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Bisa Butler: Portraits

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Exhibition Review

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***Bisa Butler: Portraits*, The Art Institute of Chicago, November 16, 2020 – September 6, 2021**

The subjects who populate the 22 quilts that comprise Bisa Butler's exhibition *Portraits* transcend their historical sources—vintage photographs of anonymous African Americans, whose visages Butler transforms through vibrant layers of fabric and thread. Employing a transdisciplinary process that includes documentary research and color studies derived from the artist's early training in painting, Butler renders her figures material, timeless, present, imbuing them with a dignity that celebrates the multiplicity of Black identity.

Photography is central to Butler's textile practice: fabric portraits that portray an eclectic cast of Black characters, some familial, others unknown. Many are unidentified subjects culled from digitized archives, including photographs taken under the auspices of the U.S. Government Farm Securities Administration documenting the impact of the Depression and World War 2 upon American life. These historical images become the inspiration then for the life-sized figures who inhabit Butler's monumental quilts and whose candid, forward views retain their photographic gaze. Dorthea Lange's 1936 photograph of an unnamed Black man from

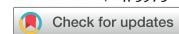
Mississippi is the basis for Butler's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2019), the title of which references a 2016 documentary film based on an unfinished manuscript by author James Baldwin (Figure 1). The artist transfigures Lange's black-and-white image of a seated figure wearing tattered clothes into a colorful portrait of a man of confidence and means, whose fanciful jacket of rich blue-greens and airplane-patterned trousers suggest a cultural cosmopolitanism and social mobility.

Butler constructs her composite portraits by cutting and layering swatches of bright fabrics—ranging from cotton, silk, wool, chiffon to lace—which she arranges and stitches into figurative forms then appliqués onto densely patterned fabric grounds. The resultant characters float within spatial environments quilted in opulent damasks, stripes, and chevrons that take their inspiration from West African and Dutch wax-printed textiles and Nigerian kente cloths. Covering the walls of the hallway adjacent to the show's galleries are contemporary wax-resist African-print textiles (manufactured by the Dutch company Vlisco), the patterns of which Butler directly incorporates into her figures' clothing. Unlike artist Yinka Shonibare's appropriation of

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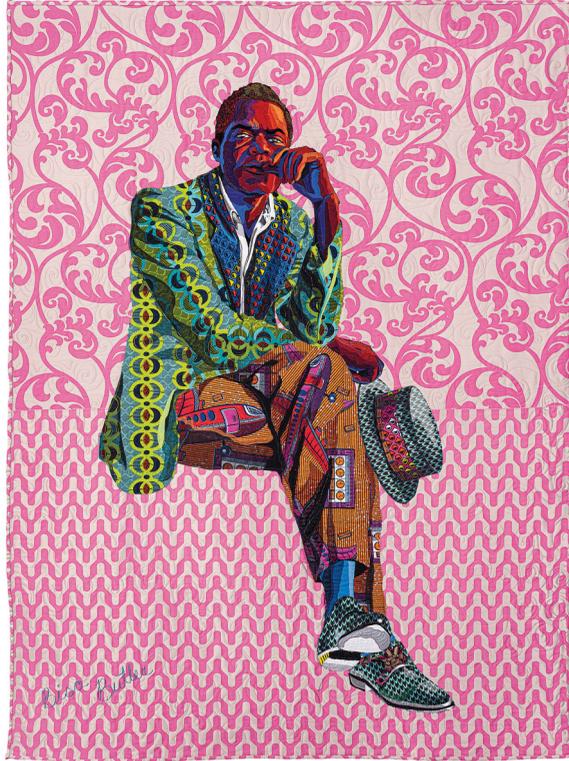


Figure 1

Bisa Butler, *I Am Not Your Negro*, 2019. Cotton, wool, and chiffon; appliquéd and quilted. 79 × 60 inches. Claire Oliver Gallery. © Bisa Butler. Photo by Margaret Fox.

Dutch wax batik cloths in his sculptural installations that critique the legacies of colonial oppression, Butler's textile references speak to her own familial background (her father was born in Ghana), as well as a shared African lineage across diverse countries and cultures.

The exhibition's earliest quilt, *Francis and Violette (Grandparents)* (2001), commemorates the artist's grandparents seen framed within a border that retains the format and formality of the photograph that served as its inspiration. Their portrait also sets the foundation for Butler's many themes of family,

community, and migration, as explored in works such as *Kindred* (2019), *Broom Jumpers* (2019) (Figure 2), and *Black Star Family, First Class Tickets to Liberia* (2018), each portraying family groupings and various life passages. The related *The Warmth of Other Sons* (2020)—epic in storyline and scale (it measures approximately 120 × 144 inches)—depicts a family en route to Chicago during the Great Migration (Figure 3). The work's title is taken from author Isabel Wilkerson's acclaimed book that traces racism in the American South and the difficult journey of Southern Blacks to Northern cities

and elsewhere. With incredible detail and skill, Butler presents a portrait of both hardship and hope, witnessed in her figures' animated faces and patchwork apparel, whose emblematic patterns (prancing horses, birds in flight or fleeing cages) are used here as symbols of freedom.

These narrative elements are heightened by the artist's technicolor palette of acid yellows, cyans and azuls, vermillion and crimson reds that give her portraits life and dimension, while offering a broad spectrum of the color of Blackness. The violets and magentas of *The Equestrian*

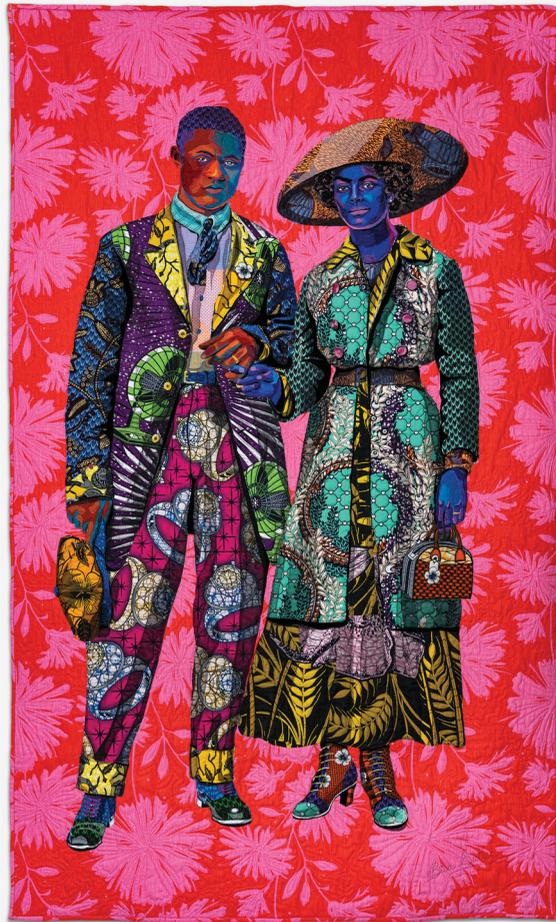


Figure 2

Bisa Butler, *Broom Jumpers*, 2019. Cotton, silk, wool, and velvet; appliquéd and quilted. 98 × 58 inches. Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Purchase with the Belle and Hy Baier Art Acquisition Fund. © Bisa Butler. Photo by Margaret Fox.

(2019), for example, transform the figure of a Black horsewoman—whose likeness is based on a 19th-century photograph of renowned equestrian Selika Lazevski by Félix Nadar—into an image of strength and nobility. Similarly, the brilliant yellows of the collar and bow that illuminate the face of the young girl portrayed in *The Princess* (2018) celebrate the artist's childhood friend who immigrated

from Jamaica to the United States (Figure 4).

Butler's electric hues hail from her background in painting. While a student at Howard University, she studied with key figures of the AfriCOBRA arts movement, a collective founded in Chicago in 1968 that sought cultural revolution through the creation of a Black aesthetic and iconography, then later pursued quilt

making at Montclair State University. The artist achieves painterly expressiveness in her quilts by layering transparent fabrics over more opaque swatches to create rich variations in tone and depth, and by juxtaposing contrasting colors to highlight facial features or reveal dual emotions. In works such as *The Safety Patrol* (2018), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (2019) (Figure 5), and *Southside*



Figure 3

Bisa Butler, *The Warmth of Other Sons*, 2020. Cotton, silk, and wool; appliquéd and quilted. Approximately 120 × 144 inches. Collection of the Newark Museum of Art, Purchase 2020 Collections Exchange Fund. Image courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery © Bisa Butler.

Sunday Morning (2018), ensembles of figures arranged in large-scale tableaux speak to the power of youth, knowledge, and spiritual transcendence echoing the allegorical subjects and grand style of history painting.

Also on view are paintings by AfriCOBRA members Barbara Jones-Hogu and Nelson Stevens, as are works by other artists influential to Butler, among them Romare

Bearden and Gordon Parks. These works provide an art historical context for considering Butler's practice, however, the exhibition neglects to place the artist within the legacy of craft and quilting, a somewhat curious omission given the strength of the Art Institute's significant textile holdings and the importance of quilting traditions to African American communities. More contemporarily, Butler belongs to a current generation of

artists redefining portraiture and the representation of the Black subject, from Kehinde Wiley's pastiches of art historical paintings to Derrick Adams' and Deborah Roberts' collaged human forms, with whom Butler's quilted portraits share many formal affinities. Butler similarly layers hybrid elements, alongside bold color and pattern, to reconfigure narratives of Black identity, performing a kind of archeology that reinvests her archival



Figure 4

Bisa Butler, *The Princess*, 2018. Cotton, chiffon, lace, and satin; appliquéd and quilted. 70 × 46 inches. Collection of Bob and Jane Clark. © Bisa Butler. Photo by Margaret Fox.



Figure 5

Bisa Butler, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 2019. Cotton, wool, and chiffon; appliquéd and quilted. 57 × 129 inches. Minneapolis Institute of Art; Promised gift on long-term loan from a private collection. © Bisa Butler. Photo by Margaret Fox.

images and vernacular sources with new meaning. One might equate such a strategy with *bricolage*, particularly as defined by Michel de Certeau who saw the political dimension of everyday practices and materials, including *bricolage* or “poetic ways of ‘making do.’” (de Certeau 1984) Deftly

balancing traditional handwork, photographic realism, and painterly expression, Butler makes visible the invisible and forgotten, while honoring the accomplishments of Black cultural icons (as suggested by her works’ titles) to create hybrid figures both real and imagined.

Reference

de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley, Los Angeles, xv. London: University of California Press.