

Lawsuits

In the spring of 2007 we were caught up in the drama surrounding lawsuits filed by three of the Gee's Bend quiltmakers against the Arnetts and others for allegedly withholding money from the sales of their quilts. Tensions are high.

Dr. Bernard Herman, Professor of Art History at the University of Delaware has written an opinion piece addressing the emotions that have surfaced. Herman, a frequent visitor to Gee's Bend, who has interviewed 40 of the quiltmakers over a three-year period asks "Why do these lawsuits generate such an unreflective response in the public readership? In art world conversations and blogs 'guilty' verdicts are routinely



rendered in the conspicuous absence of facts. It does not take a historian to know how inflammatory words degrade the truth. The dualities of rich and poor, black and white, rural and urban, victim and villain are convenient and well-worn conventions... More worrisome is the hidden work these narratives perform. Victims remain

victims; everyone plays their assigned role to perfection and we move on. Judgments rendered, the quilts are relegated to the sidelines, a marginalised art in a society given to marginalising practices... We should look for fuller accounts of how the contemporary art market operates and how it works for or against those artists categorised as self-taught, vernacular, and outsider... When the business of art trumps the beauty of art in the theatre of public opinion, the art gets lost... We need to hear all the voices of Gee's Bend. The quiltmakers have a lot to say and they say it eloquently."

Herman's piece is a clarion call for the Gee's Bend quiltmakers' art to prevail over the manipulation and myopic views that are so prevalent. The same themes resonate throughout this article - the need to expose questionable evidence, a myopic view of African-American quilts, poor quilt history, stereotypes, clichés, lapses in good scholarship and more. ●●●