



BISA BUTLER: Storyteller

In my work I am telling the story— this African American side— of the American life. History is the story of men and women, but the narrative is controlled by those who hold the pen.

My community has been marginalized for hundreds of years. While have been right beside our white counterparts experiencing and creating history, our contributions and perspectives have been ignored, unrecorded and lost. It is only a few years ago that it was acknowledges that the White house was built by slaves. Right there in the seat of power of our country African Americans were creating and contributing while their names were lost to history.

My subjects are African Americans from ordinary walks of life who may have sat for a formal family portrait or may have been documented by a passing photographer. Like the builders of the White House, they have no names or captions to tell us who they were.

These unknown stories fascinate me. I feel these people; I know these stories because i have grown up with them my whole life. i know about my grandmothers birth in Plaquemine Parrish Louisiana , I know about my Aunt Sheila whose family left Mississippi for Chicago in the 1940's; I know about my own father who left Ghana in 1960 with a scholarship to study in the United States and a suitcase with one shirt and one pair of pants. I know the pride of hard work and the dignity of these people because they are my people. I can imagine their lives because they are me and I am them. I grew up listening to the tales of my elders and I heard about what it felt like to be cold and hungry, but also to have love for one family.

I have a degree from Howard University, a historically black university (HBCU) in Washington D.C. It is at Howard that I was taught by Africobra (The African Commune Of Bad and Relevant Artists) founder Jeff Donaldson who along with other professors taught us to be proud of our African Heritage and to always present our people in a positive light. They taught us we had a responsibility to document and correct the misinformation that had been told about our people, and about Africa. Were to use our art as a tool to tell our side of the story to the masses and the mainstream.

I quilt because this was the technique that was taught to me at home. I could sew before I ever painted on a canvas. My grandmother and mother while not quilters, sewed garments almost every day. African Americans have been quilting since we were bought to this country and needed to keep warm. Enslaved people were not given large pieces of fabric and had to make do with the scarps of cloth that were left after clothing wore out. From these scraps the African American quilt aesthetic came into being. Some enslaved peoples were so talented that they were tasked for creating beautiful quilts that adorned their enslavers beds. My own pieces are reminiscent of this tradition, but I use African fabrics from my father's homeland of Ghana, batiks from Nigeria, and prints from South Africa. My subjects are adorned with and made up of the cloth of our ancestor. If these visages are to be recreated and seen for the first time in a century, I want them to have their African Ancestry back, I want them to take their place in American History. I want the viewer to see the subjects as I see them.

I hope people view my work and see the expressions of joy, the vibrancy of colors, and the quiet dignity of my portraits. All of my pieces are done in life scale to invite the viewer to engage in a dialogue—most figures look the viewers directly in their eyes. I am inviting a reimagining and a contemporary dialogue about age old issues, still problematic in our culture, through the comforting, embracing medium of the quilt. I am expressing what I believe is the equal value of all humans.