

## The Brooklyn Rail

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### The New Bend

By Charles Moore

<https://brooklynrail.org/2022/03/artseen/The-New-Bend>



Curated by Legacy Russell, *The New Bend* features the works of twelve contemporary artists exploring race and gender issues in the textile space. The exhibition celebrates Gee's Bend cultures, blending regional tradition with the power of cooperative feminism that took place in the Boykin, Alabama area, where the women of Gee's Bend made quilts to stay warm, protecting their children while they took shelter in unheated shacks without running water, phones, or electricity. The region featured Black women working together toward economic sustainability, fueled by creativity and survival instincts, from the postbellum era into the twentieth century. It has only been over the last two decades, however, that their quilts have been exhibited as art objects.

Following this trend, Russell invited artists including Anthony Akinbola, Eddie R. Aparicio, Dawn Williams Boyd, Diedrick Brackens, Tuesday Smillie, Tomashi Jackson, Genesis Jerez, Basil Kincaid, Eric N. Mack, Sojourner Truth Parsons, Qualeasha Wood, and Zadie Xa for a contemporary take on the region's craftwork and textiles.

Russell admits the exhibition has long been a dream of hers. A curator who explores the ties between race, technology, gender, and economics, she first learned about Gee's Bend in her family home, not the study of art history. "We're teaching abstraction and modernism, and Gee's Bend was never part of the deck," she explains. Omitted from the canon, Gee's Bend has largely been mythologized, and Russell hopes to start a more contemporary conversation on the perspectives at play, working across generations, and experimenting with textiles in a storytelling approach, all while honoring Black femmehood.

The participating artists' practices and perspectives vary, both in background and specialization; the oldest in the room was born in 1952, and the youngest in 1996. Dawn Williams Boyd, for example, has turned to quilting to confront the South's complicated past, while Tuesday Smillie blends vinyl, textiles, spray paint, sequins, plastic, and

twine to hone in on an entirely different vernacular: shedding light on the hard-earned nature of African and feminist histories, examining the relationship between the riot and the parade. Then, there's Anthony Akinbola, the Nigerian American artist whose work stands the test of time; he takes everyday materials and expands them into canvases that, much like Smillie's work, paint the picture of a brighter future. The simultaneously innate and effortless style the Gee's Bend women poured into their creations spoke to the artist, whose piece *Jubilee* (2021) features durag and acrylic on wooden panel. Akinbola applied the very cloth designed to hold one's hair in place to the stretcher bars like a cap pulled tight against the head. The durag, historically used to assimilate African hair into Western standards of beauty, creates an effect that's striking and peaceful in equal measure.

Russell appreciates the artist's use of the material in a painterly fashion, while Akinbola elaborates that he intentionally wanted the durag to get lost in the piece's totality—to be camouflaged atop the canvas. Part of his aptly named "Camouflage" series, which explores the loss of identity around stereotype threat, *Jubilee* reveals that those who wear durags have often lost their identities or become somewhat flat in the way others perceive them. To soften this perspective, Akinbola used a tender pastel color palette. The effect is powerful. "A lot of the time with durags, they come in these very bold colors, reds and blacks and blues," he explained. To add nuance to the stereotype of the durag, the artist channeled Easter Sunday and the feeling of celebrating with his family to create a work featuring lush pastels: oranges and yellows, pinks and off-whites. Infused with energy and warmth, his recontextualization of these textiles are perhaps the perfect homage to the women of Gee's Bend.