

ROSIE LEE TOMPKINS: SEVEN QUILTS

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Rosie Lee Tompkins, who is considered by some to be the greatest quilter who ever lived, rarely made a quilt. That is because she was almost exclusively concerned with pieced tops, the sewn together pieces of fabric that form the top layer of a traditional quilt. To “quilt” is to add an inner batting and backing to the pieced top, giving the textile substance, strength and greater capacity for warmth. Tompkins, however, was primarily focused on the visual (and spiritual) aspects of her works, not their everyday functionality. Of her over five hundred works, the vast majority were either quilted by others (women whom Tompkins never met) or left unquilted.

So, it is a rare opportunity to see, in this exhibition, seven textiles that Tompkins quilted herself. In these works, we can appreciate several distinctive characteristics of her quilting. For most of these pieces, Tompkins created a border by folding the edge of the backing fabric so that it forms a frame around the pieced top; thus, the backing material (its color, pattern, imagery, texture) becomes an essential element of the composition. When Tompkins quilted, she often preferred the technique known as “tying” in which the three layers of the quilt are connected by means of a length of yarn that ties them together. In Tompkins’ quilts, these ebullient colored ties are welcomed as an element of visual interest in themselves, bright accents that add dynamic energy even as they serve as an all-over, unifying motif.

Few of Tompkins’ quilts conform to the traditional scale of a bed covering. As the works here demonstrate, she composed at diverse scales and proportions and often departed from the standard rectangle to create asymmetrical forms that pull, crumple, and bend. There is something quite sculptural about these quilts that refuse to lay flat let alone maintain a polite rectilinearity. It is clear from the wide variations in the size and dimensions of her works that Tompkins was guided not by the traditional physical requirements of a quilt but by the visual and conceptual logic inherent in each piece she made.

The earliest work in this exhibition, ca. 1974, utilizes the traditional half-square motif to create a lively pattern of multi-colored triangles. The energy in this work derives from Tompkins' variation in the size of the triangles and from the way the solid color fabrics flow among the various patterned pieces, creating a feeling of depth and motion. Tompkins' choice of fabrics here is characteristically eccentric, ranging from a traditional black and white houndstooth to a festive Christmas design to a backing printed with the Budweiser logo that peeks around the edge as a provocative, decorative frame. A scattering of white yarn ties helps visually to unify this exceptionally complex composition.

A closer look at this quilt reveals something odd: a text, in reverse, embroidered in red. By turning the quilt over, the text becomes legible—indeed, the presence of two appliqued crosses on the backing suggests that the reverse side was meant to be seen as well as the front. In between the crosses, Tompkins has embroidered, “JOHN 3:16,” an allusion to the oft-quoted Biblical passage: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹ At the opposite end of the quilt, and inscribed upside down from this citation, Tompkins embroidered her own true first name, Effie, and “9-6-36,” the numerals of her birthday, directly above another scriptural allusion, “EX 20,” a reference to the Biblical passage that includes the Ten Commandments.² Beneath this, Tompkins embroidered, “MARK,” followed by a long and inscrutable list of numbers separated by colons. The name almost certainly refers to the Gospel of Mark and the numbers likely refer to chapters and verses in this Biblical book, which tells the story of the life and death of Jesus.

Tompkins was a devout member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church and quilt making was closely connected to her spiritual life. For her, the act of piecing and embroidering was a meditation on God. Tompkins credited God with her uncanny sense of color and with her talent for composing and piecing fabrics. Additionally, many of her quilts were made with particular family members or friends in mind and can be seen as prayers on their behalf.

One quilt that appears to have this kind of addressee includes the name of Tompkins' son, Alvin Levern Howard, embroidered in large letters and, just beneath this, his birth date, April 6, 1955. This quilt is striking both visually and conceptually for combining, in a scattering of half-squares and strips, bits and pieces of an American flag and a regulation US Army shirt. The shirt (including a nametag reading “Howard”) may allude to Alvin's service in the National Guard, although the Army shirt itself belonged to Alvin's brother, Sammy. “Job 36,” which appears just below her son's birthdate, alludes to a Biblical chapter in which Elihu admonishes his listeners to attend to God as a wise judge and to turn from the temptations of wealth. The chapter ends with a remarkably lyrical description of a thunderstorm as a metaphor for God's governance of nations:

- 27 He draws up the drops of water,
which distill as rain to the streams;
- 28 the clouds pour down their moisture
and abundant showers fall on mankind.
- 29 Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds,
how he thunders from his pavilion?

- 30 See how he scatters his lightning about him,
bathing the depths of the sea.
- 31 This is the way he governs the nations
and provides food in abundance.
- 32 He fills his hands with lightning
and commands it to strike its mark.
- 33 His thunder announces the coming storm;
even the cattle make known its approach.

The meaning of Tompkins' embroidered text "JOHN 1:1:3" is unclear because it contains three numerals divided by colons, instead of the usual two. Following this is embroidered "REV. 1:18" which refers to John's vision of Christ, who says to him, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." In this same chapter, John sees that Christ holds seven stars in his right hand, an image that is echoed in the scattered stars that appear across this quilt. On the line below, Tompkins embroidered "RUTH 4:6," which refers to an obscure verse concerning two men negotiating over a piece of land and the woman from Moab, Ruth. Finally, Tompkins includes the name "ESTHER," a biblical Book which relates the story of a Jewish woman who thwarts the genocide of her people. While not all of the passages that Tompkins cites have a clear relationship to her son or to the materials and composition of the quilt, it does seem that each citation was chosen with purpose and was, for her, an essential part of the work's overall meaning.

Formally, this quilt is a mind-bending amalgam of half-squares of various sizes, strips, and a border made in part from a whole American flag that has been used (upside down) as the backing for the quilt. Tompkins cleverly rhymes the stripes of the found flag with the strip motif incorporated into the quilt design. On the right-hand side, she added a vertical red stripe to serve as a striking background for a single orange cross which extends just beyond the frame of the quilt itself.

Another quilt in the exhibition, a small work made almost entirely of white and pastel hued women's underpants, serves as a remarkable contrast to the Alvin Howard quilt. Three black crosses and three black rectilinear forms create a visual counterpoint to these lighter colors, while a tiny area of white lace peeks out from between three other pieces of fabric. Despite the ostensibly simple grid logic of this piece, Tompkins' eccentric approach to scale and shape gives it a jumbled, haphazard look, with the grid appearing to crumble and collapse into itself on the right-hand side. The tension between order and disorder is characteristic of her work and it has been suggested that this approach may be a conscious symbolization of Tompkins' sometimes fragile emotional state. There are other clues that this work is to some degree a self-portrait. Most obviously, it includes her name and birthdate embroidered across the bottom. This work incorporates several scriptural citations including the familiar John 3:16 as well as Luke 24, Acts 4, and Mark 13. The embroidered name "MATTHEW" is likely a reference to the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. It's hard to say why Tompkins chose these particular citations though they must have had strong personal associations for her.

Another small work with qualities of self-portraiture is the work composed of a grid of black and peach-colored squares that are held to the backing with orange ties and edged with a brown frame. In this work, too, we see Tompkins' own name, Effie, embroidered along one edge accompanied by the numerals of her birth date which is closely followed by the number "68," which would have been her age in the year she made the quilt. At the opposite corner of the frame, Tompkins juxtaposed her own and her mother's years of birth: "36" and "17." There are two Biblical citations in this work. One is simply the name, "JOHN," presumably alluding to the book of the Bible, and the other reads "JOHN 1:2:3:" which is not an easily decipherable allusion. The colors of the quilt come close to what Tompkins thought of as her personal palette: orange, yellow and purple. Here, orange predominates, and purple is only seen in indistinct flecks embedded in the black fabric. Although yellow doesn't appear, the role of this lighter hue is played by the peach colored squares. As in the undergarments quilt, this work juxtaposes areas of relative order with others in which the checkerboard logic of the design seems to go strangely awry. This quilt is comprised of precisely 36 pieces of fabric, making concrete (and visible) one of the numbers most important to Tompkins, the year of her birth.

Perhaps the most unusual work in the exhibition is an untitled piece that has been dated as 2005-06, the final years of Tompkins' life. This eclectic work is unified by a bright red fabric that plays a dual role as a backing for a variety of pieced blocks and as a surface for embroidery and appliqué. The pieced blocks on the left side are comprised of men's ties arranged in a variety of irregular rectangles. By leaving areas of backing fabric visible between the blocks and highlighting their edges with bright green thread—essentially combining quilting and applique—Tompkins foregrounds quilting as a visual incident or motif. To the right of the tie blocks is a section comprised of half squares, strips, and one large piece of decorative Christmas fabric that appears to retain its thrift store tag on which Tompkins herself has written "Wednesday, November 26, 2003, Effie, 9-6-36-67."³ The embroidered text in this quilt also includes her name and birthdate as well as her ages during the period that she worked on the quilt: 69 and 70. Other numbers are scattered across the surface of the piece: 68, 71, 17, 12, 15, 1, 14, 6, 2, and 4 (which is inscribed in her idiosyncratic fashion), some of which are separated by colons and some not. It's hard to say what these numbers stand for. And the letters "MA" are equally inscrutable though they may well be an abbreviation for, or an unfinished inscription of, "Matthew." The Biblical citation, John 3:16, is, however, embroidered clear as can be on the right side of the quilt.

Two of the quilts in the exhibition have little or no embroidered text. One of these is a roughly square work combining half squares and strips in an astonishing variety of fabrics including Tompkins's signature velvet and velveteen materials. The juxtaposition of colored fabrics in various hues with black and white patterned pieces gives an effect of flickering light playing across the surface of the work, like a cubist interior seen in candlelight. The liveliness of this effect is accentuated by the many orange ties that are scattered across the surface. Barely visible at the top of the quilt is some white embroidery that, if the quilt is turned over, can clearly be read as the artist's name, Effie.

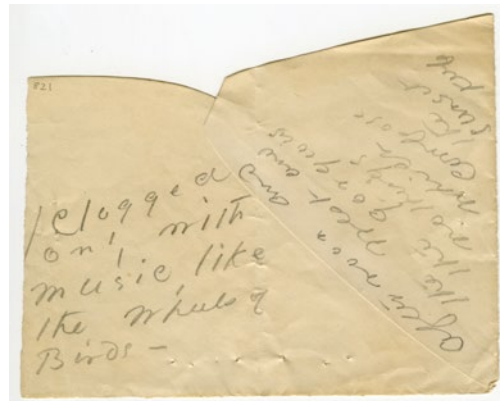
Finally, the largest quilt in the exhibition is a visually powerful study in red and white. Here, Tompkins has maintained a relatively regular grid of half squares but refrained from any con-

sistent pattern in the alteration of white and red sections, resulting in a field of jagged shapes that—as so often happens in her work—seems to have a life of its own. This uncanny dynamism is given a delightful extra spark by the use of dozens of squiggly white ties.

Having discussed the particulars of each work in this exhibition I would like to conclude with some general remarks about Tompkins’ use of embroidered text. How are we to understand, artistically, these texts that are, on the one hand, helter-skelter and, on the other hand, methodically inscribed? What is their relation to the carefully chosen and subtly composed pieced fabrics? Finally, what is the role of writing in these powerfully visual works? It is clear that the embroidered text captures Tompkins’ powerful spiritual feeling and her centeredness in the words of the Bible. It is important to understand that the fabrics themselves—the colors, textures, and shapes—were, for her, just as much allusions to divine experience as were the citations to sacred text. So, these diverse modes of expression and representation (quilting and embroidery, pattern and text, color and line) are not so much layered one upon the other as co-existent in a singular voice of spiritual reverence.

It is interesting to note that despite the frequent citations of Biblical chapter and verse there are, to my knowledge, no Biblical quotations in any of Tompkins’s quilts. There was, it seems, something about the numbers themselves that intrigued her. And we see this interest in numbers extend to the frequent repetition of her own birthdate and those of her family members, as well as her occasional counting of the very pieces of fabric that she included in a work. It is through numbers that scripture, personal history, and the quilts themselves come together.

One can compare Tompkins’ combination of text and pieced fabric with the unusual works—jotted texts on parts of envelopes—which Emily Dickinson created late in her career. In these strange works, for which the artist Jen Bervin has coined the term “gorgeous nothings,” Dickinson jotted poems, fragments of poems, and other elliptical texts onto bits of repurposed envelopes, often writing so as to accommodate in the pattern of her text,



the eccentric shape of the paper upon which she was writing. Dickinson, whose formal script was every bit as much the model of florid decorum as any nineteenth century letter-writer, used, in these gorgeous nothings, a coarse style that has been described as, “the fossil tracks of birds.”⁴ Dickinson was on to something remarkable in these works; that is, words live with us not only as sounds and ideas but as things in space and form. Embodying language was, for both Dickinson and Tompkins, a form of incarnation and a key to seeing the divine in the simplest things of life.

Thanks to Elaine Y. Yau for her insightful observations.

Notes

- 1 Because Tompkins was usually very thoughtful about the choices she made, I have maintained in my quotations of her embroidered texts the artist's own capitalizations and punctuation.
- 2 Rosie Lee Tompkins was a pseudonym which was adopted to protect the artist's privacy. Her given name was Effie Mae Martin. When she married, she took her husband's name and became Effie Mae Howard.
- 3 The meaning of the text on the tag is unclear. Tompkins sometimes noted the dates on which she sold quilts. However, the date on the tag precedes the period that the work is believed to have been made. Alternatively, she may have made this notation on the tag to mark the date on which this particular piece of fabric was acquired. In any case, the "67" that follows the date of her birth is the age she would have been in 2003. For a comparison of the handwriting on the tag to a known piece of Tompkins's autograph, see Horace Ballard, "Rosie Lee Tompkins: Sacred Structures" in Lawrence Rinder and Elaine Y. Yau, *Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective*, (Berkeley: UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2020), p. 45.
- 4 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, quoted in Marta Werner, "Itineraries of Escape," in *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings* (New York: Christine Burgin/New Directions Books, 2013), p. 211.