they appreciated the library. I really had the best of both worlds. When I became a quilter, I realized they're all tied together. As a librarian you're doing things, and I call them creative things—you're trying to get students to read, you're trying to get them interested in books. So, I'd do bulletin boards and "All School Reads," trying to do creative kinds of things to get students interested in different kinds of books. I was being creative. Now being a quilter, I can really say, "I'm being creative, I'm doing art." That's what being a quilter has led me to say. For a long time now we quilters didn't say that,

we said we were quilters. But, now we learned to say, we are artists. And, being creative is just so necessary now. If you're cooking, you know you don't just have to follow the recipe, you can change it up and it can be better than the recipe. As adults, we just don't do enough things to recognize, "I can be creative, I can do something creative, I can do something just for the fun of it." And, I think that's something that quilting has done for me, and it's definitely changed me. I am very quiet, I am introverted, I don't talk. [Laughs] I don't do those things. But, with the quilting, people ask me things and I can talk about my quilt. You know, it's not me directly, but it's about my quilt. You know my husband says, "You know, you're quiet except for your quilts." I went to the Smithsonian and the curator you know was going around with the quilts and she knew I was there and she said, "Is it ok when I get to your quilt, would you talk about it?" And she got to my quilt and I could talk about it to these people in the Smithsonian! I would never just do that, you know? But, with the quilting and with the art, I can talk about it.

Elaine asked me to do a radio interview and I said yes. We went over to KQED, they picked me up in an Uber, we went over and were interviewed by Alexis Madrigal on his morning show. Oh He talked to Elaine and me about quilting and about Elaine's exhibit "Routed West". I would never have done that, never! That's just not me! But, if I am talking about quilts and quilting, I can do it. I think that's the big big difference with what quilting has done for me. I like to talk about my quilts. Partly because I receive so much encouragement and so much positive feedback.

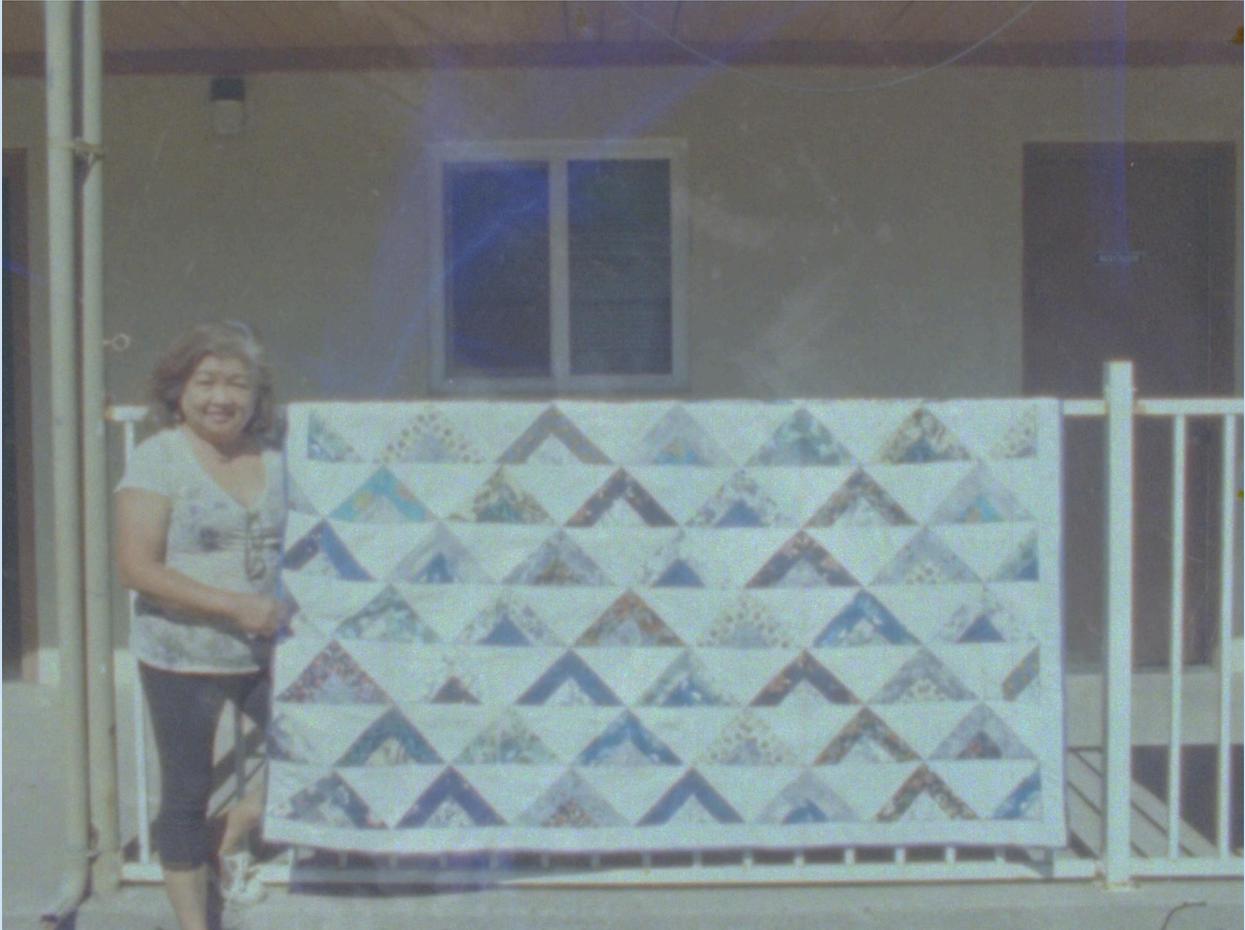
For sure, and I think quilts are such a way to connect with each other. Historically, they've been made for a body you know? So there's this person to person connection and it's such a familiar object to a lot of us. I think we feel more comfortable talking about it.

And it's textiles you know? When you put on a sweater, it's fabric... We don't walk around naked! [Laughs]

Is there anything else I haven't asked you that you'd like to say?

I think the guild has its place because we have sharing time where we bring our quilts and show, and we get positive feedback from showing anything, even if it's not finished. People don't say, "Oh, you haven't finished that quilt." We say, "That's really a great start. I can't wait till you finish it and bring it back." So, I think being in the guild you get positive feedback and some people are really afraid to get out there. You know you're an artist and people may judge it. But being in the guild, we're not mean. We're not the big public, we're sort of like family you know? So, bring it to us first and let us see it and let us tell you, "I really like those colors, I really like how you did that." So, I think the guild is an important place for new quilters, for old quilters, for any quilters.

Kathy Duff



Kathy with one of her untitled quilts using Japanese fabrics.

Kathy immigrated from The Philippines in the 1980s when she was 21. As a child, Kathy was interested in a treadle sewing machine her mother owned, though she only began sewing ten years ago when she retired. Kathy approaches quilting with little fear or stress over making intricate quilts. Instead, she is nicknamed “Speedy Gonzales” for her fast quilt work. She is a member of the East Bay Heritage Quilters guild and runs an informal, weekly quilt group at Bay Hills Church in Richmond.

How did you get into quilting?

Basically, when I was in high school my mom had this treadle thing and I kind of messed with it, played with it, but that wasn't my talent at the time so life went on. And then I came to the US in 1980 and then there was a Mervin's in Alameda, and I saw some fabric there, what do you call it? It's like vintage fabrics now... I bought some material and bought a sewing machine but that didn't go through either in the 80s because I had a toddler at the time and life went on and I had to work. So when I retired 10 years ago I went back to it, to a class in Pinole and went to YouTube, of course we had YouTube then and then I just went from place to place, learned a thing, it just got me interested. The first few years I would be quilting nonstop till four in the morning and when the pattern would ask to cut one, I'd cut two, or if two, I'd cut four. So, instead of one quilt I'd probably be making two quilts at the same time.

Just to give to someone else? Why would you make two?

Well because it didn't make sense for me having one piece, I would just double it, or triple it and I gave two or three to my sister and some I gifted, yeah. Only one I sold, that's it.

And did your mom quilt?

No, I didn't even know. Because back home labor is so cheap we had maids and a seamstress that you could pay for. So, she didn't really need to.

Is quilting a thing in the Philippines?

Not really, not when I was growing up. It was just here.

What specifically about quilting enticed you if you didn't have family who quilted?

It's the uniqueness of the fabric and the pattern that just attracts me. Maybe the color... Because at the time I think in the 80s when I went to Mervins there were stuffed animals made of quilts and I would say, "Oh, they're so cute." It's something I want to do in the future. It's just my eye and my attraction for quilting, I guess it depends on the color and stuff that attracted me.

So what's your process with quilting? Do you mostly work from kits or...?

No, when I was learning we just used scraps at the time and when I went to some of the classes in the quilting store they would sell fabric of course and depending on the class I would buy fabric for that class, that went on for maybe five or six years. But ever since I've gone to EBHQ there was just so much fabric, I didn't need to buy anymore. I would just use what was there as time progressed, my likes in the kind of quilts or color.... It's not all over the place. I just specifically want specific patterns because I'm running out of room. You know quilters just have rooms and rooms of fabric and I kind of want to downsize that.

You have rooms and rooms of fabric?

No, some quilters do. I do have a room of fabric and I need to organize that room. Sometimes when I donate to EBHQ I have two bags but sometimes I come home with four bags, you know? And there was a time when one of the church members, she has a school in the Philippines and she came here for six months. Because of that school, she asked for some fabric which I gladly gave her, like maybe 10 bags, and she gave up on me because sending stuff there is kind of expensive, but I just unloaded on her. And I am glad that she's using it because I saw some pictures on Facebook she posted.

Cool. So you said you have a specific type of pattern or fabric you're looking for. What is that?

Gradually, maybe five years ago I started to like Japanese fabrics. So when I took some classes, I really liked it. I took a lot of classes and I bought a lot of Japanese fabrics, and then the color blue. Right now I don't like red anymore, I don't like orange, yellow, it really depends. When you're learning you don't know exactly where you're headed, you just do what you can. But now specifically, unless it's something I really want I kind of decline on some fabrics because they're just giving it away. Unfortunately, the donations at EBHQ when they get a lot it's because somebody passed away and that's kind of sad but you know it will be used though. Like, if something happens to me... My sons, I don't know if they know what to do with it. They'll probably just dump it which is kind of sad also, but I hope not.

Can you talk a little bit about quilting in a community with other people?

So when I started with the Pinole Senior Center, I met somebody there who quilts at Hill Top Church, so I joined Hill Top Church, and we were quilting for church. If somebody requests for the church and stuff we would quilt for them. But, Covid came and they didn't want to continue. So when I moved to this church I asked them if they had a

quilting group I could join. And they said, "No, but you can start one." So voila, that's where we are at.

So you're mostly working with blues and Japanese fabric patterns. Are you also improvising what the pattern is?

Yeah, so I kind of, you just have to spread it out and depending on where you want things and then you start sewing. I have a good eye for color... You just kind of blend it in and see what you like and then you start sewing from there and put it together.

You make it sound so easy!

It's very easy really. All it is is a straight line. You just keep sewing a straight line unless you start quilting, the finished product, you meander.

So you were doing banking, accounting I remember? Do you feel like your math or organizational skills help you with quilting?

Not really. Well, inches, centimeters, yards, just the basic math, it has nothing to do with banking. If anything, if it doesn't fit I just McGuiver it. No one is going to see it, no one is going to know if you made a mistake, you make it as it is. I'm not going to stress out on an eighth of a centimeter or an eighth of an inch, I'm not going to waste my time thinking about it.

Did your mom ever know you quilted?

No, she passed a long time ago.

What do you think she would say about your quilts and what you do?

She was not so much of an art person so I really don't... As long as it serves its purpose to make you warm, but she's not into that art thing. Because I think quilting is an art, you know the color and the eye for it. Sometimes people make people art quilts. My older son went to Japan before I did, like 10 years ago maybe. And they took a picture of it and then as a wedding gift I made a Japanese quilt and I put their picture in the quilt. You make a copy of the picture with a fabric... And then you just work from there and kind of copy everything in cloth.

Did you ever have a creative outlet before you started to quilt?

Yeah, I liked art better than math at the time, so when I was little I would color inside the lines and I didn't like coloring outside of the line and I think at the time when I was younger I was tracing a cartoon character, not tracing with a paper, but from this to there. My siblings were surprised that I could make something out of it, you know like *Mutt and Jeff*. I just kind of copied it, no measurements, no copying, no nothing, just from here I could probably sketch.

Why didn't you pursue art?

Because it's not a career that you want to pursue, unless you're dead you're not going to be famous and you're not going to make money unless you're really really really good. Like Ansel Adams...

You immigrated here when...?

I turned 21 when my parents came here and they couldn't bring children under 21 so I just finished my college there. I just waited a year and I came over. So I had finished my banking and finance when I came over.

So your parents moved here too, to California?

Yeah in the 70s, because my brother was here, he married somebody who lived here. So he petitioned our parents and my parents petitioned me. It's been a while, 70s-80s. It's been 40 years or something.

Do you feel like there is a community of Filipinas quilters here in the Bay? Because there is a large amount of Filipinos in the Bay.

Not really. Not that I know. Maybe one, but she's not at my capacity. She just comes to chit chat, but no, not many Filipinos.

Why do you think that is?

Because I guess it's part of their growing up, they weren't introduced to it. And they don't have time for it. I don't know.

There is textile art in the Philippines...

Yeah, but they're not going to be bothered by quilting, there are lots of things to do in the Philippines, everybody is having a good time. They're not going to stay at home and quilt, they're always outside with friends and family.

Do you have a take on who quilters here are and what they're doing in the Bay Area at large? I don't mean addressing what I was saying earlier about race.

Quilting people, they have some types of shows and exhibitions... Like, there's one in Sacramento, in Pleasanton. That's where I buy some stuff but I've been buying so much stuff I don't need anymore.

Fabrics you mean?

Anything! Like I have three or four sewing machines. Just anything. I have lots of patterns that I've bought that I haven't even touched that I need to work on. It's just time, it's a matter of time.

Do you sleep under your quilts?

Yes I do. For myself I make cat quilts and I am happy, because I love cats. This one I won't use for myself.

Why not?

Because it's not me. I just did it because I was in the early years of quilting and it was a kit that I liked. But for my own personal quilts I didn't bring anything. I have cat patterned quilts.

Is there anything I haven't asked you about quilting or yourself and quilting that you'd want to share?

I work fast, they call me, what is that? "¡Ándale!" "¡Ándale!"?

Speedy Gonzalez?

Speedy Gonzalez! The first few years... I work fast. Like I said, I don't see any sense in cutting one piece. That doesn't make sense to me. And, in cutting, I need eight pieces, I would just fold it into four. And just get my eight pieces right there. I like shortcuts and I have no time for measuring, sometimes I don't even measure! I just cut the fabric in half. It's my fabric, you know? Leave me alone. It's your thing and you do what you like

to do. There is no such thing as a military police force for quilts. There's no quilt police here, just do your own thing.

Was that your mentality when you first started though?

Yeah. When I decided to do it, I [thought], "I'll do it on my own time, my own way." When this teacher at Pinole Senior Center wanted me to make something, ok, I did that, but that's it. That's all I really knew and I'll do it my way. You do your stuff and that's fine, I am not in high school, I'm not in college, we're all adults here.

Have you always been like that?

Yeah, kinda. I don't know what you call it...

Stubborn? [Laughs]

A little bit, yeah. Yes. It's like I'm not gonna waste my time figuring out something. Just do it! You know? Just do it.

I do that too sometimes in my films, or in my art. But sometimes I get annoyed at myself because I am too impatient and I want to do it my way, but sometimes, at least for myself I can get annoyed because it doesn't come out.

Well sure. I make mistakes a lot of the time, but that seam ripper? It's not my best friend. Some people, that's their best friend because when they think they make mistakes they start over. No! Just keep on going! You can't tell me where I made a mistake here, there's no way. It's not on point, so what? Who cares? Some women will be pissed, they will not tolerate that, that's fine, it's your quilt and do whatever you want. I'm impatient too. Like, really?

Jenny Hurth



Jenny holding her quilt "Nude in Bathtub" based off of Pierre Bonnard's painting of the same name.

As a young girl, Jenny was always enamoured by the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder. A child of Bohemian artists, Jenny's fascination with the "prairie girl" sewing quilts contrasted her own childhood growing up in San Francisco and Berkeley in the 60s and 70s. Beginning to master sewing through making custom slip covers and bags, Jenny finally delved into quilting after she realized there were no rules she needed to follow. Instead, Jenny lets her humor guide her decisions as well as her interest in salvaging what is deemed waste. A guiding question for her is, "Is this fabric?" Jenny recently produced a body of quilts using salvaged masks from the pandemic and is currently working on high-vis quilts.

The first question I ask people usually is how did you get into quilting?

You know, I think it had to do with Laura Ingalls Wilder when I was a kid. I was late reading and I didn't read much, but I read those over and over and over and over. I think the sort of "Prairie Girl" mentality, and the quilts, that her sister Mary could stitch anything even though she was blind, it just set me on fire. And then the third book in the series is *Farmer Boy* which is about Laura Ingalls Wilder's eventual husband and the family that he grew up in. They did everything. So that was almost a manual for wilderness living, they talked about how they sheared the sheep, spun the wool, dyed the wool, made the suits and did this and that and the other thing. And I just loved that shit when I was a little girl. I think that's where it started for me, you know growing up in a very Berkeley, kind of "strange family" and just wanting to be normal. And, normal to me and really cool was Laura Ingalls Wilder. I think that's where the whole quilt thing came for me, a prairie girl approach.

That's funny because another quilter I recently met for this project, Pattie Klimek, who hand pieces and hand quilts, also mentioned Laura Ingalls Wilder and other frontier books of the time that she was reading. [Jenny: Yeah, yeah.] But, sounds like it was also a way to rebel? Your mom was an artist, correct? [Jenny: Ummhmm] Was she a sewer at all?

She could sew, yeah. The funny thing about her was that she did sew and she made a lot of her own clothes. And she would make clothes for me when I would let her, and she would teach me how to sew... But, I swear I would kill the sewing machine. The thread would break, or the bobbin would stick and I just had no patience for it, what-so-ever. And then later in my early 20s I started making clothes, just 'cus I wanted to. And a friend of mine said, "Well, you can sew, I'd like a slip cover." So, I made him a slip cover and so that was my entry into sewing. And then a friend of his asked, so I just started out by making slip covers, slip covers and drapes. That was my first business for many years doing that and then, actually making quilts, what I really wanted to do was make traditional quilts but I just didn't have the skill or the patience for that and it just

didn't look right, so then when my kids were in school, one of the other mother's, I was complaining how it was too hard, and she said, "Oh, there's no rules Jenny." I was like, "What!?" So, that was how it really all started when my son was in kindergarten. We started making, all together making quilts for raffles, so that's how it really started. So for many, many years I was making the quilts for school fundraisers and we would have the kids paint a picture of themselves or all the group parents would do a square and we'd put them together, pretty typical stuff. But that's where it really started in earnest was making raffle quilts.

But then, I didn't know that my grandmother was a sewer, my mother never told me that my grandmother sewed a lot of stuff. So, when she passed away, this is when I was probably 30 when my grandmother passed away, my mom went back and emptied her house and brought stuff here.

Where was she from? Your grandmother?

Wisconsin. Racine, Wisconsin.

And that's where your mother grew up?

She grew up in Racine.

And then moved to Berkeley in the 50s/60s?

She went to New York in the early, mid-50s. She went to Antioch College and they put you out on a work year your first year, so she went to New York and she just never wanted to leave New York and she met my father in New York a few years after she'd been there, because he grew up in the Bronx. So, they came to San Francisco in 1957.

But your grandmother in Racine...?

Yeah, when they brought everything back there were all these outfits and quilts and stuff that she had made for my mom to wear and my mom had twin cousins and she'd make them all matching outfits. There was all this stuff and I was like, "How did I not know that grandma sewed mom?" And she was like, "Oh, I never thought about it." So it didn't feel like some family tradition to her. But, my grandmother bought her a sewing machine when she moved out, so we still have that sewing machine. So yeah, we didn't know there was a family thing about sewing but it's pretty common though. Most women needed to know how to sew and my grandmother worked in a glove factory and in a shirt factory. So she did it for real.

But you, when you read those books as a kid you didn't try? You said you'd kill a sewing machine when you were younger and your mom would try to get you to learn. But you didn't really try to apply the idea of Laura Ingalls then?

No, no, I didn't really feel like I had any skills with my hands. But I did have a lot of prairie girl fantasies. I was much more rough and tumble and I was into running and playing capture the flag instead of playing with dolls and horses and stuff.

Did you have to take a home ec class, or was that still a thing when you were a student here at Berkeley?

I did, I did take home ec. I think that might have been in 10th grade, which was our first year of high school here because when they desegregated the schools they had to put 9th grade all in one school for many years and so high school was 10 through 12.

So you started to sew out of necessity I guess when you were in your 20s?

Well, out of necessity just because I got interested in making something that I liked how it looked and I was just futzing around with making clothes. I don't even know if I did it for that long. It was after I went to live in England for a few years, after high school and you know there were all these great, weird, punky fashions and I never bought anything.

But when I came back I tried to make things like that. Maybe [when] I was in England I started to help the boys peg their jeans. I don't really remember how it all started but I did start making things, slip covers just took my head off, I loved making them. "Oh, I know what it was!" I noticed how the sofa seat cushions were dimensional and they had a zipper across the back and I thought, "That would make a great bag." So then I started making bags and so when I stopped making custom slip covers, that's when I started making bags. I had a couple of businesses making bags for probably, I think I wound up doing bags for about 15 years.

And what about quilting made you feel daunted before? That person said there are no rules... Because, I guess in making slip covers or bags, there are rules? What felt harder or unapproachable with quilting at first before that person said that?

You know, I think I had trouble with flat. I think once I started making things that were 3D it started making more sense to me somehow. But, I got a quilt top at a used clothing store and it was really beautiful, and I still have it, so I thought I'd make that into a quilt and my stitches were ridiculous. I just didn't know how to do it. So, I think it's been half finished for like 40 years, sitting in a bag somewhere. I just felt like I just wasn't up to the task of making what I considered was a quilt, which was, traditional patterns.

But with your slip covers and your clothes, you never did formal training. Not that you need formal training, but you never took a class or anything. You figured it out on your own?

Yeah.

And why not go to a class or something?

I don't know, I've never been really good at learning, I think I have to figure things out myself. I remember my dad telling me that he thought I was just stubborn, that I didn't want anyone to tell me what to do and I think he was right, to a degree. I have always

been better with teaching myself how to do things, with my hands. Reading instructions.
[tsk]

Oh, I am so bad at that too. I am so impatient, even just watching a video I can't sometimes. Even for this project, learning how to hand process or use this new camera... And then, it eventually works.

Well, maybe there is something about impatience involved. Maybe wanting to do something and not really being interested in doing it at another time. You know if it doesn't work the first time you're [frustrated sound] you try something else.

But eventually you did find...One quilter told me it takes patience and perseverance to make a quilt. So, eventually you did come into finding patience. Now, you're a deeply skilled sewer and quilter and you work with a lot of different materials. So yeah, you might not be doing the historically accurate techniques but you do make quilts now, that are pretty technically skilled.

Oh, well thank you. You know where I think it comes from? A) Really fast sewing machines and then also because I got really really interested in bags and making the bags. The first bag business I had was making diaper bags and at that time I had a young baby and I was pregnant and I had this whole baby thing. A lot of people get into baby shit when they've got little kids so I was making all these diaper bags and that was a pretty good business and then I found the next bag business. I was making bags out of discarded banners and you know vinyl advertising materials and what happened then was I went to the East Bay Depot when it was down on San Pablo Avenue and they had this huge banner that I guess had been from the Moscone Center and I thought, "This is like, 12 square feet." And the images were incredible on it. And I thought, "This is an incredible piece of material." And it just kind of fired my brain, the ideas for something so big and so wasteful.

Waste has always been... That's another thing from Laura Ingalls Wilder I think, is that I cannot stand waste. And so, I bought that banner and I had a quilt show going on, and then I had some bags on the floor and everyone said that the quilts were great but they bought the bags. So then I got obsessed with these bags and I developed a background in production sewing. So I got very skilled at doing the same thing over and over and over again and, you know? The graphics on every batch of banners was different. So, I basically had five or six standard bags that I made but every single one of them was so different and I loved seeing how the patterns came together on them. I don't know, I think that's how I developed confidence and skill with the actual sewing parts of things because I really, I just really understood how it works, you know what seam you do first, how to cross something, stuff that I could never remember if anyone told me how to do it. I just learned it by sewing the same bags over and over and over again and it just remained exciting because you cut up... Sometimes you only get five or six banners that are the same and then everything else, the next batch is completely different. So, I would say that's where I got the confidence and skill, is production sewing.

It also sounds like you started to have a more intuitive sense of your machine? Like because you used this fast machine a lot you had a more intimate understanding.

This machine here, I must have sewn 10 to 15,000 bags and items on it.

Wow, so you have a really intuitive knowledge of your machines though? Can you describe that? Do you ever look at manuals for these machines?

I have to look at the manual when the thread breaks on my serger machine every single time because I can't remember how to thread it, so I am always looking at the manual for that. I think, for me, if I already know something I can look at the manual or the instructions and it makes sense. If I know a little bit of something I can look it up on YouTube and say, "Ah, I get it." That's changed. I would guess when anyone develops a facility for something it's easier to learn something about it. For example, I can always tell when the bobbin is about to run out and then it does.

Why? Just because you notice the feel of it?

Well, sometimes there's a different sound, but generally I have probably changed the bobbin so many times that it's probably just a sense that I am about at the end. I can probably intuit how many hundreds of yards I've sewn.

The other big question I ask people is if you can talk about your process of making, how do you come up with your ideas? Maybe on the whole there's a through line for you, or if you just want to address the more recent quilts you've been making that I saw last year, or however you want to answer that. How do you begin?

My entry into making quilts was having grown up in an art store, because my parents had a store selling art reproductions and posters, so it was like growing up in an art gallery. And, I couldn't paint, I mean I probably could have but I was like, "I'm not a painter." But, I loved these pictures, they were so deep in me for so long. So, I thought, "Well, I can't paint but I can sew." So, I started making quilts that were from paintings, like I made a whole bunch of Bonnard paintings and Hopper paintings and I imitated them and they were very silly and I just had a lot of fun doing that.

And then I did a whole bunch of quilts like that and I did some from album covers. I am not a musician but I can sew, so that was that approach for a minute and then, I did some patch work and stuff. They weren't making any money and I had to make money because I had all these little kids, so then it was bags from then on in.

The pandemic project was a real change for me because I think I learned a lot about myself doing that because for me initially... I think for me always, something has to be silly about anything I do. And the initial impulse was seeing... First of all: waste. There were all these masks on the street. So, I started picking them up and immediately I thought, "This is fabric, this is fabric, these guys are fabric." So I started picking them up and making the quilts out of them. And, as I was going along, I mean the honest first

impulse was, mischief, like “Oh, this is disgusting, ha ha ha.” [Sound effect] People are going to go, “Ewww!!!” And, as I was going along I realized how loaded this material was and how full of meaning it was and how freaked out we all were and how each one of the masks carried... Every single one carried a whole little thing in it because every single one represented maybe safety. Early on it was like, “Is this going to keep me or my loved ones safe? Is this not going to keep us safe? We don’t know.” So there were all these misgivings in every single mask. So the scale of all those masks together and everything each one represented to the person who finally got a hold of it and used it and was uncertain about it, and then on the street you see the history of them. There’s motor oil and there’s blood and snot and you know some people are homeless and so there’s shit on them, those I did not pick up, that’s where I drew the line. But all these things, I could feel so many people in every single mask. So then the idea of using this terrifying time and doing this stereotypically comforting thing of a quilt and doing it in a traditional pattern, all these things, my mind went on fire.

I think the initial impulse for stuff like that is always you know humor and silliness and waste and “Is that fabric?” You know, how can I take that item and make something out of it, so you know, sewing is I guess my mode for self expression.

Were those painting quilts for use? Because, you don’t typically make quilts for utility right? The bags are definitely utility, but the quilts have never truly been... I mean, you have probably made some....?

Bed quilts. The painting ones were actually, it’s funny you should say that because I think I felt very didactic about them when I made them. “This is only a quilt, put it on your bed.” People were like, “Ooooooh this is art, what are you doing!?” “No, it’s a quilt, put it on your bed.” I have to assume that my thoughts about those evolved with me being involved with Eli. Taking care of Eli and having the “quilts as art thing” going on in the world around me, so then I came to accept that a quilt could be hung on a wall, because they are beautiful, they really are. They’re beautiful and I think Eli helped me look at quilts as paintings. Because before that I really thought, I love the way they look

all rumbled up on the bed, and they're meant for comfort and they're for people taking care of one another. You know, for a family through line and all that stuff. So, initially with the art quilts they were for beds and most people were obedient and put them on their beds when they bought them. Half way through that I started diverging from the whole bed size idea, some of them were really big. I still have a few of them.

And now you're working on this new project which is maybe an extension of... well maybe not an extension but you're working with found materials?

Always, always, always found materials. Almost everything I make comes out of my morning walks. So always, always, always at the moment it starts with the shit I pick up from off the street, whether it's clothing or now hi-vis protective things which is a whole other thing which has taken my head off. The idea of safety and work versus people having all they need without actually producing anything. So all the people who work and work and work, they all wear high vis now. I didn't notice that until a few years ago. So, high vis fabric is really loaded, you know in terms of how we're all separated from one another.

Do you mean the stratification of class or...?

Yeah, yeah. You don't see Elon Musk wearing a high vis vest unless he's being a pretentious motherfucker. So, you know what I mean?

Yeah, Yeah. When you see someone wearing construction boots, there's a utility and it also assigns you to a certain demographic. I mean, I guess there are bikers for safety, not to be a contrarian.

Yeah, no I know what you mean. There's a safety on the road aspect to it. You know, I was in England a few years ago and that's where I really noticed it. Every single person who's either riding a bicycle, every preschool child, every cop, every firefighter, every person who is out there interacting with the public. There's all this construction going on

in London all the time and there's these big gray buildings and they're just dotted with these humans in this high vis. And I came back here and I thought it was so unique, but everyone is wearing it here too! How did I miss that? Anyways, I just really like the material, I like what it represents.

And are you intending them to be? What are you working on over there?

Oh I am trying a postage stamp quilt. I made a postage stamp quilt out of all my old bathing suits too. It took a long time but I really enjoyed it and I liked how it came out so I am just experimenting to see if I have the patience to do another one.

Yeah, because it's one by one?

Yeah, one inch square that you cut up an inch and a half and, thank you YouTube, cut an inch and a half and there is a certain way that you put them together.

Wow, and the Pandemic Quilts, you do quilt them together?

None of the pandemic quilts are quilted, they're all just quilt tops because nobody is going to put it on their bed. So it's more, it's kind of a quilt joke. The bathing suit one I am going to try and quilt, I am not sure how, it's so stretchy.

What are your thoughts about quilting in the Bay Area? I know you're not deep in a guild or anything here but what is the vibe here for you and your opinion about quilters in the Bay?

I think people are really creative here with it, as they are with everything. I am really just only coming into the world right now because accidentally getting into Eli's orbit. I was on the other side of it. I was trying to help him get people to show his collection and then when he got sick and passed away then I was more on the museum end of things, regarding his collection. Which was interesting because it really demystified the art

world and the quilt world, because I didn't have any skin in the game, it wasn't my art work. So yeah, it's a recent thing for me and it's great, people are on fire here making quilts all the time. Also, part of it is just social media. It's just so hard to figure out how much is real and how much is it people talking about it.

The quilter that I met last week, Pattie. She was saying the Bay Area is the birthplace for a lot of movements, like the modern quilt scene came out of the Bay and the Bay is sort of a leading space in the realms of quilting.

I would second that and it sounds about right. I don't really know enough about the rest of the country to say that for sure. I would go out on a limb and speculate maybe it's because of all the women who came here during the Great Migration.

Yeah, I mean certainly there's a lot of different migratory stories. Whether that's Black or white like your parents. People came from many different places to California and certainly I feel like the Bay in the 60s and 70s was such a historical moment. It was an attractive place to [Jenny: Yeah] and a more affordable place to live which is not the case anymore.

It certainly is not. I thank my parents everyday for coming here.

But this is not the house that they lived in?

No no no.

Where did you grow up?

We were everywhere, we probably lived in...I was born in San Francisco and we probably lived in 8 houses there. They had to move out in the middle of the night a couple of times because they owed money. And we lived in Palo Alto for a second with friends, and then back in the city and then my dad's best friend started a bookstore in

Berkeley. My dad, he was a poet, so he was taking pictures for insurance claims and working in a framing shop and doing this, that and the other. So his friend said, "You know, why don't you just come over to Berkeley and we'll finance you and you can have a little booth in the back of the bookstore and you can do picture framing." And my dad was [like], "Ok."

So we moved to Berkeley and I started kindergarten in Berkeley, which coincidentally was the first year where the schools desegregated and Berkeley might have been the first place in the country to actually do it. You'll have to double check that to see if that's historically accurate, but anyways we came to Berkeley, started school here, they started a little business and my dad was doing some picture framing there and his friend Mo financed the whole thing.

Oh Mo's!?

Yeah, Mo and my dad were best friends. [Laughs]

Oh wow, ok...

So then they financed the business and then my mom, I don't know where she found it, but she found what she called "The Personality Poster," she saw a catalogue or something. They were six foot tall and there was Jean-Paul Belmondo and Marlon Brando and all these things and she just bought some of these posters in 1965 on Telegraph Avenue right near the campus and they just started selling like hotcakes and then she started adding reproductions and pretty soon dad wasn't doing the picture framing thing, they were just trying to keep up with the posters. The poster world exploded, the psychedelic poster exploded and film posters. So then, within a year they had their own store and it was just gang busters. They were at the right place at the right time and then my dad invented a cheap picture framing process, a mounting process, so then he ran that shop, the poster mounting, and then my mom ran a poster, comics, underground comics, publishing shop.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share that I haven't asked you about? I know your work is not very traditional, even though you're working with traditional patterns...

Well, the traditional thing is new to me and it's a real revolution. I think perimeters have been really important to me. It's hard for me to...I can think of an idea and I can get any material that I want. To me, I find the material and riff on that so I think that I am very excited about the perimeter of doing a traditional pattern because then I can fit whatever weird stuff I find and again, it's a quilt joke. I use something ridiculous to make a traditional pattern like a snotty mask or you know a working vest or something, I don't know where I am going with that...But yeah, traditional patterns are a new thing for me and I am really enjoying it. And now that I have the skill and now that I don't care if it looks pretty or not I just do it however I want to.

There is something nice about having a structure for a project, where there's still a lot of room for your own creative composition of color or fabric or maybe how you arrange it, like the quilter again I keep on mentioning, Pattie, just because I met with her last week, she does hand quilting, hand piecing and I guess traditional patterns. But she quilts them with more contemporary patterns or she's mashing it up. For quilters, there is such a history there and there's so much of an abundant lexicon I guess of quilt blocks, it's hard not to want to have a conversation with those. I can imagine it's hard not to want to play with those things.

Yeah, listening to you speak it's almost like people have a common language, how do you relate to somebody you have nothing in common with? Well, you both have kids. There's something or you both make quilts, it's a commonality. Maybe there's something more cultural about quilts then there has been with other art forms maybe. I mean I certainly remember, this is a whole other subject, but I just burst into tears, the [Eli's] place smelled like cotton. And, it was an old smell and then over the years, working with him, I could just feel all those women in that house and I thought a lot about people being, women in general, and then women of color, and just the creativity that comes

out of people inside the confines of what they're allowed to do, you know? Like tatting! Jesus Christ.

What was going on inside people's minds when they were so confined to their womanly roles? They made these incredible pieces of lace and all these things that seem, "Oh, that's just mom's 'fitchu,' that's just the stuff Auntie Maggus made." Totally not that way at all and I really feel like...The way I felt those women in that house just you know! [Slaps hand on leg] Women have been really restricted until fairly recently in history. [Amy: Yeah] And all this incredible stuff has evolved through necessity and then through community, and you know you just gotta get it out, you gotta get those feelings out. And I think quilts are a part of that.

Right, and to have a relationship to the history of that creative expression through your own process of making but in a very different way too. I think a lot about the relationship between the quilts of the past and the present in my bigger project and a guiding question is, if we can look at quilts from the past in order to reveal histories around the US, and women in those histories, how can we look at contemporary quilts of today to understand history? I think the pandemic quilts specifically are of a specific moment and they certainly tell us a history of the pandemic. But, all of the fabric that people buy now and all of the economy around quilting that some people participate in, spend thousands of dollars on fabrics and fancy machines and retreats...It's a very luxury, it can be a luxury craft for some people. And it's very different from the necessity, the Laura Ingalls period of quilting, and even the African American women that Eli collected from, they're using polyester and whatever, I just always think about how much money some quilters spend today and it's so different than some people of the past. There's of course situations back then and now where it's different. Like whole cloth quilts were a sign of wealth, to buy that amount of fabric was a huge sign of wealth.

And think about "Crazy" quilts too.

Yeah. And I think about utility, those “Crazy” quilts were often hung. It is interesting to me that the material reflects the economy and the status of a people. You almost exclusively don’t ever buy fabric?

Not much. Once in a while I might need some muslin or something, you can find anything you need. You don’t ever need to buy fabric. I’ll buy fabric at SCRAP, but I don’t remember the last time I bought something new.

Pattie Klimek



Pattie and her "Princess Feather" quilt with assistance from her son.

Pattie has been hand sewing since she was a young girl. Growing up in the Los Angeles suburbs, Pattie's mother was a skilled tailor with her own business. Fascinated by the stories from *Little Women* to *Anne of Green Gables*, Pattie always appreciated mentions of handwork within these narratives. Enamoured by San Francisco, Pattie moved up to San Francisco in the 1980s. Exclusively piecing and hand stitching her quilts, Pattie prioritizes slow stitching as a way to connect with the process of handwork. She teaches and lectures on the joys of hand quilting around the US. You can contact her at Patty9308@att.net.

I'm really glad that you're kind of doing [a project] that focuses on the Bay Area. Because the Bay Area is like the incubator for quilting and has been for years. Nobody ever talks about this because we don't like to tute our own horn too much. But a lot of the things that have started out trends, new concepts of quilting, modern quilting, started here in the Bay Area. And then spread out to all the other areas. To the [rest of the] West Coast and then dribbles off to the East Coast and everything. So that's why I'm really happy that you're focusing on the Bay Area. And lately we've had a lot of quilt shows that have, you know, given up the ghost because we just don't have the area that you can rent and that we can afford. That's really kind of suffocating us, so I am really glad that you're doing a Bay Area focus.

Yeah. I mean, the Bay Area is such an expensive place and really prohibitive for a lot of creative expression.

Exactly. I'm sure you run into that. Nobody has workshop areas or studio areas.

Yeah. I just can't afford a studio. I would love a studio but it's just crazy. Other places are also expensive but some places are really affordable, like Philadelphia, other cities. Are you from California?

I grew up here. I originally was born in the Midwest and then came here as a child. And I grew up in L.A., actually.

Oh, wow. Okay. So when did you move up here?

In the 1980s.

And why did you move up here?

Who would not want to live in San Francisco? I mean, it's wonderful here. [Laughs] Just as soon as I came here to visit a friend who had moved up here... it just felt like home. I

mean, it's a wonderful city, and I just adore it here. I just we're, like, hanging on by our fingernails with a fork to afford to stay here.

And what are you retired?

Well, I am. My husband has a wine store downtown in Union Square. So he's still working there.

I ask everyone if you can start your quilting journey and how you began and why did you begin? Did you begin before you even moved up here?

Well when I grew up in L.A., my mother had a tailoring business and was just a whiz in any kind of sewing. She was one of these people that, when she would do her tailoring, she would measure you and transfer the measurements to a body form and just drape the fabric up there and cut it off. She wouldn't even use a pattern. And that's how she learned to tailor when she was young. So this is a story I always tell, especially in my embroidery classes, they get a kick out of this. I grew up reading constantly. I was really a bookish girl. And, you know, I loved reading books like *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little Town on the Prairie*.

And the thing that those girls always were supposed to do is sit down with their moms or their aunts or whoever was in charge. And sew at the end of the day, for like 20 minutes, half an hour. So they would learn how to do their hand sewing. And so I'd read about this all the time. So one summer I decided, "Oh, I'm going to do that too."

So I took my babysitting money and walked over to J.C. Penney and bought embroidery floss and a hoop and a printed pillowcase, one of those with those little patterns with the daisies and stuff on it. My mother knew how to embroider. She was, like I said, a whiz at that stuff. But, she was really busy. You know, I have four brothers. So she was busy with the family, busy with her tailoring business. So I was kind of left on my own to do that. And of course, I went to the library and got a book, learned how to do it. [Laughs]

And when I got to these real, difficult stitches I'd ask for my mom's help and she helped me with it. And so that's how I started off. I did embroidery from that time until college, probably.

Okay. And how old were you? You were like 12...?

No, like 8 or 9 years old. And, so I did embroidery all those years. When I first wanted to start to quilt it was because of reading all of those, you know, books. You know in the Conestoga wagons, coming off and the little girls having their quilts at night. And so I always wanted to make a quilt. And, I found a book that had a pattern in it that seemed to me like I could do it. It's actually a very difficult pattern to do. But, I'm one of these people like, "Oh, I can do that, sure." [Laughs] Whatever it is, I'll do it. So, I copied the pattern and did the whole thing, and this was when I was in college my years, in my early 20s. And sewed the whole thing together, and one of the main reasons I chose this pattern was that my mother already had the fabric for it, so I could go ahead and...

What was the pattern?

It's called, "Oakleaf and Reel." It's an applique pattern.

So I'm going through it and I didn't know how to applique, I didn't know how to do anything. So I'm transferring the pattern and using carbon paper and then doing the templates and cutting everything out and doing the applique. What I thought was the applique stitch, which I thought was like hemming dresses or hemming pants. So I made my stitches really far apart. And then by the time I was done putting the whole thing together, I had to wash it because it was pretty grubby. All my applique started coming apart. I had used regular carbon paper, not dressmaker's carbon. So, you could see the lines on it. The lines didn't wash out from the carbon paper. And I was just going, "Oh my God." I just kind of wadded it up and stuck it in the closet. [Laughs] So that was my first quilt.

Oh no. And you tried to hand stitch that?

Oh yeah. Back then especially. Sewing machines weren't able to do an applique stitch like the ones that you see now.

So did you hand-quilt it too?

No. I just took the top and threw it in the closet and hauled it around with me for years. I've still got it but I never finished it. If I do, I'm going to have to go back and do all the applique all over again [Laughs] and then I'd have those lines on it still. When I do lectures and trunk show of all my quilts I haul it out and show people all the mistakes I make. [Laughs] As a beginner.

That's how you learn...

But then after that I'm raising my kids and they're ready to go off to school. I still wanted to quilt. And I actually went and took a class at this at a store that was in San Francisco at the time called Black Cat Quilts, which was a great store. I loved it. I learned how to do everything properly but I wanted to learn how to hand quilt and how to hand piece like they did in the books of my childhood. And, they really didn't teach that in classes. They taught you how to machine stitch everything together. And once you got your top put together, you took it to a long arm quilter and they finished it for you. That was how you were taught how to quilt. This was probably the early 2000s.

Oh so that's kind of when you started, in the early 2000s? You tried that in the 80s and then didn't do it for 20 or so years?

Yeah. I still embroidered and all of that and still did a lot of handwork. I've always embroidered so that's never far from me. But I never got serious about quilting until then. And so I took the class. I learned how to do everything by machine, but my machine that I still have, it's an old Singer that my mother bought me when I graduated from high school. I always tell everyone that this machine refused to sew a quarter inch

seam, just refused because it did! You did garment sewing on it. You know, you did a 5/8 inch seam. So I needed a wider seam to be able to sew accurately. So I couldn't get the quarter inch seam to work and I started doing all my blocks by hand. I just started doing it myself again and with no instruction or anything. When I got the top done, the first top, I wanted to hand quilt and I went to the San Francisco Quilters Guild and sat down and went to some of the meetings. And of course, everybody did machine stitching on all their quilts, and they had a show. I went to the show and the Dorcas Hand Quilters had a booth there, like they do.

They had a frame set up and everybody was hand quilting around it. So I was talking to them and they said, "Of course you should come to one of our meetings." I was still home with my kids, so I was free on Wednesday mornings when they met. And I went there and they just kind of put their arms around me and taught me everything.

And then you pretty much exclusively hand quilt?

I make my quilts by hand.

I'm curious to know about your process, how you make your work and the creative process that you go through? Is it different per quilt? I'm also curious to sort of unpack a little more. Why hand quilting versus machine? I mean, I feel like we talked a little bit about it when we met at EBHQ. I know you mentioned it's like you have this love of these stories from the 19th century but I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what the difference is mentally? Like emotionally and meditatively... What is hand quilting over machine quilting that you appreciate so much?

One of my quilts that I entered into the PIQ [show] I was telling you about was hanging next to one of the winners, in fact, in the handwork area. I had one of my knees replaced right before and so I couldn't walk around all the time. I had to sit down for a while. And so I said, "Well, I'll sit down and I'll listen to people's comments." You know, expecting to hear, "Oh, isn't that beautiful? And oh, look at how the little stitches are in it.

I wonder how much time it took her and all that.” But I heard these comments like snide and kind of to put down handwork. “It’s like why in the world would she want to do handwork on this and hand quilt it and hand piece it when you could do it on a machine and get it done faster?”

I remember one lady said, “She must have a lot of time on her hands. That’s why she wanted to do hand quilting on this, because she could sit down and take her time on it and didn’t have to get a quilt done fast.” I was really surprised to hear how quilters, *my own people*, are putting all of this handwork down. They’re not like looking at it and saying, “Oh, she must have really loved to do handwork.” Always when I talk to my hand quilting classes, I always say the one thing that stabbed me in the heart was to hear this lady say, “Oh, why did she just send it to a longer and quilter? They do a much better job.”

And I just went, “Oh no!” It really made me angry and it really riled me up. And I thought, “I’m not going to let people denigrate handwork like this.” Handmade quilts are beautiful and they are so distinctive from machine quilts. If I look at a row of quilts at a show, I can pick a handmade quilt out on the wall. I don’t have to go up and read the description about it, and I just don’t want people to react this way to it. It really made me angry. So that’s how I kind of started doing lectures and doing classes that did handwork. And at first when I started doing classes people would always ask me the same questions all the time: “How long did it take you? Why do you do handwork? Why do you do this?” And I would try to explain to them that I feel more in touch with the quilt itself when I have my hands on it. I always tell people that the quilt that talks to you and tells you what it wants to be done, what design does it want? What colors does it want? And when you sit with a quilt and do handwork on it you can listen to it. But, you can’t change a machine worker’s mind. You can’t. So I’ve given that up. I’ve given up trying to talk about how mindful the process is and how it slows you down. Quilters don’t want to hear that. They want to hear how fast you can get something done, and how many quilts you can make in a year.

Yeah. I think it's more telling about our society as a whole, this idea of productivity and literal product. We want to see a result quickly. And, I think a lot of people don't like this sort of slowness of it all. It's really like that with anything.

Cooking a meal for yourself instead of calling [for takeout].

I don't remember when the sewing machine was invented? Sewing machines were, I think, ubiquitous household items of the 19th century. Like a lot of things in women's life they were used for the ability to get things done more quickly because they just had a lot to do. Maybe they were hand quilting and weren't machine quilting, but people did use machines in the 1800s.

It's more prevalent than people think it is.

I think there's a range of quilts and a range of handwork periods, where people had to certainly get something done, because they needed to keep themselves warm or, someone was going to have a baby or something. I don't want to make all these binaries that hand quilting so great and machine quilting so often.

I don't think it's one against the other. But I don't like the idea of being denigrated as a hand worker by machine workers. It's not as slow of a process as everybody thinks it is. I mean, I could probably handpiece a block in the same amount of time it takes to machine piece it. It's really not that slow of a process. Hand quilting though is a lot slower than the long arm quilter can get out there and stick a pattern in the computer and get it done. The thing that you don't see is you don't see the hand of the maker. You don't see the maker's personality in the quilt. Well, maybe on a domestic machine, but a computerized quilting pattern or somebody just knocking blocks out one after the other... And I'll say that awards that are given to quilts at shows are from quilt judges that really concentrate on the technique that's shown in the quilt.

Your points are all pointy, your seams all neat at a perfect 90 degree or 45 degree angle, and you have so many stitches per inch, all of the very technical things, your binding looks beautiful on the quilt are emphasized in shows rather than the design and the personality of the quilter.

Well, I wonder if you could kind of talk about your process of making quilts. How does hand quilting or hand work play a factor in how you begin a quilt? What's your intention? I think there's a difference when you are hand or machine quilting as you were saying.

It takes patience and perseverance to be a quilter, period. Either a machine quilter or a hand quilter. And you know everybody, machine quilters say to me all the time, "I just don't have the patience to do that." You've got to have patience to be a quilter because it's not even that fast on a machine, it's not a fast process. It does take time. For me I really have a love of the 1930s quilters and I do a couple of lectures on them. Also, I really like that in the 1930s they were taking traditional quilt blocks and kind of adding Art Deco and Art Nouveau touches to them.

They were reimagining the regular traditional blocks, "Shoe Fly" or "Four Patch" or "Nine Patch." They were adding these little touches to them. And I love Art Deco. I started seeing all of this all at the Ortega Library, we lived two blocks where we had our three bedroom house out in back of Saint Ignatius. I used to walk over there and, and pull quilt books off of the shelves and read all the quilt books and look at all of the patterns and everything. And I still do that but on the computer, it's a lot easier. [Laughs] I take those patterns and then I add my own touch to it.

I classify myself as a traditional quilter, I love traditional patterns and that's where my inspiration comes from. But, I am one of few people in the sea of contemporary art quilters that are in San Francisco that does traditional quilts. I have one foot in the traditional world and one foot in the contemporary world, and the two kind of mesh up. So I take the blocks that I see from the 1930s but I put my own colors and patterns and fabrics and I kind of get captured by that and start to make a quilt from that.

My quilts tend to be not elaborately pieced. I use more simple block patterns and everything. What I like to do is a real contemporary quilting pattern, quilting design that holds the three layers together. I like to take a lot of different shapes and ideas from geometric Art Deco patterns and incorporate them into quilting patterns. That's what I like the best.

Like you were saying earlier about quilts speaking to you or that you talk to quilts in order for them to tell you what they want ... Do you already have a quilt pattern when you're starting off with your piecing blocks?

No, I know what I'm going to do, but it changes so radically once I start putting all the blocks together and get the three layers together.

Why?

Because it's more like I'm sitting down with the quilt and getting new ideas as I am working on it. That's what I mean with the quilts talk to me. They tell me what they want. You know sometimes I think, "Well, yeah, I'm going to do this "Celtic Knot" quilting pattern on this quilt or I'm going to do this typical Amish "Feather and Fan." But once I start sitting down, I don't mark my quilting patterns out beforehand, I mark them a little section at a time. Because that's when I start changing everything up. And I think that's where I kind of drag the whole quilt into the more contemporary modern era.

Is there anything else you want to share that I haven't asked?

I'm a quilter who is not an artist. I mean, I'm not a quilt artist. I make quilts, I'm a quilt maker, and all my quilts end up on the back of the couch and you pull them off the back of the couch when you get cold, and I can wrap yourself in it. Or you put it on the bed in the spare room or whatever it is. To me, quilts don't necessarily have to hang on walls.

They're bed coverings. And that's again, you know, that's not really what's thought of in the San Francisco Bay area too because everybody's quilt artists.

I mean, I think what you do, even if it's functional, is art.

Oh no, I agree with that.

You're an artist!

I know. But, you're also making a functional object. You know, like a ceramicist who makes a cup. They're going to drink whatever it is out of that cup. But it can also be a work of art. So you can't have the handle break off or have a hole in the bottom.

[Laughs]

Sandi Knight



Coming from deep, generational roots in Mississippi, Sandi is a descendant of many skilled and prolific quilters. Growing up in the Bay Area and Sacramento, Sandi became a lawyer focusing on litigation. She began quilting while living in New York City in 2013 and, after she moved back to the Bay Area in 2017, she became a member of the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland in 2018. Though she doesn't always have the time at present due to her work, Sandi loves being in community, quilting with others, reminiscent of the women in her family who used to collectively make quilts for other family members. A perfectionist at heart, Sandi appreciates how quilting allows her to practice grace, patience, and explore creative expression.

So you said your parents are from Mississippi?

Correct.

How did your parents move out here, or why did they move out here?

So they were each the first in their very large families to go to college. We are several generations back on both sides of my family in Mississippi, so as far as we can tell, probably 8 or 9 on each side. Because they were the first to go to college they had the opportunity to migrate out of Mississippi. They went to New York first briefly for my dad's first job and then came out to California for the next job. So, my brother was born in New York and I was born here.

Ok. And what did your parents go to school for and what did your dad do?

So they went to Alcorn State University in Mississippi. So my father was an engineer, studied specifically chemical engineering if I remember correctly and my mom, oh I am trying to remember what she studied for her undergrad, but she eventually studied psychology and she got her Master's in that once they moved out to California at Santa Clara University. I believe she was the first Black woman to graduate from the graduate program at Santa Clara.

Alcorn State, I know Alcorn state from a quilter I met in Mississippi who taught there when I was down in the Delta filming last year. Mississippi is a deeply economically depressed state, maybe the top in the country?

It's always close, usually between there and Alabama.

And that particular region is the most depressed out of all the other areas and it's deeply segregated.

Correct, although sadly we're getting deeply segregated in a lot of other places as well. Like I am in the heart of San Francisco and I think the Black population here, I think the numbers have gone from 20% to the low single digits just in the last 20, 30 years.

Yeah, and they're all... historically the Black neighborhood is Bayshore?

Bayview. So Bayview, there were a number of them, and the Fillmore had a large population. Alamo Square, lots of different neighborhoods. Even not far from here, there were some pockets of Haight and other areas that have really just lost family homes. As you know gentrification happened and the price went so high that once the original family members who had them passed away or sold out then the population just decreased.

So did you grow up here in San Francisco?

No, so I've been in San Francisco most of the time since 1998. All but five and a half years. When I needed to move for work I lived in New York and London between 2012 and 2017 and I moved back in late 2017, but otherwise I've lived in San Francisco all of that stretch since 1998. But in terms of growing up I was born in Santa Clara, I mentioned my mom went to Santa Clara University, we lived in the South Bay Area until I was about 10 years old, but after my parents got divorced, my mom, my brother and I moved to Sacramento so that's where I went to sixth grade through the end of high school. And then my mom and brother lived there for decades and as I mentioned moved here right before the pandemic.

For some reason I thought you had lived in New York for longer, because New York is where you began quilting, right?

That's right. So even though it was a fairly short period, I moved there in 2012 and started quilting if I remember correctly in 2013, I found a place there to take classes and learn how to quilt.

Can you tell me how you were already exposed to quilting that allowed you to go to that class?

Well, I come from a long line of quilters and so I had been thinking about learning how to quilt for a long time because a lot of our family's traditions are being carried on through other members of the family, like my mom is a fabulous cook and still does all of the traditional dishes, the southern dishes from Mississippi that we all love and enjoy eating, especially on the holidays. [Laughs] You know quilting was really starting to go by the wayside, my oldest living aunt who's my dad's sister, my Aunt Betty, is a talented quilter, she's in her 90s now but it's difficult for her to quilt anymore. But she's really the last of that line on that side of the family and then on my mom's side of the family, lots of them quilted. My grandmother, my great grandmother, lots did on both sides of the family, but like I said Aunt Betty is kind of the last of the line and so I was thinking, "Oh, maybe I should take this up as part of the family tradition but interestingly enough it wasn't until, it feels almost ironic, that I went to this huge metropolis and then that's when I actually started it. I think it's because I ended up with just kind of enough space in my life to try something new. When I was here in California where I lived my whole life I had my family close by, lots of friends, and lots of things I did all the time and I'm a lawyer on top of it so I'm always very busy. And then when I moved to New York I didn't know a lot of people. I was busy with work still, but I didn't have built-in friends and activities so I decided to see if I could finally take up quilting which I had been thinking about for a long time.

Did your mom ever quilt? I know you said she is a great cook, but did she carry on quilting?

No! It's interesting because she's a great cook and a seamstress, she used to make most of my clothes when I was a child, she's very talented. We had what we call a "Tom Thumb Wedding" at our church one time and she and one of our neighbors made a full blown wedding dress for a five year old me. [Amy: *Wow*] With beading and everything!

[Laughs] She had to wait a long time for the real one! There's plenty of photos of it but I wonder if she still has the dress? So she was very talented but she didn't take up quilting. It's interesting, I think a lot of the crafts that are coming back were such a utilitarian thing for my family. It wasn't thought about as an art form. That they didn't sort of need to do it anymore I think, once she left and moved to New York and then California. So, like I said she's great at sewing but didn't quilt.

So you began in New York, can you describe what that was like starting there?

The first [quilt] I made was through a class I took at The City Quilter that unfortunately is no longer there, it's gone the way those kinds of smaller businesses in the cities go. But, it was a wonderful shop and it was not too long after I went to New York and I saw this place called The City Quilter, and I called them up. I have fond memories of it because I remember speaking to someone on the phone and she asked me a few questions and then all the sudden she paused and she said, "Umm, dear, it sounds like you don't know how to sew?" [Laughs] I was like, "No, I don't know how to sew!" And then she starts laughing at me and says, "Girl, you gotta know how to walk before you can run! You can't sign up for the beginning quilting class, you gotta sign up for the beginning sewing class!" I was like, "Alright, just tell me what I gotta do and I'll do it!" [Laughs]

You didn't sew at all? You didn't have to take a home ec class?

I didn't sew at all. Even though my mom was very skilled, you know like you said, it kind of skips and moves around generations sometimes. So no, I never bothered to learn how to sew. So I took the beginning sewing class first, made a pillow for my mom. [Laughs] And then I took the beginning quilting class. And even though it was just a table runner it felt like an ambitious project for me because I am a bit of a perfectionist and my teacher was also a bit of a perfectionist so it took a long time to complete it. I kept on going to their office hours. But I had to finish it because it was going to be my mom's Christmas gift that year so I finished this Christmas table runner but I have it because she likes for us to use it every year so I bring it out and we do Christmas here

now most of the time. So she asked me to keep it here. So, I have that one downstairs and then I have another one I did when I was in New York. The guild that I was a part of, it's called The Quilters of Color Network of New York, I actually was in two guilds there. The other one was the New York City Metro Modern Quilt guild and I still keep in contact with both of them. But the Quilters of Color were fortunate enough to have an exhibition at the West Beth Gallery and so I did a quilt to prepare for that show and was happy to be selected, so that one is downstairs here and was included in that show and we also did a collective one with the group that was included there. So, that was a really fun experience before I left New York.

What was the joy of doing that class that made you want to continue? How did quilting complement or give you something different in your life, professional or otherwise, that you didn't yet receive? One quilter I met talked about gaining perseverance and patience.

I certainly have a lot of perseverance. I think my mother and anyone else who's known me for a long time would tell you that! What I probably don't have naturally a lot of is patience. [Laughs]

[Laughs] *Me too!!*

[Laughs] Right, I'm like, "Let's go!!" And so, I actually like that it taps into that different part of me, that you do sort of have to calm down and I can't be perfect in a quilt. I like the Amish approach that a quilt isn't even supposed to be perfect, only God is perfect. So, don't worry about perfection in your quilts. So, I liked having that connection to history. I agree with you that perseverance and patience are a part of it. I also like the communal aspect of it. Actually, what I miss the most at times, because sometimes I feel like, ok, I am just trying to get a project done. I'm working on one right now for one of my friends who survived a stroke and I wanted to make one for her. So you know I'm getting through it. As you said, I have a very busy schedule. But, I much more enjoy when I'm just together with a group of other quilters and we're exchanging ideas and

working on projects together. I attended a quilting retreat just a few weekends ago, earlier in August and that part is what gives me great joy. That's what I saw my aunts and my grandmothers and great grandmothers. They usually wouldn't even work on an individual project, they would come together if somebody needed a quilt, they'd all bring their pieces and lay it out and work on it together. I wish I had more time for that because that's my favorite part of it.

Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about your experience with the African American Quilt Guild of Oakland? There's a lot of play and intimacy and intergenerational dynamics with that group, a lot of joking...What was it like for you finding that group and how did you come to find that group?

Yes. So the way I found it was pretty remarkable. Coming from The Quilters of Color Network of New York, when I let them know that I was moving back home to California and specifically to the Bay Area one of the folks in that group said, "Oh, do you know Marion Coleman?" And I said, "No, I don't know her but I've heard of her." And [she said], "Oh, let me give you Marion's number, you definitely need to connect with Marion going back out there." I was like, "Ok..." [Laughs] They gave me her email and so when I moved back I emailed her shortly thereafter and I was like, "Oh, I realize you don't know me, I don't want to bother you, but you know I was part of this guild and I'm moving out." So, she wrote me back *immediately* and was very kind and told me all about The African American Quilt Guild of Oakland and told me when the meetings were and where they were and she said simply that she couldn't attend but she didn't really say why, [she said], "I can't attend the meetings right now but you should go and here are the people you should meet and all of that." I took it with the grain salt and checked back in with her a couple of other times and she was always very responsive and gracious. I had no idea that at the time the reason she couldn't attend was because she was ill. And so I never got to actually meet her in person but she was my connection to the guild. You know one of the early, founding members. I'm not sure if she was officially a founder but she was certainly early in the creation of that guild and probably its most famous member ever and an incredibly talented artist.

And it sounds like in the conversations I've had with Ora, a deeply committed person who was fostering new quilters and Ora's shepherd in the realm of quilting.

Absolutely. And Ora is such an amazing person. She's such a good quilter but she's even a better person I think! [Laughs] She also has that warm, gracious, open spirit about her. So getting to know her and Niambi and so many other people in the guild, like I said, that's my favorite part of it is building that community.

And so you joined the guild post pandemic?

It would have been prepandemic because I moved back out here in November of 2017, so I would have joined the guild probably in early 2018.

You mentioned working with other people, do you work with other people from the guild at all sometimes?

Unfortunately I have very little time, so almost never. But, this quilting retreat that I attended a few weeks ago had a number of members from the guild. So it was really fun to just spend some time with them there.

So with you and your job, how do you find time with quilting? Where do you find the time and when do you quilt amongst a very busy life with your job?

So, I'll make a lawyer joke and say, objection assumes facts not in evidence! [Laughs]

I don't know what that means! [Laughs]

Which means, I don't have the time! [Laughs]

[Laughs] Ok.. I was like...?

[Laughs] Law nerd jokes. So, this week is a perfect example. I had to be in Mountain View for work on Tuesday and Wednesday. I got up at about 5:30AM on Tuesday and had to leave by 7AM and I got home at 9:45PM. You know that doesn't leave a lot of time for quilting. And one of my teams now is in a very big trial so even though it's Labor Day weekend we'll be staying in close contact over the weekend and they'll be working very hard. I'll be checking in with them, closing arguments are Tuesday morning and so yeah, there's a lot going on even when it's nights, weekends and holidays for me. I look forward to that day when I can be like my retired friends in the guild and spend a lot more time quilting and going to retreats and things like that. But, you know, for me right now it's a great way to use my brain in a different way. So when I do get the time, it's like, "Ok." Like Victoria Findlay Wolfe who I met in New York who was part of the New York Metro Modern Quilt Guild, I think she was the founding member of that one... You know she's a big proponent of just taking even... I think *15 Minutes of Play* is the name of one of her books. Even if you just take a little bit of time to use your hands and play a little bit and be a little creative, it really does, I feel like I breathe in a different way. I'm just able to escape a bit. Quilting is tough because it's not like knitting where you can take it on a plane or the train with you. You usually have to do the basic amount of set up and all. But, I think it's worth what I do, to think about something else for a while and let my brain function in that way, and then I can get back to the work more easily.

I can imagine as a lawyer you're constantly in a state of analyzing information. Is a correlation of piecing things together and trying to understand how to make things work though maybe?

Yes, no that's true. So, to be able to go in this more creative way, especially with the more African American tradition of quilting. You know, the way my brain works because I am naturally that way and was trained as a lawyer... I sort of want precision and I like to learn how to do that and all... There's a man named Ed Bostock who was a really great quilter in that New York group, that Quilters of Color group there. We got along really well so we would often sit next to each other at the guild meetings and we had taken a class together and I was asking him what he was doing with the project and he was like,

“Oh, I ended up ripping it apart, I’m gonna do something else.” And I was like, “Really!? You made really good progress and all.” And he was just talking to me a little bit more and he was also from the south, he’s passed away now sadly. But he was really talented and he says to me at one point, “You know, you said your mom is a really good cook.” I said, “My mom’s a great cook.” [Laughs] He said, “Tell me this, how often does she measure when she cooks?” And he was like, “I already know the answer.” [Laughs] Never! She feels it. He’s like, “You already know the basics of how to make a quilt now, what you’ve got to get in touch with now is how our ancestors did it.” Figuring out what colors make sense together, coming up with a pattern in your mind and being able to piece that together as opposed to just following the very strict rules with the rulers—and the rotary cutters.

And being so technically rigid.

Right.

That sort of segways to another question I have. What is your process in making a quilt from beginning to end? Do you see a pattern that you like, are you creating your own?

So to date I’ve mostly done patterns, you know, [I’ll] see a pattern I like and have fun shopping for fabric although as you can see I could probably never need to buy more fabric for the rest of my life. [Laughs]

This is probably the first quilt room that I’ve been in where it’s not strictly...I’ve been in spaces where quilters have so, so much fabric. You have an eighth, maybe a tenth of what folks generally have.

[Laughs] Alright, that makes me feel a little better!

And you’re very organized too.

I am very organized, I like... it feels like a fabric store. So I can see what I have. You know, that's part of my process, what I enjoy probably the most is picking out the colors and patterns that I want to come together, even if I am using a more set pattern I love working with fabric in that way. My mom also teases about this because I love buying beautiful fabric when I'm [visiting] places. My husband is from London so I always go to Liberty when I'm there! [Laughs] And I have to resist the temptation to buy more and more fabric. And my mom just laughs at me and [she says], "You realize your grandmother never bought a single piece of fabric in her life." [Laughs] You know, if my grandfather was wearing out his overalls she would just snip a piece off the bottom and save it and keep all the scraps together. So, to remember her I try to at least sneak in one piece of used denim into every quilt I make now. But it is funny that I do love buying beautiful fabric. I love vibrant colors, especially in the pinks and purple ranges. I do love some of the florals and the modern fabrics.

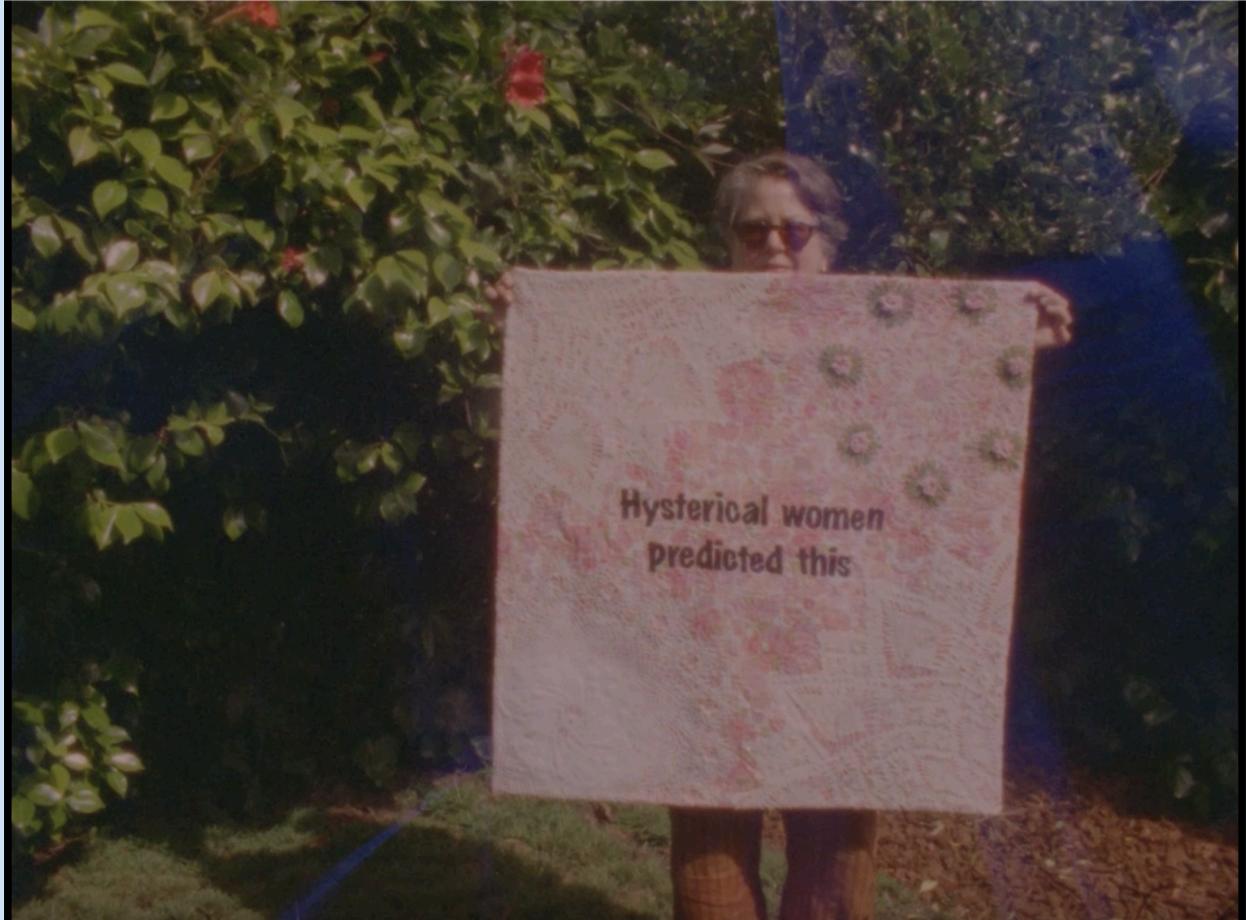
Do you have a perspective about quilting in the Bay Area? Starting in New York as a quilter and being part of guilds there and then coming out here, what's your perspective on the Bay Area?

I hadn't really thought about that before, that's a good question. Because it definitely pulls from different segments of people, from each of the regions and all. Being in New York and somebody like Victoria, she comes from Minnesota... And that was in that Metro Modern Quilt guild. There are a number of people who come from that strong midwest to Pennsylvania quilting tradition which is very different and part of it is just culturally, generationally, etc. But that New York Metro Modern Quilt guild skewed much younger, much more, you know sort of the modern... Not just in terms of the patterns and fabrics but much more negative space, more simple geometric shapes... It was interesting to see those aesthetics and some of the people whose work I really admired through that. Which was really different than even in the same region of the folks I tended to see at the Quilters of Color Network. More in the Quilters of Color group we would get people from Caribbean backgrounds too, West Indies and you'd see some more of those influences.

Where is out here, you know it's not a monolith, but particularly among the African American quilters here, usually it was a story very similar to my family's. You know, they're from the deep south, might have been born there themselves but at some point a family member was part of that the Great Migration, of leaving Jim Crow law which both of my parents grew up under, under deeply rural segregated circumstances and looking for a better life and more opportunity and that's how they ended up in California. So it tends to be more of that similar story that I find here and it came through a lot in the exhibition at Routed West³. It was often a similar thread or story.

³ This is the Routed West: Twentieth Century African American Quilts in California exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, BAMPFA that took place from June-November 2025, curated by Elaine Yau.

Lorraine Woodruff-Long



Lorraine holding her quilt, "Hysterical Women"

Lorraine, better known in the quilting community as *Quiltinginthefog*, quilts everyday in her garage studio in San Francisco. She began making quilts for her children's school fundraisers. Since the pandemic, and losing her job in the non-profit sector, Lorraine has dedicated all of her time quilting. This has taken on the form of making improvisational and "commentary" quilts, from climate change to abortion rights as well as teaching and lecturing in various local and national quilt guilds and groups. Originally from Houston, Lorraine's lineage are mostly sewers and crafts people, but were never quilters. In the Bay Area, Lorraine teaches quilting at City College of San Francisco Extension and SCRAP-SF.

How did you get into quilting and how did you start?

I grew up sewing and sewing a lot of my own clothes. My mom had said, in trying to get me to sew, "I'm not going to buy you all the clothes you want, but I will buy you all the fabrics and patterns if you sew it yourself." So it did force me to learn how to sew and she was very good at details and I feel like I had a good foundation in sewing. When I went out to the Peace Corps I actually made a whole lot of my clothes that I had there. And then I came back here, started working in San Francisco and I don't even know if I had a sewing machine, I wasn't sewing clothes. I had no time and it wasn't really what I was interested in.

And then fast forward almost twenty years and my kids were in a preschool co-op and one of the jobs, everyone had a family job, was making a quilt which we then used for fundraising. It was auctioned off. I remember looking at it and thinking, "That just looks so hard." It never would occur to me, like how would you make something like that? And so one of my friends from the co-op who did a lot of quilting said, "You know it really isn't that hard, you learn these little tricks." So I started...the internet was starting to blow up so I really started going online and there was Flickr and people started doing blogs and stuff... So I started looking at what they were doing and really wanted to learn how to do it and here at the DeYoung Museum in 2006 they had the quilts of Gee's Bend and that just blew my mind. I thought, "Oh my god, this is so amazing, I really want to do this." I was so inspired by what they were doing. And I was seeing things like quilt police, "use this pattern," the points had to be, you know I just felt very intimidating and I liked how free form it was. There is a wonderful and local and very well known quilter in the area, Joe Cunningham, who had said....He did a talk about quilters and how they came in and what their perspective is and he said a lot of people started quilting again in the bicentennial and there's a whole group of people who then started quilting during the time where the Gee's Bend [show was] circulating around. [These quilters] have a different mind set and are sort of free form and improv and that's totally what influenced me.

So I was mostly doing it on weekends as a way to feel creative. I did a lot of stuff with my family's denim and t-shirts and things. And then I started to do a lot for quilt fundraising auctions in the school. So, that is mostly what I did for a really long time.

So you never did baby quilts for your kids?

Not really, no...I think my first real quilt was when they had bunk beds and I had a Sunset magazine pattern and I made this "Log Cabin" quilt with a foundation piecing and I think that's the first quilt I ever made. So I was starting to do things for them, for the home. But a lot of it was just using up our family's stuff. And then I learned about the Modern Quilt guild and started to see people posting things that were interesting to me so I would want to try that technique. I did take a little class that was at City College with a friend to learn some basic things one semester. And that was helpful to learn like, "Here's how you can make half-square triangles really fast." Just kind of a little sampler of all the techniques and that was really good to know. But mostly I just did it by myself and when Donald Trump came around [Laughs] I started doing a lot more quilts about things that matter to me.

I went to the Woman's March with my daughter in 2017 and started collecting phrases that I was really moved by a lot. And I love seeing protest march texts. And I was always really intrigued by Barbara Krueger and artists like Jenny Holzer. And so I was collecting texts and I started doing a lot of quilts about things that matter to me, particularly abortion rights and climate change.

I lost my job in the pandemic, spent all my time downstairs because I had no space else to be in our house, [Laughs] and was quilting like crazy and that's when I got a different piece in the DeYoung Open, it sold, I bought a long arm. I feel like it's like the Malcolm Gladwell... you hear about the 10,000 hours thing. It was like after the pandemic it was me putting in my 10,000 hours of quilting. All I was doing was quilting and experimenting and creating new things and really started doing a lot more art quilts and statement, I call them "Commentary" quilts on issues like climate change and certainly

democracy and abortion rights and gun violence and also really pushing myself creatively, what I call “Poly Chrome” quilts, mostly improvisational, pieced things that I do. And I also do a whole lot of things where I challenge myself with repurposed clothing.

And I started teaching, that’s the other thing. I did a few classes at this local, repurposing and reuse site called SCRAP in San Francisco and teaching basic quilting. They were really popular, they were selling out, but it was a really difficult space to teach in, it’s a warehouse, nothing is ergonomic. But then I was approached by City College Extension to do a proposal, so I’ve been really teaching a lot with them. I do a lot of lectures and workshops with guilds and travel around and do a lot of Zoom stuff and in the meantime I have also gotten things in several museums. A lot of museum shows and participating in a lot of artist groups and stuff.

And are you a member of a guild here?

Yeah, I am a member of the San Francisco Quilt guild and then also the Modern Quilt guild. I am a member of several guilds actually. SAQA, the Studio Arts Quilts Associates, and then EBHQ. I mostly just go to the meetings virtually and then there are a few smaller groups that have formed...Like I am in two groups that are pulled out of the San Francisco Quilt guild, we meet every month and do different things.

Did you have any family that quilted?

Nobody in my family quilted. I have this quilt that somehow we found that I think was maybe made by a great grandmother from my dad’s side but I didn’t know about it. It did turn out that [my other] great grandmother, who was a doctor who was here during the 1906 earthquake... My mom’s family goes way way back here from the Gold Rush time. She graduated in 1904 from USC. She did some crafty things, even as a doctor. About a year and a half ago my uncle had this beautiful quilt and my mother kept insisting, “Oh, that’s from his wife’s family.” But then I realized there was a little label that had my

aunt's name and my uncle said, "No, no, no. Great grandma DeBloit made it." It's a tiny little hand quilted thing. I'd love to replicate it. It's called "Ocean Wave." My mom insisted it wasn't her but it was clearly her. But yeah, no [quilters]. A lot of knitters, and sewists but nobody quilted.

Were they working? Oftentimes women who work full time...

No, yeah, I think it just... You know my Texas grandma was really an amazing seamstress and she knitted these beautiful things for me and she did this amazing embroidery and crewel work but yeah nobody... I didn't know anything about it. I just thought it was just this kind of old lady thing really until I saw some people... again when I had kids. I was in my forties before I began to see things like, "Oh!! That's something I would be interested in learning!" I always just thought it was just too hard. And it's not. It's harder than making clothing, I feel like making clothing is very easy after quilting.

For you, was that balance of working full time and quilting just really challenging?

Well, it was really... quilting was my creative outlet. There's a really wonderful quilter whose name is Victoria Findlay Wolfe and she had a book, or maybe it was a blog, and I remember one of them was about "15 minutes of Play." She was like, "Ok, you come home from work, just do something for 15 minutes." Because, you kind of sometimes feel like if you're doing something creative you need to have hours ahead of you to do it. She goes, "Just come home, do something for 15 minutes and that's all you're gonna do." And so I was really doing, you know I'd do a block a day, I could make something, a 4 inch thing, [Laughs] that was very interesting and in just 15 minutes. So, I've made whole sets of quilt blocks that were improvisational, really just with doing that for a few minutes after work.

My kids at this point were in middle school and didn't need me driving them around so much because you live here and you can take public transit everywhere and that was really when I started... I would have all weekend to do kind of what I wanted and it

wasn't so demanding as a parent and I would quilt, you know, for 8 to 10 hours. [Laughs] Saturday and Sunday! And [then] I started getting a lot of things done. It was just so fulfilling. It was definitely feeding my creative juices. And, I never thought of myself as a visual artist. I didn't take any art classes growing up.

You did business, you said?

Yeah, I was a business major. Such a stupid thing to be a major in. I mean, it was because I was very much told, "You need to go to college to have your career!" And my business degree served me fine but it was not at all what I was interested in and I was a musician growing up. I played flute and piccolo from middle school through college and even when I moved out here that was my hobby. So if you would have told me, "What is your creative thing?" I think I just would have said, "Oh, I'm a musician." Even though I hadn't been playing for quite a few years by the time I even started doing this. So, it's been really interesting to kind of do this adjustment of starting to think of myself, especially when I didn't go back to my full time non-profit job, to think of myself [as] "Oh, you're an artist, you're a visual artist." Calling myself that has been a bit of an evolution.

Right. And you're starting to build out an identity in teaching and traveling. You are a quilt artist, or an artist that quilts.

Yeah.

I'm curious if you could walk me through that process of making an improvised quilt, does it start with, "I like this color, I am considering this shape," and you're not really clear how it's going to look at the end or do you sketch something out?

I do a little bit of both. But some of my favorite things were like I just woke up. I'll show you some things over here, like there's this thing that has all these plusses. I literally woke up and I was like, "I saw somebody that made this little plus block." You just pick up a square, you cut it in half, you sew a little strip in, you iron it, you cut it the other way

and you sew another strip in. And I just sat there and started to literally pull out a scrap. “Oh here’s a color I like! What’s a color that looks different from that?” And I would literally just make it piece by piece, you know some of them are really small, like an inch or two and others are more like five inches and just like piecing it together, just kind of going into the zone and making. I do a lot of things that way where it’s just like, “I’m just gonna start making a bunch of things and then see how it’s gonna go together.” So there’s a lot of that. Or, sometimes I might be making, there’s another one over there that was my 15 minutes of play...things where I’ve made another quilt for a school auction and I had all the scraps in this little bucket and I just thought, “Hmm, what can I do with those?” And I literally started to make four inch squares from this collection of scraps. And, I had lots of orange squares and then eventually stripped it all together. So, a lot of times it’s just going with it. Or, having a technique that you want to explore, “I want to make a lot of half square triangles.” And so making a bunch of them and arranging them in some sort of crazy way.

So sometimes it’s learning or honing in on a skill or technique and then sometimes you’re playing with color, you’re playing with shapes...?

Yeah, like right now I am making a few things that are a variation...I call them “Spontaneous Curves” but they’re improvisational, it’s called a “Drunkards Path.” I’m doing a retreat on that, a three day retreat, and people get really nervous [about] doing curves, like it’s really hard for them. I want them to get over the fear of that and so I am going to show them how to do it and be very improvisational. I’m gonna show them the technique and just make them [do it]. [Laughs] One of things in my class I’ve been saying is, “Just make shit, just do shit.” Don’t think about it a lot, just put it out there, take two pieces, sew it together and see what you think. So right now I am doing this thing where I’m showing all the ways that you can make these spontaneous curve blocks but also they’re not so hard to make. But also, you can arrange them in all of these amazing ways. You can take the same 16 blocks and arrange them in completely different ways. I am really fascinated just by, like it’s a technique but maybe it’s an

improvisational twist on a technique and then there's all these other things you can do with it. And just kind of getting people to feel comfortable with playing and exploring.

It sounds like for you when you started quilting you weren't needing to make a "Double Wedding Ring" quilt and do it so perfectly.

I didn't start out that way but I do try and do twists on traditions. Like I had piles of scraps that were green. So, I literally just sewed a whole bunch, like sewed a sheet together, that were little tiny scraps of green and used it like fabric and then made a "Double Wedding Ring" from that. So the "Double Wedding Ring" is white and the side part is just this crazy pieced together green stuff. I like knowing how to do traditional patterns and then doing a twist on them. Like blowing them up really big, or a kind of a weird color. A twist on tradition is what I say.

For you, it sounds like your primary drive is to work alone?

It started out as my own creative exploration. But, I did have friends that are fellow mom parents that I knew from my kid's schools. Who are in the quilt guild and were doing it. And I joined, but it was always just after work. I always remember it being so hard to get there after work. [Laughs] It's like I was one of the few people with a full time job and it was a demanding full time job, so I did what I could. But, I didn't really feel connected to the guild that much, at that point in time. And then I was invited by some people who were in the San Francisco quilt guild, you know people have kind of split off and formed their own identity groups. But, it was a group of people that were more modern, they were calling themselves "Be Modern." They were like, "You should come be a part of..." So I've been in that group and in fact we are meeting tonight [and have met] for probably 12 years. Those ended up being my good friends from there and a couple of people from that group, we split off and also did one that was about making group quilts together.

I am curious if you can describe the satisfaction you got from quilting that was different from being a mom or working in non-profit spaces? What did quilting give you?

I think it's going in the creative zone. It's going into a task and you're completely focused and you're creating something and it's like, "Let's try this, I like how this is looking and oh look what I did." There's so many steps to making a quilt and sometimes there's a failure, but once you complete something you're like, "Oh my god! I did that." But, I love the process. You're trying to design something, you're trying to create something, you explore a technique and you're seeing how it all comes together. But I love being in the zone.

But what about fabric in particular? Because it could be painting or....?

Yeah, somebody asked me, "Why do you quilt?" And I'm like, "Well, I never did anything else except being a musician." I worked in advertising for many years. I've always been on the business end of a creative business. So, I was a marketing person for an architecture firm and then I went into advertising, but I was an account person so you're considered the completely uncreative people, that's what you get branded. But what was great was I was working with a really big agency and they said, any creative agency course we will pay for it. So at the time UC Berkeley had an extension here and I took the old fashioned photography, you know you do things in the darkroom and then I took a drawing class. First of all, I had never taken a drawing class and I was like, "Oh good, I can do this!" I remember taking a life drawing class and it just made me realize, "Oh, I can do this, I can see this." And my husband's very creative and he's very confident in that way and we love going to museums... He's been a big influence on me. I like contemporary and abstract art and that was definitely an influence he made on me. But I think taking just a few semesters of it made me realize, like, "Oh! I can do this!" And again, it was kind of a thing where you get in the zone and "I'm gonna try this!" And not too long after that we got married and had kids so I didn't have time to do anything. [Laughs]

So these classes were before the kids?

Yeah, they were way before the kids, I think it was before I was even married, it might have been around the time we got married. So I just had more time on my hands. But, it made me think, "Oh! Maybe I can do this!" And I would love to explore it more, but that's all I did. I have never really painted. As a little kid... You know my mom was actually very creative and painted and stuff and I remember trying things. But then again, when I was growing up you had to pick your art in high school and it was going to be music. So, I couldn't take a painting class or an art class and I just never did it after that.

Is part of liking quilting the functional...?

No, a lot of it is like, "That's what I know how to do." I would love to do glass. Right now I feel like I can do anything in fabric, I can solve any problem. One of the things I love about teaching is people will be like, "I'm stuck! I don't know how to do this." And I can help you figure out how to fix it or how to make it work or how you need to pull it out and do it. And I feel like watching glass [making] is thinking it would be so cool to learn how to do that, but there's so much to know, it's so technical and it's also so physical. And I think that's the thing. Like, oh God, I would kind of love to do it, but learning a whole other thing right now takes me away from what I am trying to do and explore. Like, I am in the midst of trying to create a lot of stuff for a show in the fall and right now I just got to be balls to the wall and do this thing. Which has been very fun.

It sounds like you know your material and you know how it works?

Yeah. I'm not going to live long enough to do everything that I want to be doing, there's so much that I want to be creating and I have so many ideas and I can't get to them all. I'm not bored of it yet.

Do you do any hand work?

Yeah. I do like to do machine quilting and embellishing it with hand quilting. I have done quite a bit of hand quilting. I have two things on our bed right now that are hand quilted. I love the look of it. I like it all and want to do it all.

At this point are you quilting everyday?

Yeah. I am either quilting everyday or I am doing something about the business of it. I'm doing a lot of teaching, so about everyday or so there's someone I need to be following up with and doing a lecture, or I am submitting to shows or submitting to teach. I am doing my first Zoom, online workshop later this month on texts for quilting, particularly people who want to learn how to make texts for protest signs. So, I'm hoping to do that every two months. But it's my first foray into getting that technical part set up. Also the business of managing an art career. I started a newsletter and I have a website. That's about a day a week, at least doing that stuff.

Is there anything else you'd like to share that I haven't asked you?

This whole part of my life has completely been a fantasy of what I would have liked to have done. I would never have imagined this is the way it has gone or that it's been so fun or so successful but also I have just met so many amazing people. I can't remember if I told you but there's this guy named Robert Putnum, he wrote a book called *Bowling Alone*. He really talks about how a hundred years ago people were in clubs. First they're all going to church more but they were in PTA and they were in Rotary Clubs and bowling leagues and how [now], people aren't doing that. He wrote this book before the internet and before social media and kind of lamented how we are becoming more isolated and not with other groups. And, I remember thinking that just in the Bay Area alone... You know if you're a quilter and you're lonely, you don't need to be because there's like a quilt guild in every little town. I mean every neighborhood in the Bay Area!

I actually need to make a list because I've been to like 15 in the Bay Area. You never have to be alone, there's a quilt guild for you.