BISA BUTLER
EXPANDING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN QUILTING TRADITION

Deally, a portrait is not just a literal likeness of a person but incorporates clues to the subject’s inner life. In her quilted portraits of African Americans, Bisa Butler uses fabrics as clues to the personalities of people she portrays. “I want my work to show African Americans with the same hopes and fears, the same pride in their community, as everyone else,” she said during a recent interview.

To stand before Butler’s life-size depictions of people is to confront compelling presences returning one’s gaze. Inspired by black-and-white photographs of actual men, women, or children, the artist enlivens these images with heightened colors and rhythmic graphics of African prints. Butler is an emergent voice at an auspicious time for a textile genre with ethnic roots. Predecessors like Faith Ringgold, Rosie Lee Tompkins, and the Gee’s Bend quilters have confirmed a place in the art world for contemporary quilts by African Americans. “I hope people seeing my work will think of me as someone continuing the African American quilting tradition but taking
Butler's work carries forward two interests first pursued in childhood. She attributes her leaning toward portraiture to curiosity about the stories behind the photographs in her family's albums. At a young age she learned to sew from her mother and grandmother, seamstresses who made their own clothes. Later, while an art major at Howard University, she brought those interests together. "I was a painting major, but my work wasn't advancing like that of other students—my paintings seemed flat," she recalls. Then a professor observing the distinctive mix of textures in the outfits she wore, recommended that she bring fabric into her work. Familiar with Romare Bearden's combination of paper and fabric in collage, Butler took that advice.

At Howard in the mid-1990s, students were encouraged to produce work that projected positive messages related to the African American experience. Butler says, "Half the faculty had been with AfiCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists)." Formed in Chicago in the 1960s, that group promoted African aesthetics as a resource for visual expression. They also had their own ways of mixing colors. Butler remembered, for example, that adding yellow rather than white to a color lightens it and also makes it vibrant.
Butler's first works in fabric were based on the pictures that intrigued her as a child. Now she draws from a wide range of sources including the Internet, the Library of Congress, and photography books such as those by Deborah Willis, James Van Der Zee, and Gordon Parks. A friend allows Butler to use photographs of her grandfather, who was a Tuskegee Airman during WWII. Government-sponsored photos documenting black American life in the 1930s and '40s particularly attracted her. To offset generic titles like "negro man at work," Butler gives the subjects identities and personal stories. Among countless photographs available, she might be struck by a facial expression, a pose, or a potential narrative.

Mindful of copyright restrictions, Butler assembles photographs from different sources in configurations with narrative intent. Images enlarged on her computer become pattern pieces. Ultimately each work consists of thousands of patches held together with meticulous stitching. Butler's painting studies are evident in strong compositions as well as authoritative use of light and shadow, articulated with overlays of black or white chiffon that she compares to painters' glazes.

Butler's two-dimensional portrayals of fully-rounded figures often exist in front of flat quilted backdrops with geometric patterns—alternating bands of color, zigzags, or repeated triangles, for example. In Butler's visual vocabulary, these are not simply minimal designs, but evoke ancestral memories. "The Kassena live in painted homes, and their bold graphic patterns are often referenced in backgrounds of my quilts," she says.

Since clothing provides non-verbal information on a person's role and socio-economic status, Butler dresses her fictional characters in fabrics appropriate to their imagined lifestyles. To set them in certain periods, she does extensive research in fashion history. For example, in Black Star Family, First
Class Tickets to Liberia, she envisioned a well-to-do early 20th century family headed for the African country founded as a potential home for freed slaves. The man’s silk hat and the woman’s shapely two-piece costume exemplify what a stylish couple of the era might have worn. But the commemorative print of Nelson Mandela’s face on the man’s suit coat slyly skewers the time frame.

The title of Les Sapeurs, Butler explains, refers to a group of contemporary Congolese men who, inspired by dapper English gentlemen, are known for wearing fashionable clothes and shiny shoes. Departing from the flat planes behind most of Butler’s figures, this composition defines a foreground and background as well as hints at a horizon; spatial depth lends dynamic tension to the dancing figures.

Butler’s work is not overtly political. Nevertheless, in some works, especially those with young males as subjects, this viewer found it hard to avoid allusions to current racial issues. For example, the face of the solitary child in Mannish Boy is worldly-wise for his age and seems to question why a viewer might be looking at him.

The formal elegance of Butler’s work keeps the eye moving around it until a subliminal meaning seeps through the surface. In Southside Sunday Morning, horizontal zigzags behind the group of boys in church-going suits seem to vibrate with energy. The boys, some looking older than suggested by their sizes, appear to be waiting for somewhere to go.

Safety Patrol depicts a group of young boys and girls with the tallest boy standing in front, his arms extended to protect the others. Some have shock or fear reflected in their faces but the viewer is left to imagine what they see. (Here, the subdued botanical shapes in the background are reminiscent of foliage surrounding the official portrait of Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley, a painter Butler...
Admires.) An optimistic contrast, The Princess presents a small girl standing at ease with unconscious pride and a confident expression directed toward someone with a camera or a far horizon.

In Survivor, a 2018 deviation from Butler's typical content, the look of apprehension on the face of the woman in the center reveals a tragic aspect of African tradition, the practice known as FGM (female genital mutilation). The enigmatic white hand imprinted on her chest is a provocative detail that invites interpretation. This work comes across as a critical but deeply compassionate view of a controversial subject.

Anticipating two solo shows in 2020, one at the Katonah Museum in Katonah, New York, and the other in Manhattan's Claire Oliver Gallery, Butler is vigorously working in the creative clutter of her New Jersey studio. At ABMB (Art Basel Miami Beach) last December, all her quilts represented by Claire Oliver were purchased for museum collections before the show opened to the public.

While 21st century success is pulling her forward, Butler says she still feels connected to African American quilters of the past through roots on her maternal side. “Many of my ancestors came to this country as people who were enslaved and had to make things for themselves out of necessity. All of my female relatives knew how to sew very well and I have carried on that tradition with my own daughters.”

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