

interview with keisha roberts

Interviewer: Perhaps we should begin by defining what it is we are discussing. What is a traditional or utilitarian quilt?

Roberts: Layers of fiber joined by stitching.

Interviewer: What is a contemporary or art quilt?

Roberts: Layers of fiber joined by stitching.

Interviewer: I have noticed, in the quilt world, that there seems to be an argument brewing between many traditional quilters and contemporary quilt artists. Many traditional guilds and quilters exclude art quilts because they do not adhere to traditional quilting conventions. Some quilt artists counter that traditional quilts lack originality and assert that they are not art. What are your thoughts on this debate? Where do you situate yourself and your work within this debate?

Roberts: The arguments between makers of art quilts and makers of traditional and utilitarian quilts over authenticity, creativity, artistry, and intrinsic worth could not be more irrelevant. Traditional and utilitarian quilts are the maker's artistic expression. Art quilts are utilitarian. We need them. They serve a purpose. They are deeply rooted in tradition even as their makers reinterpret those traditions. It is like the oceans and the noon sky arguing over which is really blue. They are both blue and they meet at an infinite number of points along the event horizon. My work is one of those points.

Interviewer: Your work is comprised of both traditional and contemporary constructions. Can you talk about that? How did that come about?

Roberts: The first three quilts I completed could be considered traditional quilts, if you accept that as a useful designation. They are made of traditional quilt blocks, machine pieced and quilted in commercial cotton solids and prints. The backing fabric is black cotton.

The fourth quilt I completed, *Kente Sunrise*, is an original design of brightly colored, commercial batik fabric. It's backing fabric is also black. This piece marks one of my transitions.

The *Bogolanfini* series I began in 2002 was a complete departure from my earlier work. *Bogolanfini First* is the first piece I constructed by quilting acrylic painted and distressed on ripped, raw-edged canvas. It is also the first piece that features the exaggerated thread length that is now characteristic of much of my work. It's backing fabric is also black.

There was an opening. I felt so free as I quilted that piece. I felt as if I was singing or dancing as I made that quilt. I felt like I was finding my voice and my vision. It was amazing. I was elated.

I have always had a deep admiration for quiltmaking by African American, rural, and Amish women. I had always seen those quilts as a genuine and worthy artistic production. But I had abandoned what you called traditional quilt making years ago.

In May 2005, there was another opening. A fusion.

The quilt tops of my current work are acrylic on canvas, sometimes with a restrained use of beads or embellishments. There is the exaggerated thread length. My photographic work incorporates various photo transfer techniques. I then paint and draw on the transfers with oil pastels, chalk pastels, watercolors, calligraphy ink, graphite, more acrylics. Sometimes I write on them with pigments and ink.

The back now features a complete traditional quilt made of cotton calicos. I combine contemporary quilts and traditional quilts in each piece. Each of my current quilts is actually two quilts joined together.

It feels balanced and in harmony. It feels whole.

Interviewer: So are you a traditional quilter whose work incorporates contemporary vehicles or a contemporary quilter whose work incorporates traditional vehicles?

Roberts: Sure. (laughs)

Interviewer: OK. I see you aren't going to make this simple for me! (laughs)

Roberts: Oh, but it is simple. It just *is*. Quilting is much too nuanced an art form to be crudely dissected into just two categories. Imposing two artificial designations upon thousands of years of cultural and artistic production is necessarily complicated, and insufficient. I understand the need for categorizing and creating a common language—but people have that need. Quilts don't. Just let them be. These categories cannot adequately describe the entire canon of quilting. This paradigm is not useful. Ultimately, it doesn't reveal any new insight or understanding.

Besides, how can traditional and art even be useful monikers when there is no consensus on the meaning of those two words? Who defines tradition? Who owns tradition? Whose traditions do we prefer? Who defines art? Who gave them that power? Why do we listen to them?

Every category we use to *include* objects and subjects we also use to *exclude* objects and subjects. Again, who has that power? And why do we listen to them?

Interviewer: OK. Let's consider this more personally and less academically. I am curious to know where your mind is, if you will, when you create the more traditional, I mean— When you create constructions of pieced cottons, what do you think about?

Roberts: I think about my great-great-grandmother, Leila Borders Corry. She was born in 1890. She went to Lincoln Academy. She was a schoolteacher. When I was a girl, my mother and I lived with my grandmother. I slept under a quilt made by my great-great-grandmother. I loved that quilt. I was a child; I didn't even know what a quilt was. But somehow, when my mother, aunt, and grandmother tucked me under this quilt, I knew I was loved. I still wrap myself in that quilt when I go home. I think about

Roberts, continued: her and all the women—and men—in my family who I love dearly. I feel connected to them.

And I think about the women in my quilt circle, the African American Quilt Circle. They are so wonderful and loving and supportive and amazingly talented. I think about them. I feel connected to them.

And I think about enslaved women who quilted to warm their families. And rural women who created utilitarian quilts that are breathtaking in their design and composition and either subtle or evocative use of color. I have a tremendous respect for their art.

I feel connected to women when I quilt. Women known to me and women imagined.

Interviewer: What, then, is in your mind when you create mixed media abstract and photographic contemporary constructions? When you work with canvas, acrylics, oil and soft pastels, watercolors, beads and embellishments, ceramics, unconventional threads? When you create using surgical implements, fly fishing tools, hardware clamps, power tools?

Roberts: [I think about] the striking linear nature of many African textiles, particularly Bogolanfini and Kuba cloth. I think about jazz. Stillness, movement, simplicity, complexity.

That aspect of my quilting is more contemplative, more introspective. I look inward. I think about myself, my journey, my process, my values.

I think about meaning.

Interviewer: Is your work political?

Roberts: Of course.

Interviewer: How so?

Roberts: All of my work is political—some of it overtly so, some of it not so evidently.

Roberts, continued:

In my series *Blood on the Fields*, I speak about the enslaved children, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers whose masters held title to them as if they were chattel, a tractor, a tree, and worked them and tortured them. They bled on this land.

I speak about the many nations of people who are indigenous to North America, who were hunted, and driven from their homeland.

And migrant workers who risk their lives to escape to this country and perform dangerous agricultural labor in pesticide-ridden fields.

I speak about prison and Chinese workers who built railroads and constructed a physical financial infrastructure for this country.

And slaughtered animals.

When I think about our country's violent ambience, and the centuries over which it has been so, I have a difficult time imagining that there can be a grain of dirt that has not been washed in blood.

My series *Diamond* brings light to the workers in mines. Our purchases subject these people to regular body cavity examinations and other intolerable, inhumane practices. We hurt these people so we can wear a rock?

The subjects of my photographic quilts are black and unapologetically so. This is political. I explore their, our, beauty within a cultural setting in which may still view black skin and hair and speech and cultural expression with disdain and contempt. In fact, many African Americans have internalized this worldview.

More often than not, when blacks have even appeared in Western figurative works, they have been objectified, objects, acted upon. Or they were simply background material. In my work, African Americans are subjects, thinkers, initiators. The people I represent in my quilts are beautiful and dignified people.

My work is political in so many ways. If you distill all of these considerations, you are left with my aesthetic. I assert an aesthetic that

Roberts, continued: someone, or perhaps a coalition of someones, has deemed *other* in some way. The fact that I, a black woman, even claim an aesthetic could be considered an act of defiance.

Interviewer: In addition to being a fine artist, you are also a curator, writer, lecturer, researcher, and designer. You are just as comfortable in art and art historical settings as you are in the humanities—and math, science, and medicine for that matter. How do you manage these disparate interests with such fluidity?

Roberts: They aren't disparate interests in my mind. And I don't try to manage anything. This is just who I am. I am curious about everything. And art, the humanities, math, and science are all indispensable methodologies for understanding the world around me.

I must create art. And I love being a curator and researcher. When you make a singular work of art—or a series for that matter—you create an interpretation in your voice. But when you design a project and curate an exhibition with other artists, you are able to magnify that already powerful exploration with more voices, more worldviews, more perspectives.

Curating and interpreting humanities-based historical exhibitions is a contemplative experience. I feel personally charged to preserve African American cultural property and history.

Making art, curating and designing exhibitions, doing research, writing, designing projects—it's all about understanding and telling the story. Everything I do is focused around personal and collective narrative, memory, and storytelling.

At this point in my life, I do not want to choose between being an artist and being a curator and researcher. And why should I? Why should I choose between my left arm and my right? My nose and my ear? This is who I am and this is how I experience and interpret the world.