



GRAM

MICHIGAN ARTIST SERIES

Carole Harris: Bright Moments

Grand Rapids Art Museum | March 17 – June 18, 2022

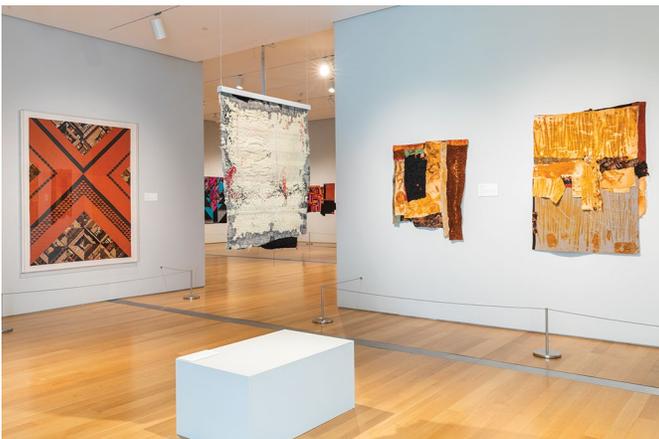
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Carole Harris: Bright Moments

Jennifer Wcisel, Assistant Curator



Above: *Before the Freeway*, 2008. Commercially printed cottons top and back, cotton batting. Machine pieced and machine quilted, 55 x 61 inches. Collection of Dennis Teichman and Deborah King.



Above: Installation view of *Carole Harris: Bright Moments* at GRAM

Carole Harris has expanded upon traditional quilting methods to create vibrant, improvisational works of fiber art. Her work brings textiles and techniques sourced from across the United States, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean together with visual strategies from modern abstract art and her own intuition and experience. Harris cuts, pieces, stitches, paints, and dyes fabric, intuitively abutting shapes and patterns to form surprising and revealing compositions. *Carole Harris: Bright Moments* presents five decades of Harris' joyful and vibrant fiber art, from the first quilt she made in 1969 to mixed-media works completed just this year.

A lifelong resident of Detroit, Harris learned to embroider and sew from her mother as a young girl. After graduating from Wayne State University with a fine arts degree in interior design and crafts, Harris made her first quilt and began to explore in-depth the artistic possibilities of fabric and thread. Harris considers her own relationship to each piece of fabric, its cultural history, and her sensory experience with the material. She improvises as she works, layering pieces together into a final composition with no preconceived ideas, allowing the cloth to guide her journey. The resulting works have a harmonious quality, generated through a nuanced balance of shape, color, and texture.

“Three layers, that’s what makes a quilt - a bottom, a middle batting, and a top. You stitch those three together and you’ve got a quilt,” says Harris. “Now what you do with it after, that is where the real creativity comes in.”



Above: Carole Harris in her studio in Detroit

“I think that textiles probably selected me. It’s something that I’ve had in my hands all my life, so it’s just a very natural thing for me,” says Harris. **“What I’m doing with it now is more freeform and of my own design. I gave myself permission to do whatever I wanted to do with cloth. I stopped looking at so much outside definitions of what I should be doing, or how I should be doing it.”**

The earliest quilts in this exhibition are Harris’ ‘string quilts’ created from strips of fabric sewn to a muslin foundation. String quilting is a simple, freeform method which gives makers the freedom to experiment with endless combinations of color and pattern within a geometric framework.

Harris’ architectural and geometric quilts were inspired by the energy and rhythm of cities, particularly Detroit, as well as her work in interior design.

More recent works in the exhibition demonstrate Harris’ transition from geometric shapes to spontaneous organic forms with ragged edges, uneven seams, burns, and rust-dyes that give a raw, aged quality to the materials. Inspired by aging buildings and well-used objects, Harris’ recent mixed media quilts celebrate the beauty in age, memory, and the passage of time.

What inspires fiber artist Carole Harris?

Music

Music, particularly jazz, blues, Motown, classical, and gospel, has inspired Harris throughout her career. She often attempts to harness the rhythms and energy of music within her compositions. Many of the titles she gives her pieces reference particular musicians or tracks, such as *Blues in the Night* (from Ella Fitzgerald) and *Epistrophy* (from Thelonious Monk), both on view in this exhibition. Like a jazz musician, Harris' practice is one of masterful improvisation. She allows the cloth to guide her to the finished work, using repetition, pattern, and juxtaposition much like the jazz musicians she admires.

Cities & Architecture

Harris refers to some of her compositions as "cityscapes" because of their direct urban influences—particularly of her hometown, Detroit. Works like *Blues in the Night* and *Before the Freeway* feature abstract shapes that seem to coalesce into a jumble of buildings, roads, and pathways while their vibrant colors and patterns mimic the energy of a busy metropolis. Harris is drawn to old and decaying buildings because of the histories they contain, that simultaneously reveal and conceal the stories of those who once occupied them. While on her city walks, Harris photographs elements that catch her eye—a water stain, an old brick home's crumbling façade, plywood layered over broken windows—to later use as starting points in her fiber works.



Image courtesy of Carole Harris

Global Traditions

Boro

Boro is the Japanese practice of reworking textiles through piecing, patching, and stitching to extend their use. Central to this practice is the notion of treating damage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to be disguised. In 2015, Harris was awarded a Kresge Visual Arts Fellowship and traveled to Japan to learn about boro and other Japanese craft traditions. Boro textiles are an excellent example of the concept of wabi-sabi, or finding beauty in that which is

imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. This concept so inspired Harris that she has since incorporated the wabi-sabi principles of asymmetry, roughness, and weathering into her compositions.

Egungun Regalia

Egungun Masqueraders are a tradition unique to the Yoruba Peoples of West Africa and their descendants in the African Diaspora, particularly in Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Barbados, and the United States. The regalia is worn by masquerading dancers who embody the spirits of departed ancestors. The regalia is constructed from a range of materials, both locally woven and industrially manufactured fabrics, in addition to metal, beads, leather, bones, and other potent, empowering materials. When performing an acrobatic dance, the dancers spin rapidly so outer fabric panels fly out from their bodies, revealing the colorful layers beneath.



Egungun Regalia



Joomchi

Joomchi

Joomchi is a centuries-old Korean method of papermaking that creates strong, textured handmade paper. Many layers of hanji, or mulberry paper, are combined with water, and then rubbed, squeezed, and agitated by hand, causing the fibers to tangle and adhere firmly to each other, in a process similar to felting wool. The paper becomes stronger and tougher the longer it is worked and can achieve the look and durability of leather. Harris was introduced to joomchi by Korean-American artist and educator Jiyoung Chung.

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Cover Image: *Who Knows Where the Time Goes* (detail), 2018. Commercially printed and hand dyed cotton, silk, recycled clothing, acrylic paint, discharge dyed and rust dyed cotton top. Cotton back and cotton batting. Fused and machine pieced, hand and machine quilted, and hand embroidered, 48 x 48 inches. Collection of Richard Cruger and Elizabeth Cheslock.