

Opinion: BAMPFA must ensure that more African Americans see the Rosie Lee Tompkins quilt exhibit

Very few African Americans were at the opening of an exhibit celebrating the works of a prodigiously talented local black woman. It felt wrong, and a missed opportunity.

By Joanna Foley February 27, 2020

Colors on the museum's walls are shimmering, dancing and glowing — purples, oranges, saffron. Patterns wave and vibrate as the most astonishing display of quilts I'd ever seen seemed ready to leap off the walls. Quilts made of velvet, cotton and wool. Fabric statements that speak to the history of our times. As a person who cherishes quilts, I'd eagerly been looking forward to the opening of this BAMPFA exhibition, "[Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective](#)."

As the opening statement on the wall proclaims, "Rosie Lee Tompkins (1936-2006) is widely considered one of the most brilliant and inventive quilt makers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Her reputation has grown to the point where her work is no longer considered solely within the context of quilting but considered among the great American artistic achievements of our time."

Other quilt lovers were pouring in for the reception, radiating excitement and anticipation. African patterns and textiles were referenced in the attire of some guests.

I deeply love all the fabric arts. My family roots spring from generations of women who created female community while their hands were busy quilting. One of their creations is an 1873 crazy quilt that hangs on my living room wall, made by my grandmother's grandmother, Harriet, and her Tennessee sewing circle.

So, with this heritage to guide me to BAMPFA, why was I feeling uneasy at this opening exhibition? Looking around, I sensed a palpable absence, a gap. A show celebrating the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of the works of a prodigiously talented local black woman was opening with only three black people in attendance — one middle-aged man, and two young women who looked to be students. The event seemed entirely cut off from its cultural roots.

Rosie Lee Tompkins lived in Oakland and Richmond and raised five children. Some of her descendants live in this area. I met her son at the 2018 memorial service for Eli Leon, the art scholar, collector and donor of this unprecedented gift of 3,000 quilts to BAMPFA. I wondered aloud, "Why aren't there family members or friends here today to share the joy that her work is bringing to these museum-goers?"

I learned that BAMPFA gave the family a private tour the day before the opening. Was this the family's choice? Or was it BAMPFA's? If the family preferred to view the exhibition in private, I applaud the museum for honoring their wishes. Seeing all these works assembled together for the first time might have been emotionally overwhelming — bringing up complex feelings of longing, pride, memory, grief.

But where were the other black people who would have gloried in this opening? At noon on a Wednesday, they were probably at work or in school. Did the museum consider opening this exhibition on a weekend? Did BAMPFA invite organizations such as Healthy Black Families and Youth Spirit Artworks? The Social Justice Sewing Academy? The African American Quilters Guild of Oakland?

To me, the cultural context of an art exhibition or a dance performance matters. Recently, I went to a performance of Kola, an Afrodiasporic meditation on “The Nutcracker.” The Castlemont High School audience in East Oakland was mostly black and brown people — parents, relatives, neighbors of the young performers. The emotional energy shared between the young dancers and the audience felt like a sacrament, a sacred connection. Experiencing the performance through this lens is an emotionally rich new perspective for me, one that I am learning from my friends who are people of color.

A friend of mine is a parent to two children who were in Kola. When I later asked if we could invite some of these performers to dance at our largely white church, they demurred. “The cast performed again for an audience of elected officials, mostly white, in Oakland,” my friend said. “It just felt like entertainment for people who were not investing their love into these young people.”

That's a bit how the opening reception at BAMPFA felt to me. It was missing some of its potentially sacramental quality because one of its natural audiences was not present. The African American adults and children who would most deeply appreciate this exhibition were absent— for whatever reasons.

That was a momentary blip, I hope, and surely not the end of the story for BAMPFA's relationship to Rosie Lee Tompkins and the other African American quilters whose works were the lifetime passion of Eli Leon. “I'd love it if the collection would become a convening opportunity for the community,” said Lawrence Rinder, the retiring BAMPFA director. “Opportunities for students to learn are enormous.”

I hope that learning will begin with the upcoming “Colloquium: Revisioning the Art of Rosie Lee Tompkins” on Saturday, Feb. 29 at 2 p.m. Presenting new light on Mrs. Tompkins and her place in modern and contemporary art will be Horace Ballard and Lisa Gail Collins, two African American scholars of art history plus Lawrence Rinder and Elaine Yau, the c-curators. Bringing a personal dimension to the discussion will be Sammy Howard, Tompkins' son.

Hopefully, this time BAMPFA will provide for a more complex appreciation of Rosie Lee Tompkins that centers her art in its full cultural, familial and community contexts. I'll be there: 2155 Center St. in Berkeley.

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