

# Saving the Artwork of the South: Deep Investment, and a Drone

 [nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/design/joe-minter-gees-bend-souls-grown-deep.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/24/arts/design/joe-minter-gees-bend-souls-grown-deep.html)

Hilarie M. Sheets

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By [Hilarie M. Sheets](#)

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — “I’m the conjurer of all my ancestors, 400 years of African people in America,” said [Joe Minter](#), surveying the dense outdoor environment of artworks he has forged from refuse over the past 32 years across his half-acre yard, facing two of the largest African-American cemeteries in the south. Nodding to the tombstones, he added, “they have given me the privilege of being their spokesman.”

Minter described receiving the word of God in 1989 to “pick up what has been thrown away, put it together and put my words on it.” Ever since, the artist, now 78, with a gift for mechanics and previous jobs in construction and auto repair, has been building “[African Village in America](#).” It is a succession of improvised sculptures that bear witness to the history of the diaspora and of civil rights, the contributions of Black people and events shaping the country.

For decades, with his seven-foot-tall talking stick adorned with colorful lanyards and jiggling bells, Minter has led visitors arriving on his doorstep through his cacophonous installation. They have included the art collector [Bill Arnett](#), who was brought there in 1996 by the artist [Lonnie Holley](#), Minter’s friend.



“African Village in America,” the dense outdoor environment of artworks Minter has forged from refuse over 32 years across his half-acre yard. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

“I call Bill the trailblazer — nobody else took up the sword,” Minter said of Arnett, who died last year. An early champion of work by Black Southern artists including Minter, Holley, Thornton Dial, Purvis Young and quilters in Gee’s Bend, Ala., Arnett created the Souls Grown Deep Foundation in 2010 for his collection of some 1,300 pieces by more than 160 artists and made a landmark gift of 57 of these artworks to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014 — including Minter’s 1995 anthropomorphic assemblage of shovels, rakes and chains titled “Four Hundred Years of Free Labor.” Since then, through a collection transfer program under the leadership of its president Maxwell Anderson, the foundation has facilitated acquisitions of more than 500 works by underrepresented Black artists in two dozen institutions.

But were they doing enough? “It began to feel imperative,” said Anderson, that this money directly benefit artists whose labor “had never been compensated in a way that matched up with the true value of these objects.”

The nonprofit Souls Grown Deep Foundation has expanded its mission by investing directly in Alabama communities through partnerships and grants that impact artists like Minter, and the Gee’s Bend quilters, where they live, work, and struggle, and speak to issues of their deepest personal concern.

Image



An art piece across from Joe Minter's home in his "African Village in America." Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

For Minter, that worry is the fate of his opus when he is gone (he just lost his wife, Hilda, earlier this month.)

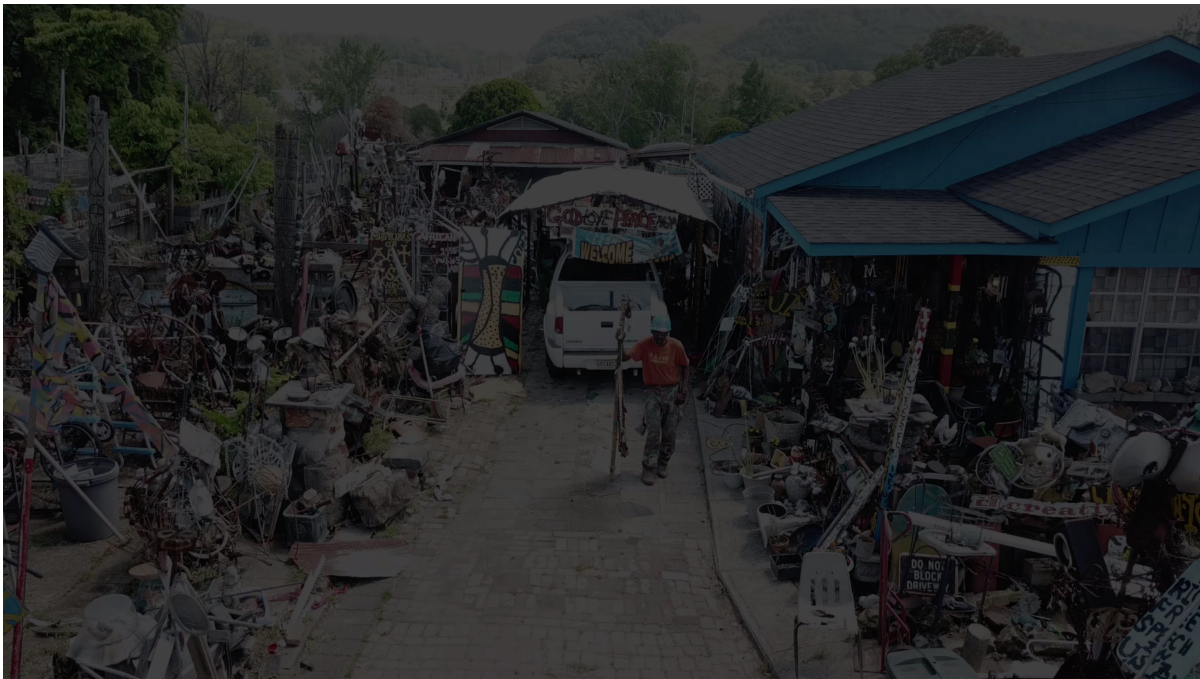
“I can hear the bulldozer coming,” he said, alluding to the destruction of many yard environments, including Holley’s in 1997 after a battle with the Birmingham Airport Authority. “I’ve been waiting on someone to preserve this.”

- **Giant-Sized Exhibits:** A free museum near Route 66 celebrates America’s fiberglass giants and the nostalgia that draws people to them.

- **Wild Things:** A retrospective highlighting the works and the imaginative life of Maurice Sendak runs through Feb. 17 at the Denver Art Museum.
- **Wrestling With “Hybridity”:** The artist Chase Hall, who is frank about the issues raised by his mixed race, has a solo show opening in Los Angeles.
- **A City of Murals:** For 40 years, Mural Arts Philadelphia has been nurturing art and artists who have left their marks throughout the city.
- **More From the Special Section:** The art world stretches boundaries with new artists, new audiences and new technology.

This summer, with \$45,000 in funding from Souls Grown Deep, the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa used advanced geographic technology — designed to map rivers in three dimensions — to document every square foot of “African Village in America,” a survey that will enable people to experience the installation in virtual reality.

Video



A drone's eye view of Joe Minter's yard and sprawling artwork, created over 32 years. Credit Credit... University of Alabama/Souls Grown Deep

“We’re treating this as an archaeological site,” said Eric Courchesne, the university’s geospatial services manager, who has overseen drone flights capturing its dimensions — top-down; a view from within the space; and how the installation relates to the neighborhood. A second phase includes filming a walk-through narrated by Minter and cataloging of the artworks, all to go live on a website.

“God’s looking down, like the drone,” Minter said. “I want him to see the progress and be able to say, Well done.”

Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, feels the longtime debate in the museum field about whether artists like Minter or Holley should be classified as vernacular or self-taught “really smothered the possibility of those voices being heard,” she said. “What Souls Grown Deep has done is raise the voices of those artists and given them a place in American art history that they deserve.”

Image



This summer, with funding from Souls Grown Deep, the University of Alabama used geographic technology and drones to document every square foot of Minter’s “African Village in America.” The survey will catalog his artworks and enable people to experience the installation in virtual reality. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

From Birmingham, it's a two-hour drive south to Gee's Bend, another place of pilgrimage, which cultivated the astonishing patchwork quilt tradition characterized by bold asymmetrical geometries and unexpected color combinations from scraps of denim, corduroy and old cloth. Since "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" opened in 2002 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston through the advocacy of Arnett and toured 12 other institutions — Michael Kimmelman called the quilts "some of the most miraculous works of art America has produced" in his review for "The New York Times" — Gee's Bend has become a globally recognized phenomenon and brand.

Yet the small isolated community (renamed Boykin in 1949) defined by the Alabama River still has a poverty rate of more than 55 percent and median income of \$12,457, according to 2019 U.S. census data. With no store or gas station or restaurant, visitors are hard pressed to leave money behind.

Over the last year, Souls Grown Deep has invested more than \$1.1 million into the community, initiatives aimed at creating economic opportunities in Gee's Bend. Nineteen quilters have been marketing their wares in shops on Etsy, set up in February with a \$100,000 grant from Souls Grown Deep and more funding from its partners, Etsy and Nest. In the first six months, from the sale of quilts priced from \$50 up to \$20,000, the artists have taken in 100 percent of the proceeds, totaling more than \$300,000.



Gee's Bend quilters (left to right): Emma Mooney Pettway, Stella Pettway, Doris Pettway Mosely, and Mary Margaret Pettway with her quilt, outside the Gee's Bend Welcome Center. Credit... Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

"I can sit in my house and use my hands and work at my pace and look for money to come in," said Stella Pettway, one of several quilters gathered at the Welcome Center near the ferry landing. After her regular paycheck as a substitute teacher stopped abruptly with the pandemic, she debated taking a bank loan she couldn't pay back. Now, through quilt sales, she's been able to buy herself a car and a computer for her grandson.

In addition, licensing and art gallery sales, also facilitated by Souls Grown Deep and Nest, brought \$400,000 over the last 12 months to the quilters. (The New York dealer Nicelle Beauchene sells historic Gee's Bend quilts for up to \$60,000.)

Mary Margaret Pettway, a quilter who was elected board chair of Souls Grown Deep in 2018, said the foundation's efforts have made a world of difference here.

Image



Mural of "Medallion with Checkerboard Center" by Patty Ann Williams, 1960s. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times



Image



Mural of "Pig in a Pen," medallion by Minnie Sue Coleman  
c.1970.Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

Image



Mural of "Roman Stripes" Variation (Local Name: "Crazy Quilt") by Plummer T. Pettway, c.1967. Credit... Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

Image



Mural of “Bars and string-pieced columns” by Jessie T. Pettway, 1950s. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

“We’re not a rich community,” she said, “but I’ve come to know we’re rich in artisans, just like an artists’ colony.” While some quilters have done better than others, “everybody got a taste of the pie,” she said. “Every day we’re trying to open it to more people down here, the younger the better.” She has passed on to her two children the tradition she learned at age 11 from her mother, Lucy T. Pettway, whose work is in museum collections in New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, Baltimore, Atlanta, Richmond and Toledo.

Dotting County Road 29 from Alberta down through Gee’s Bend are faded, community-made signs with reproductions of the 10 quilts commemorated in 2006 on U.S. postage stamps. But the signs, like the stamps, don’t name the artists, including Loretta Pettway, Mary Lee Bendolph and Jessie T. Pettway, who are still living.

Souls Grown Deep has worked with the design firm Pentagram to upgrade the signage to provide information on each quilter and is now creating an expanded cultural trail that could draw tourists visiting civil rights landmarks in nearby Selma and Montgomery, where the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in 2018.



Emma Mooney Pettway and Doris Pettway Mosely (left); Mary Margaret Pettway, Stella Pettway (right) sewing a quilt at the Gee's Bend Welcome Center. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

“People can experience not just the artistry but also the racial injustice and history of the Bend,” said Anderson, who has committed more than \$100,000 of his foundation’s resources to additional markers at places including the church where Dr. King exhorted voting rights in 1965 before the march from Selma to Montgomery.

Also on the tour is the historic Freedom Quilting Bee building, a women’s sewing cooperative founded in 1966 that had contracts with quilters to sell bedding and bags for stores, including Sears, until the 1990s. Elaine Williams, who remembers being in day care there while her mother and aunts worked, has created a nonprofit organization with \$250,000 from Souls Grown Deep to begin revitalizing the long-dormant building as a heritage center hosting workshops, a library and a cafe.

Williams envisions building lodging for tourists and an event space on the 13-acre property. (The well-attended Gee’s Bend Quilting Retreats are now held in Mississippi because of a lack of local facilities.)

Image



Elaine Williams at a quilt mural at the historic Freedom Quilting Bee building, a women’s sewing cooperative. She created a nonprofit with \$250,000 from Souls Grown Deep that will revitalize the long-dormant building as a heritage center to host quilting workshops and a cafe to encourage visitation. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

Just to make the Freedom Quilting Bee building habitable will be a major undertaking. The structure, strewn with sewing machines across the bright red floor, has suffered extensive water damage and mold. But Kim V. Kelly, a community activist based in Camden, Ala., thinks the concept is solid.

“Elaine wants to make it attractive for people to come and see some quilts, learn some history and buy some stuff,” Kelly said, “not wonder, Why did I come here again?”

Souls Grown Deep's largest community investment, \$600,000, has been in the Black-owned apparel company Paskho, which has rented and retrofitted two buildings in Alberta and Gee's Bend for production of an online collection of Gee's Bend clothing. "With all the companies I have run, I should be able to build something that actually helps with social inequality in America," said Patrick Robinson, Paskho's founder and a fashion industry veteran, who has designed a first round of asymmetrical tops with contrasting hand-stitching inspired by the aesthetic of the community.

Image



A seamstress at Paskho Apparel's new production pod. Credit...Wulf Bradley for The New York Times

In July, he hired more than a dozen skilled seamstresses from Gee's Bend, starting at \$16 an hour.

“When I go there, the women start telling me what I need to change on each thing they’re making,” he laughed, “and they’re allowed to do it.”

He expects that the sewing pod, which cost his company about \$250,000 to set up, will become profitable in October, after three months of operation. “Gee’s Bend is a huge attraction to our customers,” said Robinson.

While the women do not get a percentage of the royalties, Paskho may become a beacon to other businesses.

By any set of metrics, it is incredibly difficult to break the cycle of generational poverty in the South, according to Conwill, of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. But she feels the effort of Souls Grown Deep “puts a lie to the notion that these are intractable circumstances that could never be changed,” she said.

Unlike the old days, “the challenge won’t be the lack of will,” she added. “The challenge won’t be the lack of respect.”