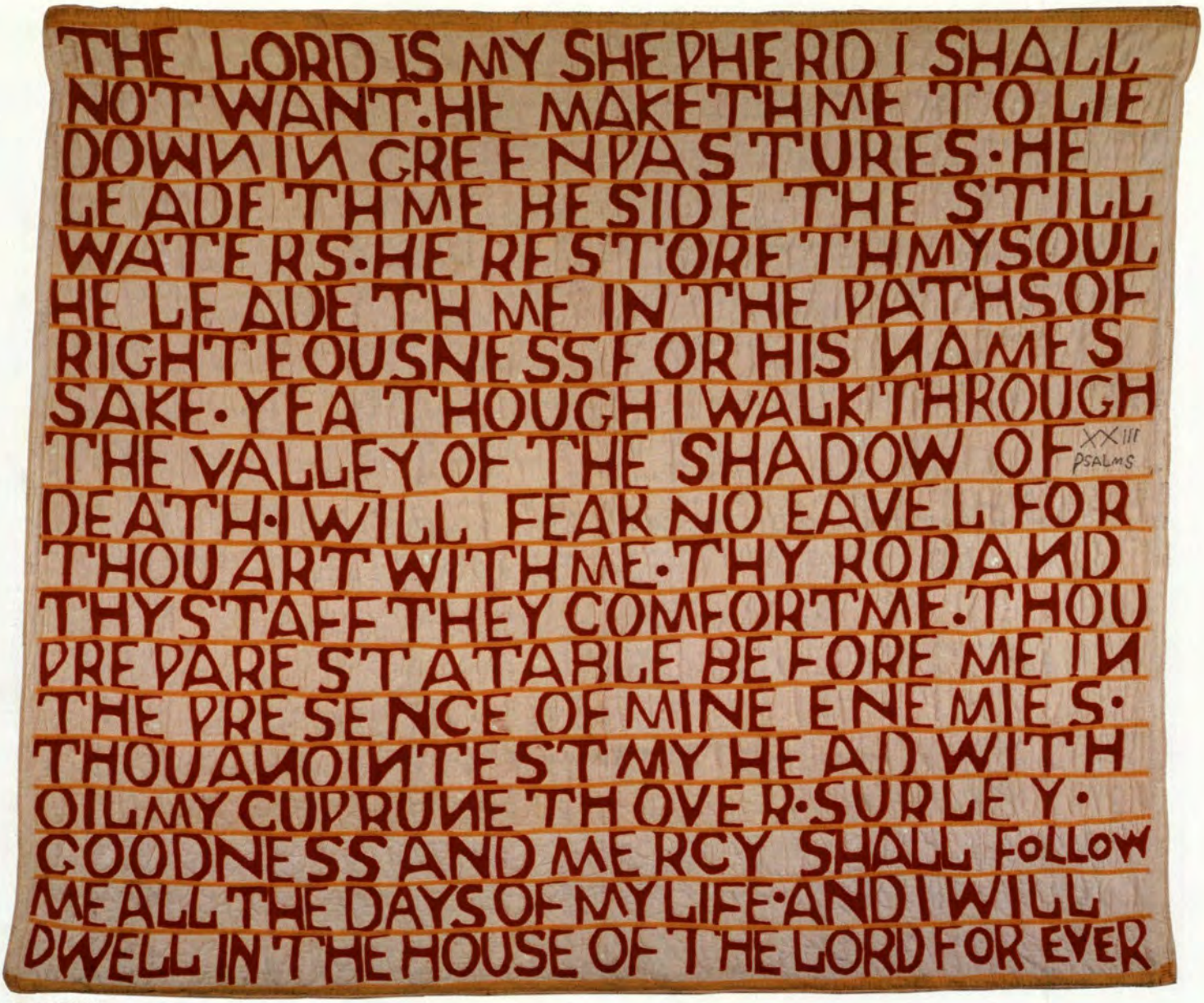
TALKING QUILTS

By Stacy C. Hollander

"Talking Quilts," on view at the American Folk Art Museum through August 1, explores the visual texture of language as expressed in quilts from the nineteenth century to the present. As an early form of what might be termed female graffiti, quilts have historically provided a forum for women to voice opinions and exercise power. Today, women continue to "talk back" through the words they apply to their quilts. In each of these textiles, words play multiple roles and introduce concepts that elicit varying levels of response from the viewer. The words, as visual signifiers, provoke intuitive reactions. At the same time, they initiate the act of reading and the intellectual process of grappling with comprehension and meaning. Decisions of word choice, graphic strategy, and technique—embroidery, stenciling, pen and ink, piecing, or appliqué—transform surfaces into monumental assertions of self-identity, statements of belief and support, and blankets of protective prayer, realized through the arc of the artist's hand.

"Talking Quilts" is made possible in part by Fairfield Processing Corporation.



PSALM 23 QUILT
Lena Moore (d. 1965)
Canton, Mississippi
c. 1930
Cotton
65 × 78"
Collection of Janet M. Green

An intimate connection exists among various Southern visual expressions, particularly when they include texts. The affinity between Southern religious-text quilts and the work of folk artists such as Jesse Howard is not coincidental; it is strongly related to the larger tradition of stark, raw, hand-lettered signboards seen on rural churches, buildings, and alongside roads throughout the South. In this unified vernacular landscape, the written word assumes powerful dimensions that are both creative and talismanic. Words offer guidance, exhortation, and allegory. When applied to quilts, they reflect the maker's recognition of the vagaries of life, proffering a blanket of protection in sleep and the promise of salvation should a beloved soul not awake.

The entire text of Psalm 23 thunders edge to edge across the *Psalm 23 Quilt*, the densely packed words creating staccato rhythms as they compress and expand. An

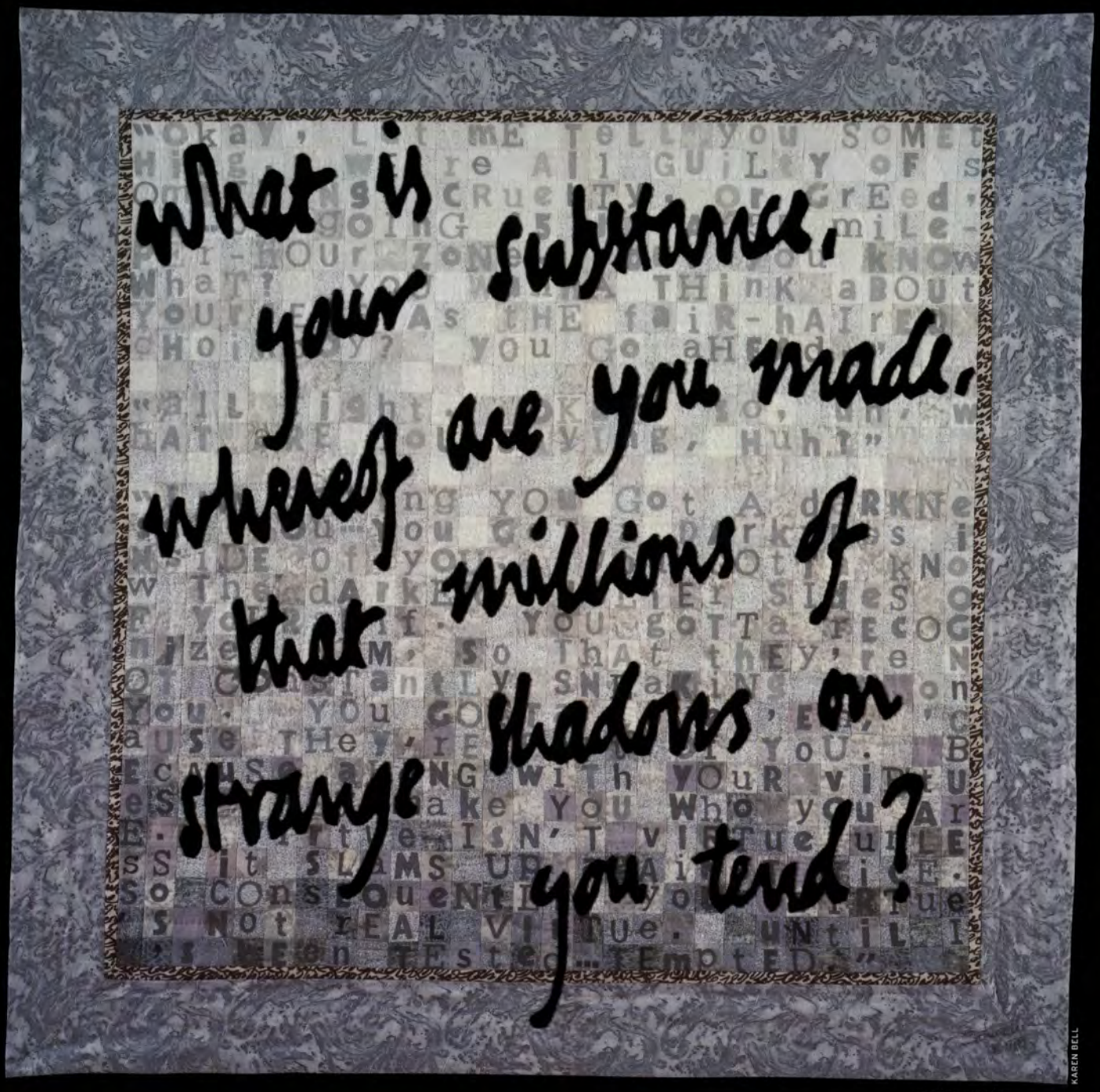
"ANGELS GUARD MY HEAD" QUILT
Quiltmaker unidentified
United States
1894
Wool
79 × 65"
Collection of Penny and Allan Katz

occasional letter turns backward; here and there a word features an original spelling: The impact is timeless, like an ancient tablet. Treating the quilt like a large sheet of paper, Lena Moore has lined the top with yellow rules that separate the rows of text and render the words more legible. This concrete treatment—the words of the psalm are contained within the lines—sparks a process of association with traditions as diverse as handwritten Southern folk signboards and the centuries-old practice of "lining a hymn," wherein a leader calls out a line of text that is then sung back by the congregation. Just as the spirit of the congregation dictates the length of the notes that are sung, the words in this quilt flow with the spirit of its maker.

Powerful protection is encoded into the *"Angels Guard My Head" Quilt*. The words at the top draw upon a rich literary tradition, from seventeenth-century writer Thomas Ady ("Four angels to my bed, / Four angels round my head, / One to watch, and one to pray, / And two to bear my soul away") to Isaac Watts's *A Cradle Hymn* ("Hush! my dear, lie still and slumber, / Holy angels guard thy bed! / Heavenly blessings without number / Gently falling on my head"). The perimeter of the quilt is further guarded by the words of the child's bedtime prayer "Now I lay me down to sleep," as well as additional religious sentiments in a variety of typographical styles. The glory train is stationed in the center, a potent metaphor derived from a translation of Ephesians 4: "Therefore it is said, When He ascended on high, He led a train of vanquished foes."

The instruction to "Gather up the fragments let nothing be lost" (from John 6:12) appears in several quilts, with letters comprised of small fabric scraps. The verse seems to have been particularly popular for this purpose, probably because the quiltmaker herself is enacting the directive by gathering up fragments of fabric and creating something new and worthwhile from the pieces. The *"Gather Up the Fragments" Quilt* is best read at a distance: Each cut-out letter is slightly different and is placed upon an individual block that, in some cases, is itself pieced from small bits of cloth.

"GATHER UP THE FRAGMENTS" QUILT
Quiltmaker unidentified
United States
c. 1880
Cotton
77¾ × 67"
Collection of Laura Fisher, Antique Quilts and Americana, New York



KAREN BELL

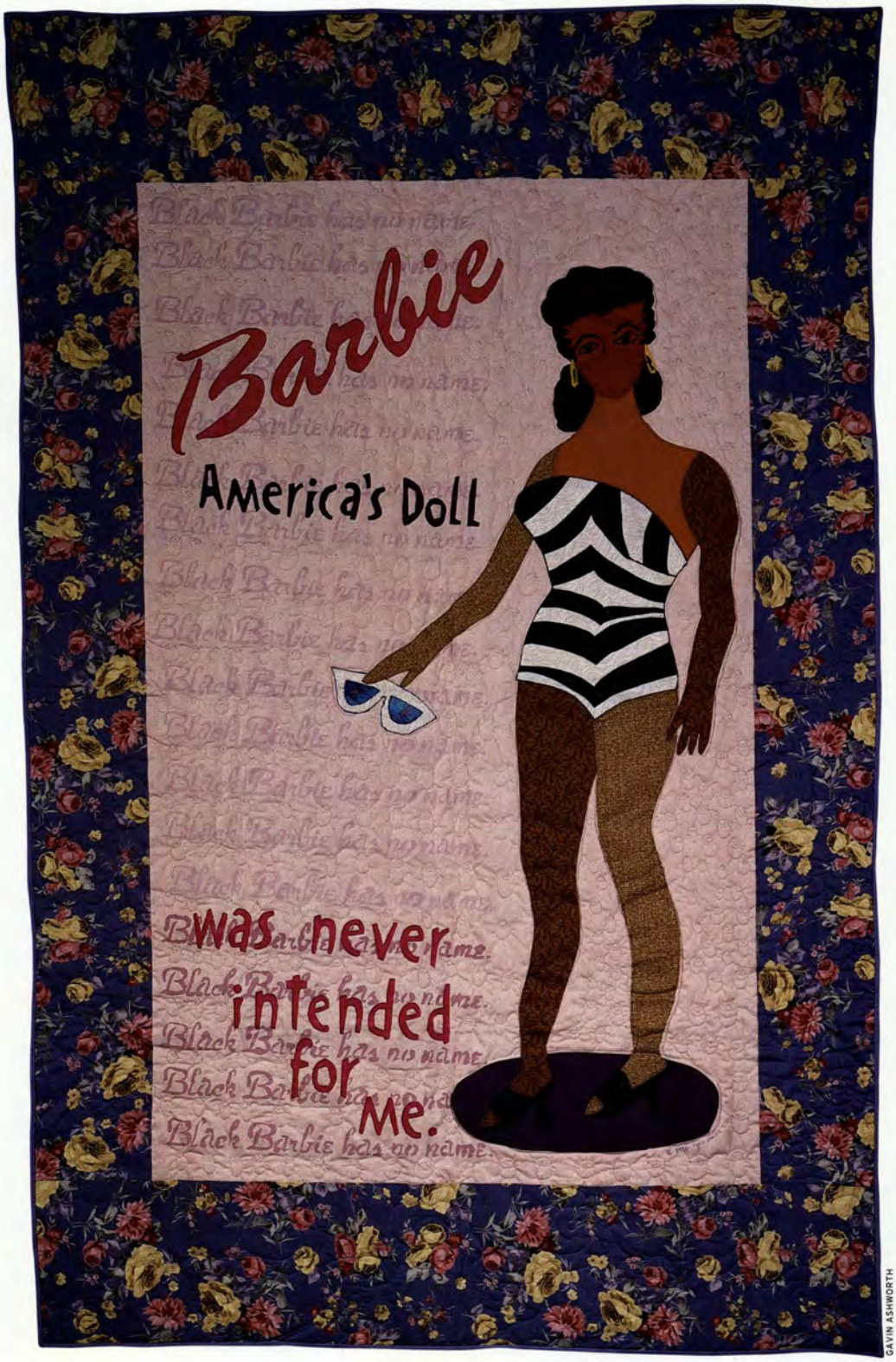
STRONG WORDS
Robin Schwalb (b. 1952)
Brooklyn
1998
Stenciled cotton fabrics; machine pieced, hand appliquéd, and hand quilted
36 × 36"
Collection of the artist

A similar strong, cursive hand is used for the text written on two contemporary quilts. Each appropriates popular culture—past and present—to confront issues of identity. Both artists exploit the visual tension between shadow and substance to create reverberations of meaning. Personal references offer clues to the ways in which mass culture works to shape individual character and experience.

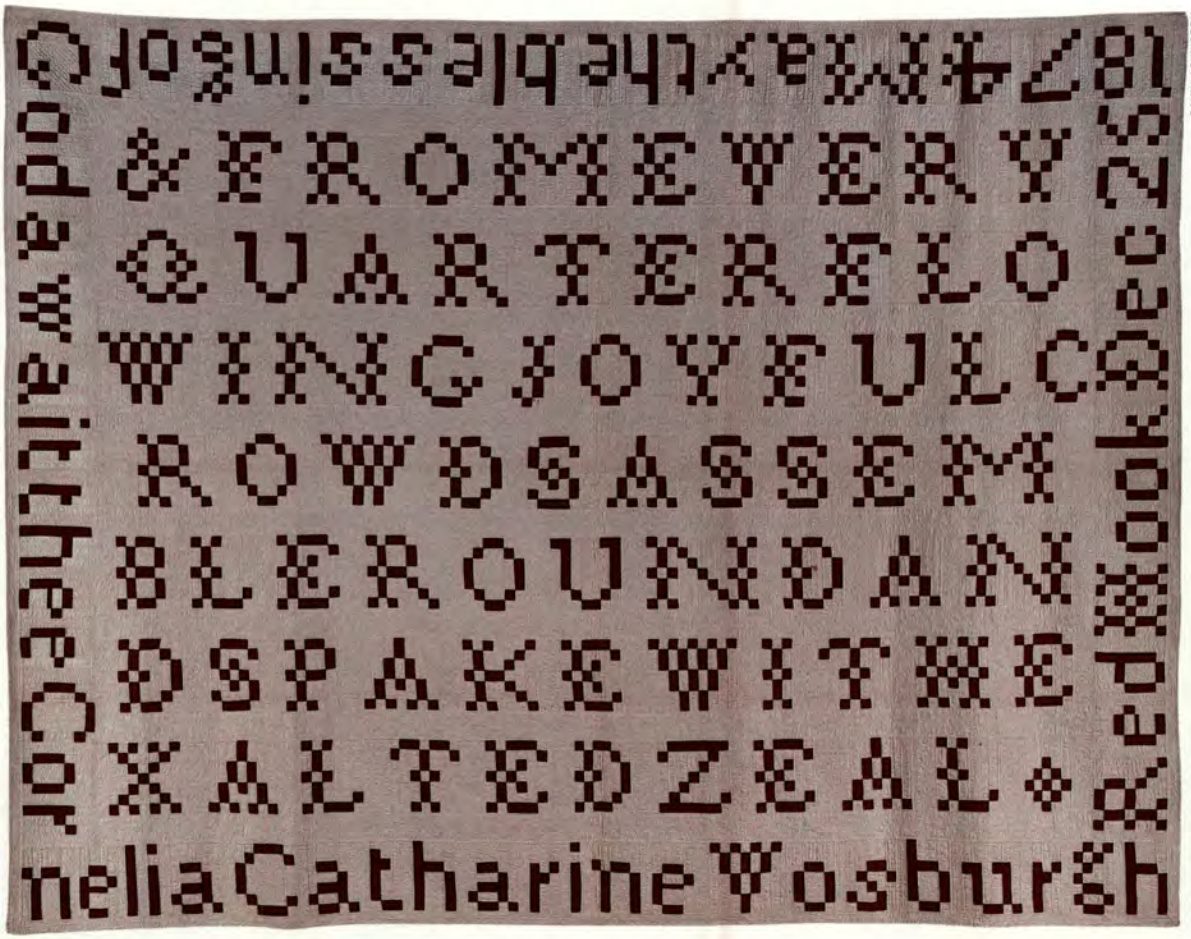
In *Strong Words,* Robin Schwalb invokes the opening lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 53 to question her sense of self: "What is your substance, whereof are you made." Her process-oriented work has been likened to a palimpsest, each layer revealing new personal terrain. She uses textual markings as brushstrokes that also provoke interpretation and provide context. Behind her bold, liquid calligraphy, Schwalb's subliminal text is stenciled onto separate blocks, taking on the aspect of a ransom note. Appropriately, the barely visible yet disturbing letters spell out lines of dialogue from the television show *Homicide: Life on the Streets.*

With *Black Barbie,* Kyra E. Hicks uses the visual distinction between the familiar eponymous Barbie font and her own hand to question her place in American culture: "Barbie America's Doll was never intended for me." Hicks's haunting refrain "Black Barbie has no name" is written in shadow text, underlining the second-class status of the dark-skinned Barbie doll, which rarely had its own identity. The repeated lines are placed next to an African American version of the classic Barbie doll that was introduced in 1959.

BLACK BARBIE
Kyra E. Hicks (b. 1965)
Arlington, Virginia
1996
Cotton
76 × 47"
Private collection



GAVIN ASHWORTH



GAVIN ASHWORTH

RELIGIOUS TEXT QUILT
Cornelia Catharine Vosburgh (1810–1896)
Red Hook, New York
1874–1876
Cotton
80 × 102"
Private collection

The "marking" of textiles—applying letters to cloth—was an important basic skill taught to young girls in early America. This was done primarily to indicate ownership at a time when textiles were rare and costly and activities such as washing linens might be communal. Not surprisingly, the words that appear on the earliest quilts most frequently included the quiltmaker's or recipient's name or initials and sometimes an important date, such as that of a birth or marriage. The subtext of even these simple markings, however, was also a declaration of self: In a society in which a woman held few legal rights, her name was nonetheless often prominently displayed within the household over which she presided.

A particularly interesting group of quilts emerged in upstate New York during the nineteenth century. Paying homage to early counted-thread traditions, each letter in these quilts is pieced from seven small, stacked blocks similar to alphabets stitched into needlework samplers. The earliest example, dated 1807, derives directly from this tradition and forms three initials. By the time Maria Cadman Hubbard made her *Pieties Quilt* in 1848, the medium had become the message. Hubbard imparted the following advice: "If you cannot be a golden pippin don't turn crab apple." More than 150 years later, this maxim continues to inspire a smile, because the words were not spoken and quickly forgotten, but lovingly pieced onto a quilt.

The religious sentiments and homilies that appear on *Pieties Quilt* come from a variety of sources, including the Bible; "Courage" (1630) by German poet Paul Gerhardt; the hymn "Come, Ye Disconsolate" by Thomas Moore; and "Little Things" (1845) by American poet Julia Fletcher Carney. The lettering device combined with the religious texts creates an emotional link to the long history of female application in the needle arts, the preparation from childhood to assume adult responsibility for providing domestic textiles, and a woman's role as her family's moral and religious center.

The design of the visually emphatic *Religious Text Quilt* is composed entirely of pieced letters. Upper- and lowercase letters around the perimeter define a border that encloses additional text in all uppercase. The letters are made from calico blocks that may be likened to pixels, forming an image that is indecipherable at close view: The words resolve only when one steps back. The text in the border reads like a benediction; the source for the primary text has not yet been determined. This may be an original sentiment, as every letter of the alphabet is used within the fourteen terse words of text, making this virtually unique among text quilts. Although the border indicates the quilt was made for Christmas 1874, the year 1876 appears in the quilting.

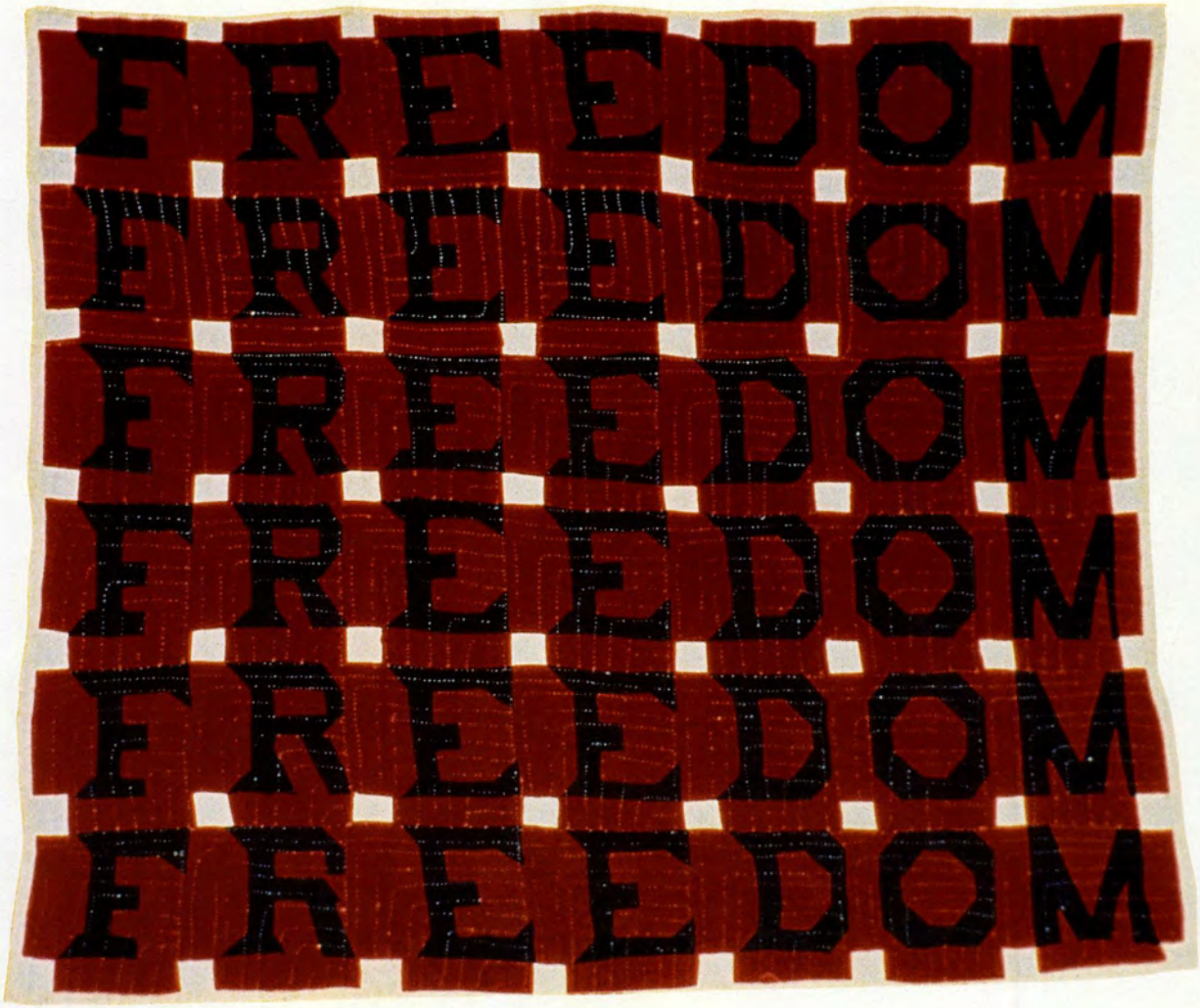
PIETIES QUILT
Maria Cadman Hubbard (possibly b. 1769)
Probably Austerlitz, Columbia County, New York
1848
Cotton
88½ × 81"
American Folk Art Museum, gift of Cyril Irwin Nelson in loving memory of his parents, Cyril Arthur and Elise Macy Nelson, 1984.27.1

JOHN PARNELL

The text blocks composing the *Stormy Day Quilt* document the quiltmaker's process in a self-referential fashion more usually associated with contemporary art. From "THE FIRST SQUAIR 1903" in the lower-left corner to "THE LAST SQUAIR APRIL THE 5" in the opposite corner, the quiltmaker engages the viewer in a lively dialogue. Multicolored, balloonlike letters tumble out in informal, whimsical arrangements and function as a visual diary of the making of the quilt, including an ongoing commentary about the weather on each day a block was appliquéd. This follows in a longstanding tradition among American diarists, who often started each entry with an observation regarding the weather. The quilt was made for Margaret Blosser's granddaughter and namesake and provides personal notes, an entire alphabet, political commemorations, and picture blocks.

STORMY DAY QUILT
Margaret Culp Blosser
(possibly b. 1843)
Possibly Hocking County, Ohio
1903–1904
Cotton
70 × 78"
Collection of Julie Silber, The Quilt Complex, Albion, California

SHARON RISEDORPH



FREEDOM QUILT
Jessie B. Telfair (1913–1986)
Parrott, Georgia
1980
Pieced and appliquéd cottons and synthetics
73 × 85"
Private collection

The concept of a freedom quilt can be traced at least as far back as the Civil War, when women were urged to "prick the slave-owner's conscience" by embroidering anti-slavery slogans and images onto their needlework. Although the existence of Underground Railroad quilts has not been documented, the belief that quilts were used to encode paths to freedom has persisted to the present day. This is one of several freedom quilts that Jessie Telfair made, initially as a response to losing her job after she attempted to register to vote. It evokes the civil rights era through the powerful invocation of one word, *freedom*, formed from bold block letters along a horizontal axis. Mimicking the stripes of the American flag, it is unclear whether the use of red, white, and blue is ironic, patriotic, or both. ★

Stacy C. Hollander is senior curator and director of exhibitions at the American Folk Art Museum and the curator of the exhibition "Talking Quilts."