

Quilts and Roger Brown's indwelling identity

— “Domestic, intrinsic, and diaspora”

Ashley Wang

“The meaning of an object is not necessarily limited to what was intended by the maker, but can be drawn from other sources as well. In the case of a large contextual gap between viewer and maker, such as situations in which objects are unfamiliar to their viewers, viewers may fill in this lack of meaning by either familiarizing themselves with the maker’s context or importing meaning from other contexts to which they have access”

— Terry Klassen

This curatorial project navigates through Roger Brown's life experiences by focusing on the relationship between him, his collections, and his house. Being an enthusiastic artist, painter, and collector, Brown kept a gigantic amount of objects during his life, in which most of them are currently exhibited at the Roger Brown Study Collection. Those collected objects influence, shape, and reflect Brown's artistic career in a direct way that no other secondary materials could compare.

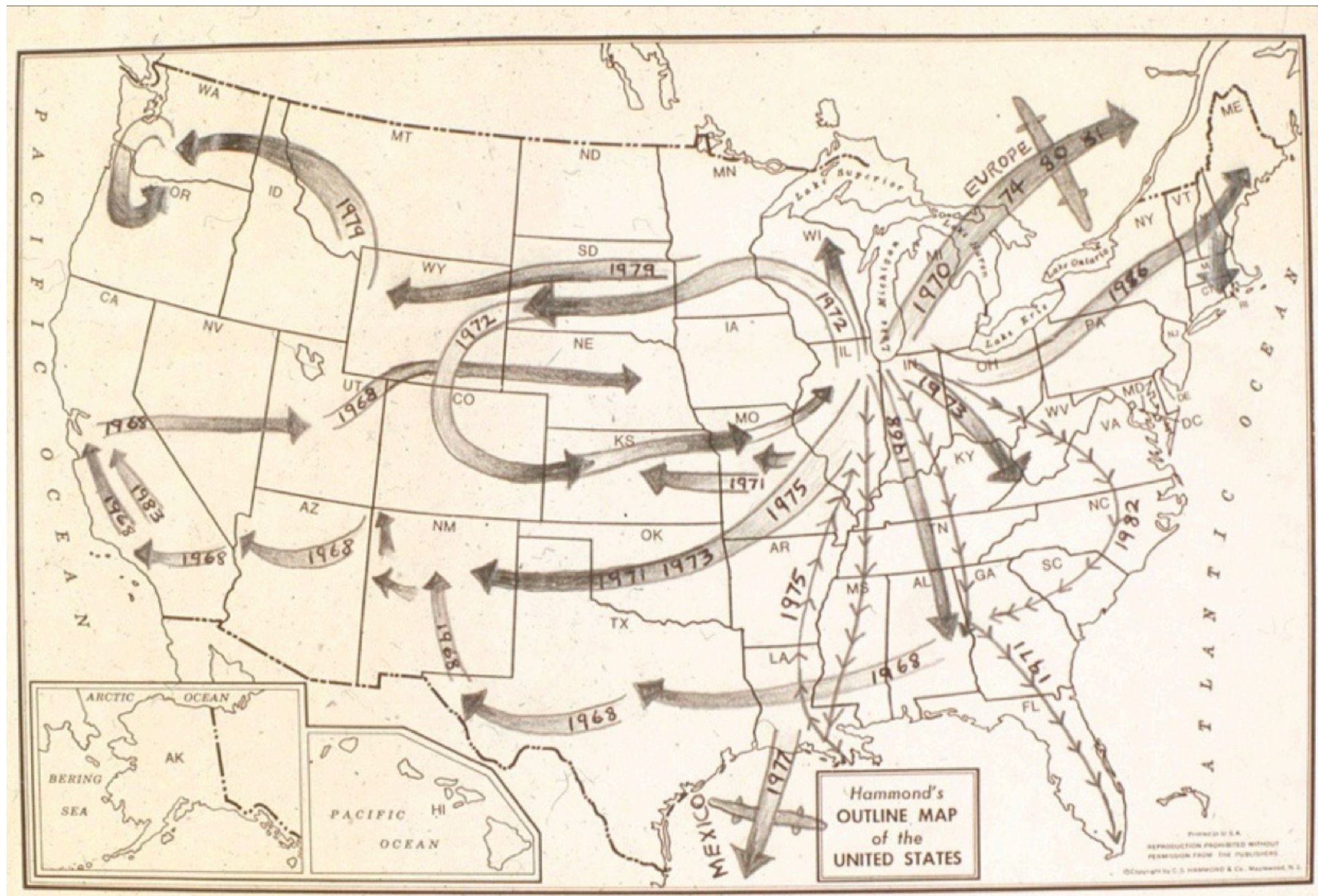
Roger Brown was born in 1941 in Alabama. He grew up in Hamilton and Opelika, Alabama, and left the south to attend the School of the Art Institute after high school. Brown spent most of his childhood with his grandparents, especially his great grandma Mammy. A strong sense of attachment and bond with his family's past was established from this experience. Brown was very interested in his family's genealogy, as well as the material culture that he associated himself with the south. As known as an intuitive collector, Brown had expanded his collection by acquiring works from his fellow classmates and Chicago artists, buying objects in thrifted stores and flea markets, obtaining things he found intriguing when traveling, etc. As museum artifacts today, these objects play a significant role in telling Roger Brown's aesthetic interest, inspiration index, family history, and personal experience.



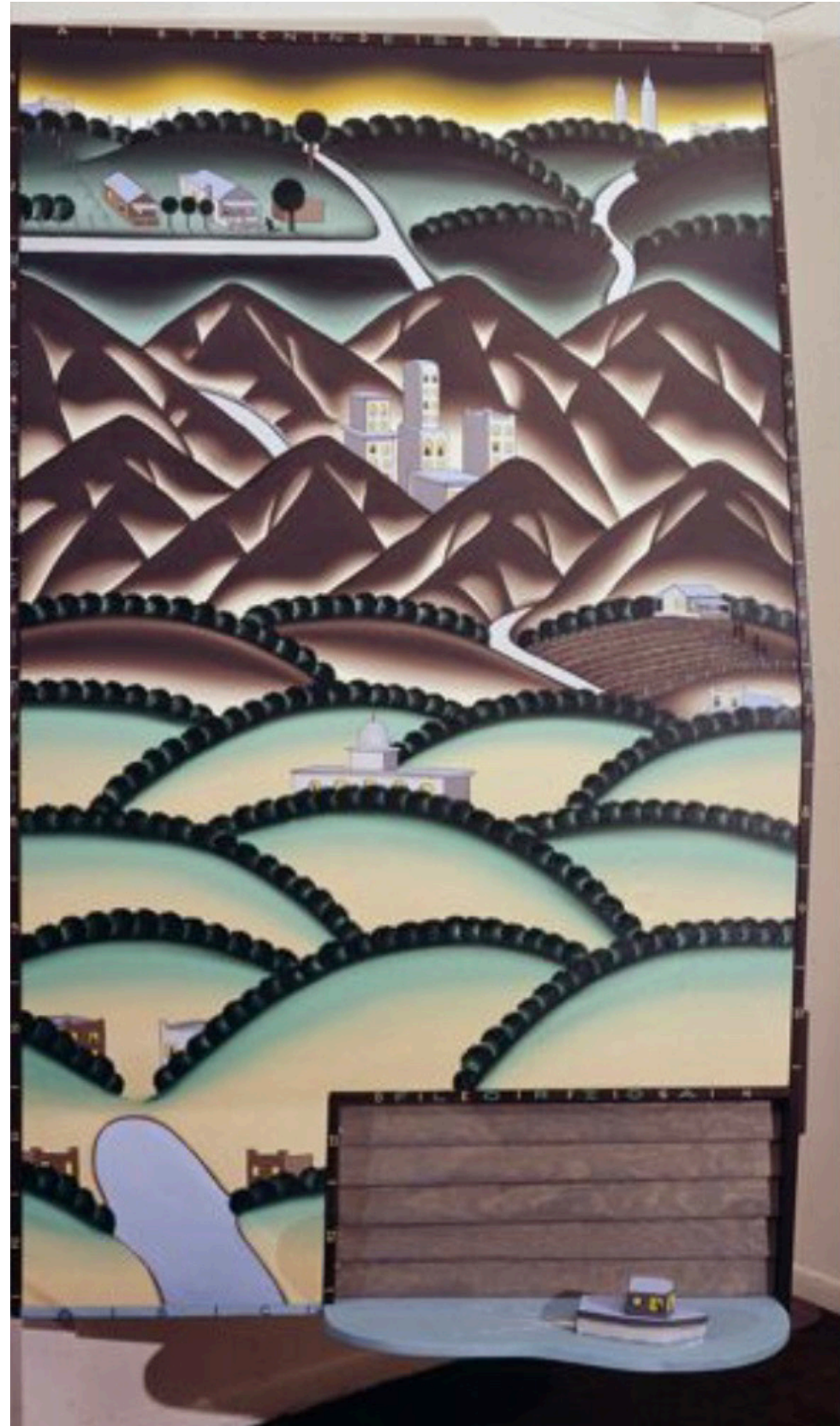
African American Quilt

The body of work in this catalog was selected based on one essential object: the African American quilt. How can a domestic object embrace its outer environment? Is the idea of home further reinforced by looking at a house essential? How can memories about home be carried with us when being further away?... Quilts are often times associated with home, interior, gender, care, and heritage. The African American quilt in Brown's collection is made by an unknown maker, who was likely to be an African descendent. The quilt is significant in its abundant historical context which links back to Brown's attachment with the south. Alabama as an essential state for African American civil rights movement, was flooded with African folk art. Being born and grew up in this environment, Brown was greatly inspired by and referred himself to art and objects with African roots.

“Quilts as cultural adaptation and effects of ethnicity and geography, tell the story of migration, settlement, continuity, and the change of traditions”. Possibly, Brown's attachment with his family's genealogy and the history of the south had to do with his experience of leaving home at a young age and spending most of his life away from home. Quilts are physical cultural materials that get handmade from scraps, get handled and used everyday, and get passed on throughout time. They are vehicles carrying care and love from family members. Brown has collected many quilts during his life, including one from his great grand-ma Mammy. He also owned a great number of objects coming from African cultural backgrounds. Perhaps his attachment to both categories stemmed from the resonance between his experience of being lightly rooted and far away from home and the African diaspora.



Roger Brown drawing on an existing map, showing the paths of his travels from 1968 to 1986



Autobiography in the Shape of Alabama (Mammy's door) recto



Autobiography in the Shape of Alabama (Mammy's door) verso

As a kid, Roger Brown spent majority of time living with Mammy when he was back in Alabama. Society in the 40s and 50s still put emphasis on women's role as being indoor and domestic, specified in cleaning, cooking, quilt making, and other houseworks. A door is what divides the interior space from the outside world. It is also a physical and metaphorical gateway to home. After entering his "house" through the "door", next section explores Roger Brown's perception of what a domestic place is like.



Untitled (Frying pan and matches)

A standard house includes the front yard, the interior, and the backyard. If the living room is supposed to be exposed and public for meeting guests and hanging with friends, then the kitchen area is semi-private and generally hidden behind the living room. This painting by Brown portrayed the rather mundane scene of everyday life, by a kitchen stove which is not very often discussed since it's considered boring and gendered. It is a symbolic proof that Brown had lived in this place being a representation of him occupying an interior space.



Roger's bedroom

Navigating through the kitchen and the staircases, Brown kept an aged cabinet from his family's old house in his bedroom, where was arguably the only private space in his house. The cabinet was for keeping objects that are closely related to him and his family's heritage. You can find family portraits, a saving pot, and even the fabric used to wrap Brown when he was just born. As a place truly to himself, the bedroom held collections that were placed at the bottom of his heart. This cabinet is the material expression of his journey tracking and exploring his family's genealogy.



Grant Wood, Fall Plowing



Quilted Landscape

After being a part of Brown's dwelling both physically and mentally, let's step outside and take a look at the surrounding environment. The notion of home is not merely tied with an interior space, but also the scent, the breeze, the outside hue reflected on walls besides the windows... Brown had created a large number of works related to landscape, from more of a realistic style early on to his later surrealist approach. The depiction of landscape is not rare in the art world, actually it is arguably one of the most represented subjects in oil painting. Roger Brown focused primarily on the human presence and labor in rural environments, showing urbanization as well as the human-nature relationship.

In some of his paintings, the fields and townhouses consist an abstract pattern, linking back to the idea of a quilt made from scraps of fabrics. The quilt pattern resembles an aerial view of large scale agricultural lands, physically mapping out areas with colors and textures. This connection between a domestic object and its outer environment is interesting in a way that it integrates utilitarian functions and symbolic meanings. Drawing back to the context of African American history, quilts are burdened with the significant story of moving and adapting. This story gets retold and reinterpreted over and over again but the heritage lives on.