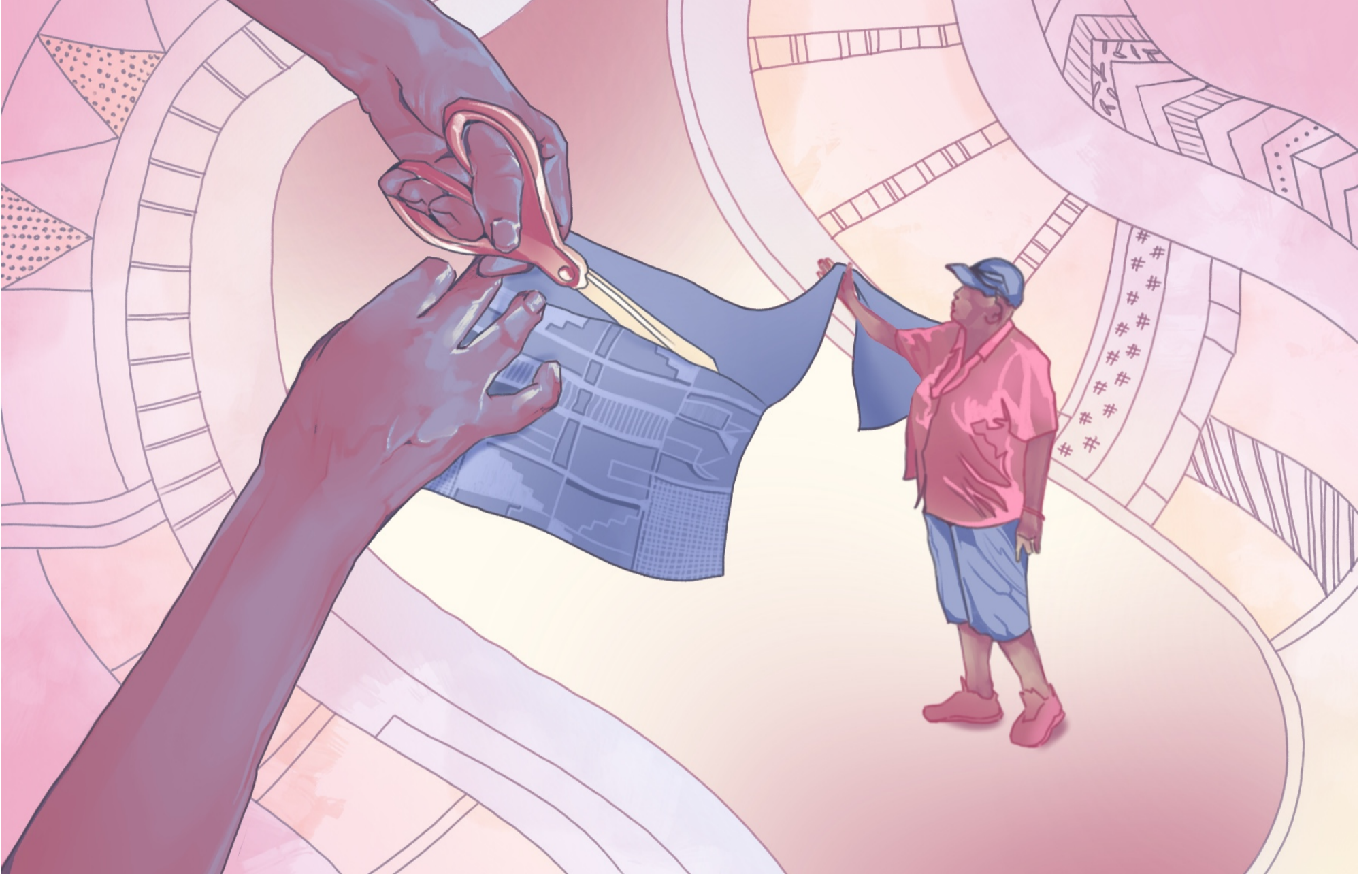


Gee's Bend quilter, Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center board members discuss cultural participation, preservation



ALISON XIONG | STAFF

When Mary Ann Pettway's mother first taught her how to quilt, it was out of necessity. The nights in Gee's Bend, Alabama were cold, and without beds to sleep on, quilts were certainly more inviting than the bare ground. But necessity has never meant insignificance.

"When Mama taught me the basics, she taught me to love," said Pettway in an interview with The Daily Californian.

That love has been at the heart of the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective since its creation 20 years ago, when 50 women came together to continue the quilt making tradition that originated in the region during the 19th century.

This March, Pettway will join two of her fellow collective members in a lecture at the Joyce Gordon Gallery on Black history and culture as a part of the Barbara Lee and Elihu Harris Lecture Series. Pettway, alongside Elihu Harris and Dr. Roy Wilson of the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center, sat down with the Daily Californian to discuss the ways in which art, culture and democracy are intertwined.

Born out of Indigenous American and African textiles, the Gee's Bend quilts have come to represent the fortitude of African American culture. The brilliant colors and abstract, playful patterns are the result of limited materials, such as recycled fabrics and textiles, and unbridled creativity. "This is historical art," Harris, chair of the MLK Jr. Freedom Center Board and former mayor of Oakland, asserted. "They had to make a way out of no way."

For Pettway, the cultural breadth of the quilts was not immediately apparent. "I didn't know I was making history," she said. "All I knew is that we were just making quilts."

In recent years, the Gee's Bend quilts have gained more and more recognition as salient pieces of American art, but the tradition is far from new. Quilt making has been passed down from generation to generation in the mostly Black community of Gee's Bend since it was first introduced at a cotton plantation established in 1816. Many Gee's Bend residents, including Pettway, have heritage that runs deep in the region, and they became artists through community ties and cultural preservation.

"I'm going to try and keep this alive for as long as I can, because people say this is a dying art," Pettway said. "But it will only die if you allow it to die."

With the immense cultural impact of the quilts, it is clear that Pettway practices what she preaches. Since she first started managing the collective in 2005, Gee's Bend quilters have had their quilts displayed in fine art museums, inspired the Obama portraits and received the National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts.

The upcoming lecture in Oakland will highlight the reasons why these quilts have come to be such significant touchstones of American art history.

With a mission statement that aims for advancements in civic engagement, the Freedom Center strives to educate the Oakland community on expression as a form of liberation. By sharing the spirit of the Gee's Bend community through storytelling and displays of their work, the people of the MLK Jr. Freedom Center hope to emphasize the ways in which art is essential to the maintenance of democracy.

"Art is a means of communication and communication is the beginning of understanding," Harris said. The lecture with members of the collective will highlight the importance of cultural pluralism to the preservation of democracy with an emphasis on the advocative power of art.

"You don't have to be able to know a consonant from a vowel to get your voice out there," Freedom Center Executive Director Roy Wilson said.

Accompanying the March lecture and quilt exhibition, Pettway and collective members China Pettway and Julia Pettway will present their stories and knowledge to many highschools in the Oakland community.

"[The students are] being challenged to find for themselves how to get their voice out there, how to represent their communities and how to make a lifetime commitment to creating a stronger democracy," Wilson said.

As the former mayor of Oakland, Harris finds outreach initiatives to young people with the goal of strengthening community ties and democracy especially important. "Anybody can find ways to contribute. There's not just one way to be a part of the human family," he said. "Take what you got and make something out of it. And if you have something that helps your community, what could be better than that?"

The message of the lecture and of each quilt is one in the same. As Pettway puts it, "Making a quilt is almost like building a house." Each individual scrap of fabric and person in a community is vibrant on their own, but when brought together, they are greater than the sum of their parts. They create harmony.