MILWAUKEE-BRED, CALIFORNIA-BASED FILM-MAKER JAMES BENNING'S CURRENT EXHIBIT AT MCASB IS NOTHING LESS THAN A BRILLIANT BAKLAVA OF AMERICA, A SOLEMN LAYERING OF THE COUNTRY'S HEARTBREAKING AGRICULTURAL AND CLASS HISTORY, TURNED OUT IN THE COOL MINIMALISM OF THE VANDERBILT THAT FOLLOWED VARSHOL.


NOWHERE IN THE SHOW IS BENNING'S INTEREST IN AG, LABOR AND CLASS MORE POIGNANT THAN IN HIS QUILTS, MADE, IN HIS WORDS, OF "POOR WHITES" AND "POOR BLACKS." THERE'S A SOUL-TINGLING FAMILIARITY FOR VIEWERS FROM CALIFORNIA'S AG LANDS, IN WHICH SANTA BARBARA IS ROOTED, ON APPROACHING THE DENIM PATCHWORK OF AFTER MISSOURI PETTWAY (2019). MADE FROM WORK CLOTHES BENNING COLLECTED AT CENTRAL VALLEY FLEA MARKETS, THE QUILT OVERLAPS THE HISTORY OF UNDOCUMENTED AND POOR MIGRANT WORKERS WITH THAT OF THE QUILTERS OF GEE'S BEND, A FORMER COTTON PLANTATION WHERE THE ALABAMA RIVER TAKES A TURNT. BENNING'S CONCERN FOR AMERICA'S LAND HISTORY IS CLEAR IN THESE QUILTS AND BROUGHT FULL TILT IN THE ARTIST'S CRATES OF ALABAMA DIRT.

THE BLACK BELT OF THE DEEP SOUTH WAS NAMED FOR THE COLOR OF THE RICH

SANTA BARBARA
JAMES BENNING
MCA SANTA BARBARA
BY DEBRA HERRICK

years. The exhibit is Benning’s first solo show on the West Coast in a more than 40-year career. There’s a sense of retrospective, a spanning portrait of America, and no less of the artist.