

United States in the 2020s are not separated by progress. Instead, these stories are bound by the persistence of White supremacy.

As Mazloomi proclaims: "Art is truth, and my quilts bear witness. They are evidence, testimony, and a lived record of American history."¹⁵ In *Threads of History*, that testimony is palpable. As you sit with each piece, remind yourself not simply to look but to understand that looking, in this context, is a form of accountability. The histories documented in these quilts are not settled. The people memorialized in them died fighting for things that remain unfinished. Dr. Sharbreon Plummer is a public scholar, curator, writer, and interdisciplinary artist whose work explores Black art history, craft and material studies, southern

¹⁵ "Carolyn Mazloomi Quilt Depicts Timeline of Black American History," See *Great Art*, March 24, 2026, seegreatart.art.

Artist Biography



Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi is a master quilter of international renown. She is the founder of the African-American Quilt Guild (1981) and the Women of Color Quilters Network (1985), whose initial 10-person membership has grown to over 1,800 nationwide and 4,350 internationally. Through these organizations, Mazloomi has created networks that highlight the unique contributions of African-American quilters on the global stage. Mazloomi's quilts have been exhibited at institutions including the Mint Museum, National Civil Rights Museum, Museum of Art and Design, American Folk Art Museum, and the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Many of her quilts depict narratives about family history, African-American history, and women's rights. She has also published twelve books about African-American quilters such as *Visioning Human Rights in the New Millenium: Quilting the World's Conscience*, *And Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations*, and *Quilting African American Women's History*. In 2003, Mazloomi was the first recipient of the Ohio Heritage Fellowship program which recognizes Ohio folk and traditional artists who are the finest and most influential masters of their particular art forms and traditions and whose work in the folk and traditional arts have had a significant impact on the people and communities of the state. In 2014, Mazloomi was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts. She was inducted into the Quilters Hall of Fame Museum in 2016.

folkways, and cultural memory. In this lecture, Dr. Plummer examines cultural histories and the role of art and craft in democracy, particularly in relation to the current political climate and Mazloomi's work within U.S. history.

A native of South Louisiana, she has spent more than fifteen years developing programs and initiatives that support artists and communities of the global majority whose work advances freedom, liberation, and social change. Dr. Plummer's latest publication, *Stories in the Seams: A People's History of Black Quilts and Their Makers*, will be released October 6, 2026. Mazloomi will not let that be forgotten and neither should we.

—Dr. Sharbreon Plummer

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GALLERY GUIDE

Introduction to the Exhibition

The Contemporary Dayton is proud to present *Threads of History: Quilts by Carolyn Mazloomi*, in partnership with The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, a landmark solo exhibition of recent work by award-winning artist, historian, and curator Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi. Now an septuagenarian, Mazloomi remains one of the most visionary leaders in contemporary quilting, widely recognized for her lifelong efforts to elevate African American quilt traditions. Her striking black-and-white quilts memorialize the lives and legacies of Black freedom fighters, capturing resilience, resistance, and remembrance through bold imagery and layered narrative. Illustrated in Mazloomi's quilts are Frederick Douglas, Fannie Lou Hamer, Henrietta Lacks, John Lewis, Emmitt Till, Sojourner Truth, and many more.

Considered to be one of the first artists to use the medium of quilting to further social justice causes, activism, and African American storytelling, Mazloomi speaks out on issues of police reform, equality in the public school system, literacy in Black neighborhoods, gun violence awareness, and inequality in voting rights. Her extraordinary impact has been recognized with numerous honors, including the Bess Lomax Hawes NEA National Heritage Fellowship, a United States Artists Fellowship, and an American Craft Council Honorary Fellowship. Mazloomi's work is held in major collections, including the Smithsonian Institution and the American Folk Art Museum.

As The Contemporary Dayton marks its 35th anniversary, it joins the nation in commemorating America's 250th birthday by centering the theme of freedom of expression across its exhibitions and public programs. Rooted in democratic ideals of open

Threads of History: Quilts by Carolyn Mazloomi

June 12 – September 12, 2026

THE DR. ROBERT L. BRANDT, JR. FAMILY GALLERY
THE IRA AND SUSAN THOMSEN FAMILY GALLERY
THE JACK W. AND SALLY D. EICHELBERGER FOUNDATION VIDEO GALLERY

dialogue, civic participation, and the exchange of diverse perspectives, this focus positions art as a vital space for reflection, conversation, and community engagement. *Threads of History: Quilts by Carolyn Mazloomi* embodies this theme by illuminating overlooked histories, honoring cultural memory, and celebrating the power of storytelling through art.

Witness Work: The Quilts of Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi By Dr. Sharbreon Plummer

*"Elder, African-American mother, wife and grandmother born in the Jim Crow segregated south."*¹

This is how Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi introduces herself, unapologetically framing her personal politic and driving force as an artist. This framing tells you why, after decades of training as an aerospace engineer and building one of the most impressive legacies in American craft history, she returned to the studio and made over 40 pictorial quilts in under two years. Most importantly, it tells you why, in a moment when over thirty states have passed legislation restricting the teaching of Black history in public schools,² the exhibition you are standing in is more than a survey. It is a rebuttal to and righting of historical erasure.

Threads of History: Quilts by Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi gathers twenty works on view at The Contemporary Dayton from June through September 2026. The works span decades of American struggle and survival — from antebellum abolitionism and Greensboro sit-ins to contemporary movement building against police brutality. Their subjects include notable figures across American history, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, the Little Rock Nine, the Black Panther Party, Harry and Henrietta Moore, Emmett Till, Sojourner Truth,

¹Trelani Michelle, "Whole Cloth: The Art and Legacy of Dr. Carolyn Mazloomi," *Black Art In America*, October 4, 2024, blackartinamerica.com.

²Sarah Cascone "Quilt Artist Carolyn Mazloomi on a Lifetime of Weaving Narratives," *Artnet News*, September 23, 2024, news.artnet.com.

Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King Jr. These quilts are intended to push beyond simply restating these figures' prominence within our nation's story. Each piece is a witness document that bridges Mazloomi's lived experience with the life-altering moments throughout history that are consistently threatened by revisionism.

Mazloomi was born in 1948 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and came of age during the civil rights movement, inspired by the actions of those who were at the helm of protest and resistance. She earned degrees in aerospace engineering from Northrop University and the University of Southern California. As she built her formal career, she simultaneously began her journey into quilting. In 1981, she founded the African American Quilt Guild of Los Angeles. In 1985, she founded the Women of Color Quilters Network (WCQN), a national organization now numbering nearly 1,700 members, dedicated to preserving and promoting the work of African American quiltmakers. In 2014, she was named a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts—the highest honor the United States confers on practitioners of traditional arts.³ Her quilts are held by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the American Folk Art Museum, the National Civil Rights Museum, and the Renwick Gallery, among others. She has authored eight books on African American quilts, curated seventeen traveling exhibitions, and given decades of her professional life to amplifying the voices of other makers while also now returning, with full urgency, to her own.⁴

That urgency is evident in the scale and thematic density of her most recent body of work. Mazloomi does not approach these histories as a researcher passively observing cultural and movement-based work across the passage of time. She engages with them as someone who lived adjacent to them and who understands the need to carry these stories forward, especially when it may be deemed unpopular or in direct opposition to those in positions of power. "My quilts are visual, historic documents to

tell our story," she has said, "because it's becoming increasingly difficult [to do so]."⁵

The quilts in *Threads of History* are whole cloth works—built on a single base fabric rather than pieced from multiple swatches—and worked primarily in stencil, hand painting, and ink. Each figure is rendered with clarity. She ensures the faces, bodies, gestures, symbols are delineated with care and precision. Fabric becomes a canvas where Mazloomi is able to present the most difficult imagery with both tenderness and strategy, hoping to tug at a semblance of relatability within her audience. As she states, "every human being has an intimate relationship with cloth. It is the first thing we are swathed in at birth, and the last thing that touches our body upon our death."⁶ Through that closeness, she hopes viewers can have a soft place to land as they are confronted with (at times) ugly truths.

The choice to work almost entirely in black and white is one of the most deliberate decisions in the exhibition, and Mazloomi's overall stylistic trajectory. What began as a practical way to stop spending time deliberating over color became structurally and conceptually essential.⁷ "Creating artwork in only black and white emphasizes contrasts, shapes, and textures without the distraction of color, Mazloomi states. "[...]There's nothing to get between the message I want to convey to the viewer."⁸ The most important meaning behind this choice, however, lies far beneath the visually graphic surface. "My black and white works also symbolize racism in the country," she continues, "There is much drama surrounding the relationship between white and black people in America."⁹ Mazloomi's logic is manifested through a simple, yet bold palette that is compelling due to its unconventional nature and imagery that is constantly subjected to racial amnesia. There is also a historical resonance that runs through the monochrome palette. These images call back to the visual archive of the civil rights era: the newspaper photographs, the protest placards, the activist prints, the documentary film stills. In black

and white, Mazloomi's figures hold the gravity of those records while also transcending time and space. Their starkness reminds us of the proximity of the present those moments. They are not as far removed as we'd like to believe, with figures such as Ruby Bridges still living today.

To move through *Threads of History* is to move through connected histories of state violence, resistance, and the ongoing cost of Black life in America. Several works in the exhibition form a coherent arc that spans more than a century. *A Concerto for the Dead* (2024) is the exhibition's most direct engagement with police brutality and contemporary anti-Black violence. The title itself invokes elegy and performance simultaneously—the dead are mourned, named, memorialized, and held in a way that is both haunting and compassionate. Works such as *Harry and Henrietta Moore: Freedom Never Dies* (2024) reaches back to one of the movement's earliest martyrs. Harry T. Moore founded the first NAACP chapter in Brevard County, Florida, in 1934, and served as the Florida State Conference's executive secretary until 1951. His campaigns registered tens of thousands of Black voters, fought for equal pay for Black teachers, and demanded accountability for the murders and brutality carried out by law enforcement across the state.¹⁰ On Christmas night 1951—the couple's 25th wedding anniversary—a bomb planted beneath their bedroom floor exploded, killing Harry and fatally wounding Harriette, who died nine days later. No one was ever prosecuted.¹¹

Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free: Fannie Lou Hamer (2024)—an important part of this body of work, but not on view in this exhibition—takes its title from Hamer's own words. Born in 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi, to a family of sharecroppers, Hamer did not learn that Black people could register to vote until she was 44 years old. She registered in 1962, was evicted from the plantation where she worked, and survived beatings in Mississippi jails at the hands of local law enforcement. She co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 as

an integrated alternative to the state's all-white Democratic delegation, and delivered testimony before the Democratic National Convention Credentials Committee that was broadcast on national television and interrupted by President Lyndon Johnson, who held a competing press conference to pull attention from her words.¹² Three years after Hamer first attempted to register to vote, the 1965 Voting Rights Act became law.¹³ Her declaration—*I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired*—has outlasted every attempt to consign her story to the past. In the context of the 2020s, when voting rights legislation continues to be contested across Southern states, this quilt is a sobering reminder of the fallacy of progress in present times.

Quilts like *Black Panther Party* (2025) function as what one critic has described as "a visual archive." The piece catalogues how the Party advocated for freedom, liberation, and civil rights across the late twentieth century.¹⁴ Founded in Oakland in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party developed a Ten-Point Program demanding housing, employment, education, justice, and an end to police brutality. Their community survival programs—free breakfast for children, health clinics, legal aid—were direct responses to state abandonment of the Black community. The Party was also the target of sustained federal counterintelligence operations designed to destroy it from within. Mazloomi does not simplify any of this. Her visual treatment of the Party honors its complexity and its necessity. Her use of color portrays the Party's radical politics as a beacon that cast out the shadowy conditions that produced them. Read together, this collection traces a through-line that Mazloomi has never let herself forget: the persistence of anti-Black violence in America, across legal regimes, across geography, across time. The bomb beneath the Moores' bedroom floor and the knee on George Floyd's neck are not separate phenomena. They are iterations of the same structures of oppression. The beating of Fannie Lou Hamer in a Mississippi jail and the voter suppression laws proliferating across the

³ "Carolyn Mazloomi," National Endowment for the Arts, 2014 National Heritage Fellow profile, arts.gov; "Carolyn Mazloomi," *Quilters Hall of Fame*, quiltershalloffame.net.

⁴ "Carolyn Mazloomi," *Quilters Hall of Fame*, quiltershalloffame.net; "Celebrating a National Treasure: Carolyn L. Mazloomi," Textile Center, textilecenter.substack.com.

⁵ Cascone, "Quilt Artist Carolyn Mazloomi."

⁶ Claire Oliver Gallery, "Carolyn Mazloomi: Whole Cloth, Narratives in Black and White," exhibition statement, September 3–November 16, 2024, claireoliver.com.

⁷ Michelle, "Whole Cloth."

⁸ Biljana Purić, "Carolyn Mazloomi on Quilting, Activism, and Preservation of Black Histories," *Loophole Magazine*, November 6, 2024, loophole.art.

⁹ Purić, "Carolyn Mazloomi on Quilting"

¹⁰ "Harry T. and Harriette Moore," NAACP, naacp.org. Gilbert King.

¹¹ "The Unsolved Murder of Civil Rights Activist Harry Moore," *Smithsonian Magazine*, smithsonianmag.com.

¹² Marlee Bunch, "Why Civil Rights Icon Fannie Lou Hamer Was Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired," *The Conversation*, theconversation.com.

¹³ "Fannie Lou Hamer," Archives of Women's Political Communication, Iowa State University, awpc.cattcenteriastate.edu.

¹⁴ "New Exhibition Contends With Black Heritage Through Layered, Evocative Textile Art," *My Modern Met*, January 17, 2026, mymodernmet.com.