



SHATTERED

a two-person exhibition of new work by **Barbara Earl Thomas and Bisa Butler.**
EXPO Chicago 2018 Claire Oliver Gallery stand 428

It makes no difference to the black bird if he eats from our table or scavenges from our discarded piles. The future of his kind may not be altered. But that is not our fate. We've inherited the burden of knowledge and the grief of failed intention. We are not born blind, but we can choose to live that way.

-- Barbara Earl Thomas

For EXPO Chicago 2018, Claire Oliver Gallery is proud to present a curated two-person exhibition of new works of art by Barbara Earl Thomas and Bisa Butler entitled *Shattered*. One definition of this word is disillusioned; the definition of disillusioned is to be free of illusion. It follows then that the works in this installation speak to the possibilities that are in front of us as a society if we can become empowered by understanding that which holds us captive and dismiss these delusions that serve to comfort us in a time to come. *Shattered* also connotes fragmented. The works of Butler and Earl Thomas use small fragments of disparate materials which they bring together in a way that speaks to a greater whole. They also speak to our fragmented society in a way that uplifts and empowers each of us to make a difference.

Each work of art exhibited is labor intensive, obsessively detailed and extremely impactful. Viewers are invited to enter our exhibition by walking through a large-scale Earl Thomas lantern. The shadows cast from this work will spill out into the space and across all who enter there. Earl Thomas uses these shadows as a metaphor for Community; we are all touched by the events that surround us. Once inside the space, the viewer will encounter Bisa Butler's intense, obsessive free flowing quilted textile works, as well as large-scale white or black papercut wall pieces by Earl Thomas. Shadow and texture are important elements in both women's works.

Barbara Earl Thomas' works of art treat the viewer to a chaotic dream world, cross-pollinated with fragments of Bible stories, folklore, and superstition passed from the artist's 'deep southern' roots. Her personal history and current social narrative harmoniously coexist in these visual anthologies. A cultural ambassador and activist in her community, Thomas draws on current events in hopes that her work will help others to gain a new perspective on the important incidents shaping our world; as her grandmother often told her, we are all damned and redeemed every day. Thomas's current body of work addresses the growing hair-trigger violence in our society and, in particular, addresses that brutality surrounding young black men.

Paper cutting is an art with a long history; its first origins date back to the 4th century after the invention of the paper by the Chinese. People displayed paper cut designs as decorative paper lanterns, each showcasing their artistic talents. Today, Thomas reinvents the paper lantern in large scale, some towering 18 feet in the air, casting the



shadows of her stories on all who pass by them. In this way, she incorporates the viewer and reminds us all that we can be part of the solution as there is a proliferation of concurrence in the world we all inhabit together.

Walking a pathway forged by feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, Bisa Butler challenges the division between textiles and fine art. Embracing a technique that was conventionally relegated to the realm of 'women's craft', Butler's visual storytelling combines painterly high decoration and an exploration of community and spirituality. Using skills passed down to her from her African grandmother, the artist questions unsettling topics such as the continuing practice of FGM, mortal violence and the breakdown of the family unit. According to the artist, the textile medium allows her politically aware messages to be more digestible. Beauty here is truly beyond skin deep. Conceptually important to Butler's work is the rigid structure of her traditional craft; a quilt, by tradition, keeps one warm and comforted, however, in Butler's hand it becomes a thoughtful awareness to action.

Earl Thomas and Butler both have supported long and storied studio practices exploring the current condition in their own African American communities. Their artistic handling of materials in a social climate where added importance is given to factors such as making things oneself and recycling with aesthetic pretensions, these artists provide a bridge between ordinary experience and concepts that transcend the viewer's physicality. In *Shattered*, Claire Oliver Gallery attempts to confront the accepted narratives, instigate conversations and question the status quo. This has long been the domain of artists.