

What a Quilt Is Allowed to Do: Decoration, Use, and the Domestic Image in Alex Kalil's Quilts

By Kehayr Brown-Ransaw

A chair waits beside a table. Flowers bend outward from a vase. A plate holds the remains—or anticipation—of breakfast. Through a window, a landscape appears flattened into bands of color. Elsewhere, a watering can sits beside a potted plant, a labubu lies on its back, and a monumental butterfly occupies a dark field streaked with red. Across Alex Kalil's quilts, a world emerges from things that are remarkably ordinary: houseplants, tables, food, animals, windows, furniture, household products. Yet the ordinariness of these images is precisely what gives the work its tension. The quilts are concerned not with extraordinary events but with the visual and material conditions through which everyday life becomes meaningful.

Made primarily from secondhand fabrics and stitched together with dental floss, Kalil's quilts resist the expectation that artworks should conceal their construction or elevate their materials. Seams remain visible. Fabrics wrinkle and buckle. Shapes do not always resolve into clean silhouettes. Pieces overlap, interrupt one another, or appear to have been persuaded rather than forced into position. Dental floss is particularly important. An industrially manufactured hygiene product becomes structural material, replacing the thread conventionally associated with sewing. Inexpensive, readily available, extraordinarily strong, and slightly absurd, it becomes the connective tissue of an object intended to endure.

The choice of floss and discarded fabric is not simply a resourceful substitution. It establishes an economy for the work. Objects assigned little cultural or monetary value become indispensable to the construction of something newly designated as art. The hierarchy is inverted without being romanticized: the materials do not cease being ordinary once they enter the quilt. Their ordinariness is precisely what the work preserves. This economy of reuse places the quilts within a much longer textile history in which fabric accumulates meaning through circulation. Cloth is rarely neutral. Before entering Kalil's compositions, these materials have already existed elsewhere and potentially performed other functions. They arrive with patterns, textures, densities, stains, seams, fading, and histories of handling. Rather than beginning with the presumed neutrality of stretched canvas, Kalil begins with material already implicated in the world.

The distinction matters formally. A painter can confront a blank support and construct an image upon it. Kalil encounters a surface that is already pictorial. Floral cloth already contains flowers; polka dots already establish rhythm; stripes already imply direction; printed fabric arrives with its own scale, palette, and visual associations. Composition therefore becomes less the imposition of an image upon passive matter than a negotiation with material that already possesses information.

Elissa Auther's history of fiber in American art is particularly useful here. In *String, Felt, Thread*, Auther demonstrates how textiles entered twentieth-century American art institutions burdened by associations with craft, domesticity, decoration, utility, and feminized labor. These associations were not formally inherent to fiber; they were part of the cultural system through which media were assigned status.¹ Her account makes clear that material cannot be separated from the hierarchy through which institutions recognize it.

Kalil does not attempt to escape this history by making quilting look more like "high art." Instead, the work remains stubbornly textile. The resulting compositions possess the logic of collage. In the domestic scenes, perspectival coherence repeatedly gives way to pattern. A tabletop becomes an expanse of black-and-white geometry. Wallpaper becomes a dense field of turquoise and green. Floral fabric simultaneously describes a surface and refuses representation altogether. Chairs bend into strips of patterned cloth. A window can frame something resembling a landscape while also functioning as a collection of adjoining rectangles. The distinction between an object and the material used to depict it is never completely stable. A flower is both a flower and several pieces of fabric sewn together to approximate one.

There is an exuberance to these collisions that places Kalil's work in productive conversation with Fauvism, particularly Henri Matisse and André Derain. The comparison is not intended to establish influence. It is more useful as a means of asking how similar formal conditions acquire different meanings within different materials and histories.

In Matisse's *Open Window, Collioure* of 1905, recognizable objects remain—the window, flowerpots, boats, harbor—but naturalistic color has largely surrendered its authority. Coral, pink, turquoise, blue, and green organize the painting as forcefully as the scene itself. The National Gallery of Art identifies the work as an important early Fauvist painting and describes Fauvism's effort to free color and texture from strict naturalistic representation.²

Kalil's quilts perform a related destabilization, but through fundamentally different means. Color does not merely describe an object; it announces the material from which that object has been made. The blue of a chair is not simply blue. It is a particular blue cloth, with a specific weave, thickness, previous function, and finite size. A flower cut from floral textile can become simultaneously motif and material. Representation is continually interrupted by the stubborn fact of fabric. That difference is significant. Matisse can mix a color until it arrives at precisely the chromatic value he wants. Kalil often begins with a color already attached to something else. The question becomes not only "what color should this be?" but "what can this existing piece of material become?"

Constraint becomes part of composition.

André Derain offers another productive comparison. His Fauvist landscapes reorganize recognizable environments through heightened chromatic relationships, allowing color to undermine conventional depth and descriptive fidelity. The radical color of Fauvism was not simply decorative excess; it became a way of constructing pictorial space differently.³ Kalil similarly builds space from adjacent chromatic territories, but because those territories are

pieces of cloth, their material boundaries are literal rather than painted illusions. The comparison therefore should not suggest that Kalil's quilts derive their formal sophistication from Fauvist painting. More interestingly, both arrive at questions of flattened space, chromatic autonomy, pattern, and distorted perspective through fundamentally different material conditions.

Marc Chagall provides a related but distinct point of contact. In his work, animals, flowers, domestic objects, figures, villages, and memory frequently occupy a visual world unconstrained by rational scale or continuous perspective. Kalil's cats, labubu, butterflies, flowers, houseplants, furniture, and food similarly move between observation and recollection. A familiar object can become enormous because scale follows emotional or compositional necessity rather than optical reality. The interiors in Kalil's quilts consequently feel less like objective descriptions of rooms than like memories of them.

A chair may become disproportionately large because the chair matters. Flowers overwhelm a table because their visual presence exceeds their physical scale. A window contains just enough information to imply another space without constructing convincing atmospheric distance. Domestic space is assembled through recognition rather than illusion.

Raoul Dufy makes the Fauvist comparison still more complicated because his practice crossed the line between painting and decorative design. The history of modernism was never entirely separated from textile, ornament, fashion, and interior decoration. Modern painters could borrow, inhabit, or embrace decorative language while remaining securely within the institutional category of fine art. This is where the comparison becomes politically consequential.

Kalil's quilts should not be understood as significant because they can be made to resemble Matisse, Derain, Dufy, or Chagall. To do so would preserve painting as the standard through which the quilt gains legitimacy. Instead, the comparison exposes an uneven art-historical vocabulary. Why do flattened perspective, expressive color, fragmentation, improvisation, repetition, and abstraction become signs of the avant-garde in one medium while similar operations elsewhere have historically been described as craft, folk art, domestic production, or decoration?

Ruth Clement Bond provides an essential counter-history. Bond's extraordinary quilt designs emerged during the 1930s while she lived among Black workers and their families associated with the Tennessee Valley Authority's Wheeler Dam project. Bond produced designs that were then executed in cloth by other Black women. Her quilts combined appliqué, simplified silhouettes, geometric organization, political imagery, and narratives of Black labor and modernity. The Museum of Arts and Design describes this as Bond's only venture into quilt design and emphasizes that the project joined political messaging with a form made within the domestic sphere.⁴

The collaborative structure matters. Bond designed; other women materially realized the works. Authorship, design, labor, and execution therefore do not collapse neatly into a single identity. Patricia Bernard Ezzell's scholarship situates these works within the racial and social

engineering structures surrounding the TVA, emphasizing both Bond's modernist designs and the Black women who translated those paper patterns into quilts.⁵ Bond complicates the easy distinction between the quilt as domestic object and modern art. Her work is political without ceasing to be decorative, formally sophisticated without abandoning the language of applied textile, and modern without requiring painting as its legitimating medium.

What happens if we place a Bond quilt beside a Derain landscape? Both can flatten space. Both can subordinate naturalistic representation to shape and color. Both can transform recognizable subjects through geometric simplification. Yet the critical vocabulary historically available to Derain—avant-garde, expressive, radical, modern—was not equally available to Black textile production. The difference says less about the formal intelligence of the respective objects than about the institutions authorized to categorize them.

This is why the quilts of Gee's Bend are important here, but they must be approached carefully. The comparison between Gee's Bend quilts and modernist abstraction helped bring institutional attention to a remarkable textile tradition, yet it can reproduce the assumption that painting supplies the vocabulary required to recognize quilts as art. Amelia Peck has addressed precisely this problem, questioning the tendency to legitimize Gee's Bend through comparison with canonical modernist abstraction rather than understanding the quilts on their own historical, material, domestic, and social terms.⁶ That warning should govern how Kalil's work is approached as well.

The relevant history is not simply that quilts "look like" modern art. It is that the category of modern art was historically narrower than the formal practices occurring beyond it. Gee's Bend offers another connection through material life. Quilts produced there frequently incorporated available or previously used textiles, including clothing and work garments. Such materials carry social histories that do not disappear when they enter abstraction. Lisa Gail Collins's *Stitching Love and Loss* is particularly valuable because it interprets a Gee's Bend quilt through kinship, mourning, memory, and material biography rather than isolating it as autonomous formal design.⁷

Kalil's secondhand textiles similarly arrive with prior lives. Their history is not necessarily legible in a documentary sense—we may not know who owned a particular piece of cloth or exactly what it once was—but previous use remains conceptually present. Material has survived one context and entered another. The quilts therefore treat reuse as both method and worldview. A discarded textile is not empty. It is available.

Dental floss intensifies this proposition because it lacks even the cultural prestige of traditional sewing material. There is no need to attach an art theorist to the floss in order to make it meaningful. Its conceptual force arises through specificity. An inexpensive commodity associated with bodily maintenance becomes structural infrastructure. A material designed to be used briefly and thrown away becomes responsible for keeping an artwork intact. There is humor in this reversal, but also an institutional problem.

Should one of these quilts enter a museum collection, the institution might assign the object a value, accession number, storage protocol, environmental conditions, conservation treatment, and insurance status. Yet the object's physical integrity would remain dependent upon dental floss and discarded cloth. Value and material value come apart.

This contradiction resonates with Glenn Adamson's argument in *Thinking Through Craft* that craft occupies an unstable position in relation to modern art: materially essential yet frequently conceptually subordinated. Adamson approaches craft less as a fixed class of objects than as a way of examining skill, making, labor, material, and the cultural construction of artistic autonomy.⁸ Kalil's quilts make that instability tangible.

They are also made, intentionally, as decoration. That point should not be softened. Some of the quilts become bed dressings and therefore enter the sphere of use, but many are produced primarily to live on walls and alter the environments surrounding them. Their function is aesthetic. To describe them as decorative might initially sound diminishing. That reflex is part of the problem.

"Decorative" has historically operated as a disciplinary category. Objects understood as decorative, useful, handmade, domestic, or associated with craft have often been positioned beneath autonomous fine art. Author's account of American fiber art demonstrates how textile artists confronted precisely these hierarchies, including fiber's associations with women's work and the "merely decorative."⁹

The work does not answer this history by insisting the quilts transcend decoration. Instead, the work asks why decoration should require transcendence at all. Decoration is not the absence of thought. It is one way human beings author their surroundings. To decorate a room is to decide which colors, objects, textures, images, and memories will accompany the body through daily life. Decoration participates in breakfast, illness, conversation, boredom, sleep, grief, sex, celebration, argument, and care. Its supposed triviality may derive precisely from its intimacy with ordinary existence.

Here, Matisse becomes useful again. Pattern and decoration repeatedly enter his work without depriving the paintings of intellectual or institutional authority. Modern painting could adopt ornament, patterned textiles, flattened surface, and decorative abundance and have those qualities discussed as sophisticated formal experimentation. The contradiction lies not in modernism's total rejection of decoration but in its ability to absorb decorative languages without necessarily extending the same cultural authority to the decorative objects and labor from which those languages emerged.

T'ai Smith's study of the Bauhaus weaving workshop demonstrates another version of this problem. Textile production at the Bauhaus was deeply involved in debates over craft, gender, design, medium, and modernity; weaving was not peripheral to modernism so much as historically marginalized within many accounts of it.¹⁰ Kalil's work belongs productively within this contradiction because the quilts refuse the premise that decoration must disguise itself as something else to become critically meaningful.

Faith Ringgold provides another important history of refusal. Her story quilts joined painting, fabric, narrative, autobiography, family, race, and political history without requiring textile to function merely as support. *Tar Beach*, for example, constructs a visual and narrative world through the form of the story quilt, combining domestic and familial imagery with fantasy, mobility, and Black urban experience.¹¹ Ringgold is useful not because Kalil's quilts resemble hers stylistically, but because her practice destabilizes the assumption that textile, narrative, domestic imagery, politics, and fine art must be treated as separate domains.

Kalil's work is generally quieter narratively, but text occasionally enters the quilts with surprising force. In **one work**, the phrase "every living being holds hidden wisdom" occupies a central panel amid geometric and botanical fragments. Elsewhere political symbols coexist with flowers, household scenes, animals, and decorative pattern. Language is not treated as an explanatory caption. It becomes another piece of material. The political and the decorative are permitted to occupy the same surface without one legitimizing the other. That relationship is especially pronounced in the large quilt in which a butterfly dominates a dark ground while red droplets fall along and around a sharp white form and daisies cluster at the lower edge. The butterfly's scale gives it something approaching monumentality. Yet the image does not become heroic. Its delicacy remains visible even as its body expands. The red forms introduce bodily or violent associations—blood, injury, rupture—without clarifying an event. Beauty and unease coexist. The daisies do not repair the wound. The wound does not invalidate the flowers.

In the small quilt depicting a labubu lying on its back, a similar instability occurs. The animal is simultaneously tender, funny, vulnerable, and vaguely disturbing. Small rectangular pieces appear attached to its body like labels, bandages, scraps though we recognize that they may be tags. A familiar figure becomes difficult to narrate conclusively. The softness of cloth does not guarantee softness of content. This tension between material softness and interpretive uncertainty occurs throughout Kalil's work. Quilting carries cultural associations with warmth, comfort, care, domesticity, and protection, but Kalil does not allow those associations to dictate meaning. The quilts can contain political urgency, melancholy, absurdity, beauty, violence, humor, or complete mundanity.

Their material vocabulary is hospitable enough to hold contradiction. The contradiction becomes still more productive when a quilt leaves the wall and becomes bed dressing. Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* of 1955 supplies an obvious comparison. The work incorporates a pillow, quilt, and sheet mounted vertically and worked with oil and pencil. MoMA classifies it within Painting and Sculpture, and it has become a canonical example of Rauschenberg's Combines—works that unsettled distinctions between ordinary objects and art.¹² Rauschenberg moved the visual and material language of bedding toward the wall. Kalil allows movement in both directions.

A quilt can exist as decoration and later dress a bed. Its artistic status need not depend upon permanently escaping utility. This reversibility distinguishes Kalil's work from a familiar modernist narrative in which the ordinary object enters the museum by ceasing to behave ordinarily. On a gallery wall, the quilt invites formal analysis. On a bed, it encounters the body. That difference is consequential.

The bed introduces folding, friction, bodily contact, laundering, sunlight, compression, stains, smells, hair, skin, and wear. The museum, by contrast, generally attempts to slow material change. The logic of conservation privileges preservation; the logic of use accepts transformation. Kalil's quilts make these two temporalities rub against one another.

If an artwork becomes bedding, wear need not signify the failure of the object. It can become evidence of another stage in its biography. The question shifts from How do we preserve this object unchanged? to What kinds of life are we willing to permit an artwork to have?

That question reaches beyond the quilts themselves toward institutional practice. Museums necessarily classify. Classification determines which department acquires an object, which curator researches it, what language is used to describe it, how it is stored, how it is conserved, and which histories become attached to it.

Painting; Textile; Craft; Decorative art; Design; Folk art; Household object; Contemporary art. Kalil's quilts behave badly within these categories. That behavior constitutes their institutional critique. It is not a critique based upon refusing the museum. Nor do the quilts announce an anti-institutional position. Their critique emerges because their material and functional identities remain difficult to stabilize. A quilt can be decorative art and contemporary art. It can be an image and a blanket. It can be made of refuse and become valuable. It can carry political meaning while existing principally to make a room beautiful. It can be preserved and used. Rather than demanding a new category, the quilts reveal the inadequacy of requiring one category to do all the explanatory work.

Ruth Clement Bond is crucial here because her quilts similarly unsettle authorship and classification. Her paper designs became textile objects through the labor of other Black women. Is the resulting object design, craft, fine art, collective labor, political imagery, domestic furnishing, or social history? The answer is not one of these. It is their entanglement. Faith Ringgold likewise refuses a neat boundary among painting, narrative, textile, autobiography, activism, and domestic form. Gee's Bend resists separation of abstraction from use, family, material scarcity, improvisation, and generational knowledge. Rauschenberg converts bedding into canonical museum art. Matisse and Dufy bring decorative language into painting. Kalil moves in another direction: the work does not require the absorption of textile into painting, nor decoration into autonomy, nor use into uselessness.

Instead, it permits these states to remain reversible. This is where the secondhand fabric becomes more than a material fact. Reuse is also a model for meaning. Nothing in these quilts is required to possess only one identity. A discarded textile becomes color. Color becomes flower. Flower becomes image. Image becomes decoration. Decoration becomes artwork. Artwork becomes bed dressing. Bed dressing returns to the wall. Dental floss becomes thread. The transformations do not erase what came before them.

The work therefore proposes a particularly generous understanding of objects: a thing can become something else without ceasing to carry its former possibilities. Decoration, within this logic, is not superficiality. It is an intimate form of world-making. To decorate is to make

decisions about what will surround a body. It transforms space from somewhere one happens to be into somewhere that has been authored.

Kalil's quilts understand this authorship as modest rather than monumental. Their recurring flowers, chairs, animals, plants, plates, windows, and tables rarely announce grand historical events. They insist instead upon the aesthetic consequence of the mundane. That insistence ultimately produces the work's most consequential challenge to art history.

Seen beside Bond, Ringgold, the quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Matisse, Derain, Dufy, Chagall, and Rauschenberg, Kalil's quilts suggest that the history of modern art might look different if objects were understood not only according to what they *are*, but according to what they are allowed to *do*. Flattened space does not belong to painting. Abstraction does not belong to modernism. Pattern does not belong to decoration. Decoration does not belong to the insignificant. Use does not belong outside art. A composition can be an image and a blanket. A secondhand cloth can be refuse and archive. Dental floss can become infrastructure. Beauty can perform labor. An artwork can accommodate a body rather than merely asking that body to stand at a distance and look.

The question, then, is no longer whether a quilt can become art. Art history has answered that question repeatedly, if often belatedly. The more difficult question is why becoming art has so often required an object to stop being something else. Kalil's quilts offer no such sacrifice.

They remain decorative, materially humble, occasionally useful, resolutely handmade, pictorial, unruly, and comfortable with contradiction. Rather than crossing the boundary between art and life once and permanently, they keep that boundary permeable. Kalil does not need the quilt to become painting in order for it to become art. Perhaps the more consequential proposition is that painting—and the institutions built to preserve its authority—have always had something to learn from the quilt.

Notes

1. Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), esp. introduction and chap. 1. Auther's study traces the historical elevation of fiber from a medium associated with craft, decoration, and women's work into the postwar American art world.
2. National Gallery of Art, "Open Window, Collioure," Henri Matisse, 1905, accessed August 10, 2026. The NGA identifies the painting as a foundational Fauvist work and emphasizes the movement's loosening of color and texture from naturalistic description.
3. National Gallery of Art, "Henri Matisse / André Derain," educational resource, accessed August 10, 2026. For the larger Fauvist project of chromatic experimentation, see also National Gallery of Art, "Henri Matisse," accessed August 10, 2026.

4. Museum of Arts and Design, "Fabric of Change: The Quilt Art of Ruth Clement Bond," accessed August 10, 2026. MAD notes that Bond devised the designs while African American women executed the panels and describes the project as combining political messaging with quilting in the domestic sphere.
5. Patricia Bernard Ezzell, "Quilts, Social Engineering, and Black Power in the Tennessee Valley," *Southern Cultures* 28, no. 2 (2022). Ezzell situates Bond's designs within the racial, labor, and social structures of the Tennessee Valley Authority communities and discusses the women who translated Bond's patterns into quilts.
6. Amelia Peck, "Quilt/Art: Deconstructing the Gee's Bend Quilt Phenomenon," in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South*, ed. Cheryl Finley et al. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018). Peck's methodological concerns regarding modernist comparisons are also discussed in Rachel High, "Author Amelia Peck on Gee's Bend Quilts in *My Soul Has Grown Deep*," Metropolitan Museum of Art, July 16, 2018.
7. Lisa Gail Collins, *Stitching Love and Loss: A Gee's Bend Quilt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023).
8. Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007). Adamson develops craft as a critical framework for examining workmanship, materiality, skill, and the relationship between craft and modern artistic autonomy. The book was published by Berg in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum.
9. Author, *String, Felt, Thread*, introduction and chap. 1. The University of Minnesota Press's description of the volume specifically identifies textile's historical association with the decorative, arts and crafts, and women's work as central to Author's argument.
10. T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Smith examines the Bauhaus weaving workshop as a critical site for debates surrounding craft, medium, gender, and modern design.
11. Museum of Modern Art, "Story Time: *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold," June 17, 2020; Museum of Modern Art, "Faith Ringgold," accessed August 10, 2026. MoMA identifies *Tar Beach* as a story quilt centered on Cassie Louise Lightfoot, her family and neighbors, and a fantastical flight above New York.
12. Museum of Modern Art, "Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955," accessed August 10, 2026. MoMA records the work as oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet mounted on wood supports and classifies it within Painting and Sculpture.

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