

Delta Sources and Resources

Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective
Berkeley Art Museum
and Pacific Film Archive
Berkeley, California
Online Exhibit: bampfa.org/program/virtual/rosie-lee-tompkins-retrospective
by Marcus C. Tribbett

For a limited time, through the end of 2020 and due to its closure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Berkeley Museum of Art is offering a substantial portion of its exhibit of the artwork of renowned quilt maker and Arkansas native Rosie Lee Tompkins (1936-2006) viewable for free online.

Tompkins, whose real name was Effie Mae Martin Howard, was born and raised in Lincoln county, Arkansas, where she grew up working in the cotton fields and learned traditional quilting from her mother. In her early twenties, she migrated to Richmond, California, studied to become a practical nurse, and went to work in convalescent homes. For two decades she did little quilting before taking it up again in the late 1970s.

She met collector Eli Leon in 1985 while selling her quilts at a flea market. Leon eventually purchased hundreds of her works, which were recently bequeathed to BAMPFA, along with quilts by many other African American artists. According to the online *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* entry on Tompkins, originally written by Leon, she was a “deeply religious woman” who saw her process as divinely guided and often used Biblical symbols and embroidered quotations, finding “solace in her special blend of prayer and needlework while further developing ways to infuse her patchworks with spirituality.”

Further, Leon writes that her “affinity for changeable design, vibrant color, bold contrast, multiple patterns, non-four-sided borders, and radical shifts in scale and color scheme” are integral to the African-American patchwork tradition, as are two other aspects of her art: its improvisational jazz-like quality and the collaboration of others. While Tompkins/Howard pieced the tops (the art), other women finished the quilts with wadding and backs

(the craft). Together, these aspects of her work indicate a clear inheritance of African artistic traditions. Leon notes, “Her unlimited elaborations on familiar patterns . . . show an aesthetic of variation reminiscent of the raffia embroideries of the Bakuba of central Africa and of certain royal Kente cloths of the Asante of Ghana and the Ivory Coast.” In turn, Tompkins/Howard’s own work has been very influential on succeeding generations of quilters.

A compendium of recent reviews of the exhibit discussed in *The Week* magazine (24 July 2020), indicate that this influence will be long lasting. In particular, Roberta Smith, of *The New York Times*, stands out, calling her an “artist of singular greatness” whose works “come at us with the force and sophistication of so-called high art, but are more democratic . . . a new standard against which to measure contemporary art.” Smith’s excellent 26 June 2020 online article, “The Radical Quilting of Rosie Lee Tompkins,” is an outstanding introduction to Tompkins/Howard’s work in its own right. She sees in it “further evidence of the towering African-American achievements that permeate the culture of this country” and that must be understood and recognized, “especially where art is concerned,” as a necessary part of the “healing that America faces.”

The online viewable part of the exhibit includes a slideshow featuring images of a dozen of Tompkins’s quilts; a seventy-minute virtual video tour of the exhibit led by BAMPFA Director and Chief Curator Larry Rinder; a downloadable nineteen-page PDF “Family Guide” that includes many more images of the artwork, pictures of and biographical information about the artist, and activities designed to encourage both kids and adults to analyze, interpret, and understand Tompkins’s techniques, themes, and artistry as well as encourage viewers to design and assemble their own art; and finally the exhibition’s main page which itself features several discussions and videos by its various curators and other experts.

Though Tompkins/Howard died in her home in Oakland, California, in late 2006, she was buried “down home” in the Natural State. Her art, and the tradition it both embodies and shaped, lives on. Take a look. ▲▼▲