

Rosie Lee Tompkins

5 September – 17 October 2003

Opening reception: Friday, September 5, 6-8pm

Anthony Meier Fine Arts is pleased to announce an exhibition of quilts by Richmond, California artist Rosie Lee Tompkins. Born in 1936 in Southeast Arkansas, Tompkins now uses a pseudonym to protect her anonymity. Public awareness of her work is due to the efforts of a small group of enthusiastic collectors and curators headed by Oakland based scholar Eli Leon. In contrast to the high value placed on her privacy, Rosie Lee's quilts reference many personal connections and relationships, speaking volumes about her life, what she believes, and who is important to her.

One of fifteen children, Rosie Lee grew up helping her mother piece together quilts for family use. Wasting nothing, outgrown clothing, weary linens, and worn rags were all given new lives as utilitarian quilts. This recycling technique has stayed with Tompkins through the present day. The same fabrics can be seen in numerous quilts, with new pieces supplied by Rosie Lee's own home and wardrobe as well as friends' cast-offs and Salvation Army dollar sales.

There are few formal characteristics to Rosie Lee's work. Using a medley of fabrics, Tompkins creates a push and pull of color and shape, a surface tension. This energy in the quilts has led some critics to draw comparisons to 20th century painters Paul Klee and Hans Hoffman. The imprecise, angled borders of her works contain dense aggregates of triangles and quilts within quilts. Tompkins emphasizes experimentation and references traditional African textile patterns, many that are derived from a tribal belief that evil advances in straight lines and that broken lines thwart its progress. In fact, much of the inspiration for Rosie Lee's work comes from a deep religious faith that her quilt making is a gift from God and a form of spiritual worship. Many quilts are pieced together as protectors for specific family members.

Rosie Lee Tompkins pieces are multi-layered. For nearly twenty years her work has been shown in the folk-art context of African American quilt making, but has also been followed closely by contemporary art curators, as evidenced by her inclusion in the 2002 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial. Tompkins quilts can be approached and viewed from a number of angles but the depth and beauty of Rosie Lee's work leaves the distinction between art and craft a moot point. Her intuition and ingenuity with color and form are rare and seemingly effortless.