On the majority of captions on Bisa Butler's Instagram profile, the New Jersey-born artist includes a disclaimer: "There is no paint on this artwork." By now, she's used to viewers making that mistake. Butler says it's partly because she uses similar techniques to painting in her work: She lays down a base color (consisting of fabric, of course) and then uses layers of more fabric "rather than glazes to build up my images."

"This results in my finished artworks looking like paintings with sheer and translucent layers that look like paint," Butler explains. "I've been honing this technique for over a decade, and nowadays I have to constantly assert that I haven't used any paint at all in my work. Many viewers are incredulous because even the tiniest details; like the light reflections in an eye, or a fingernail are all done with tiny bits of fabric."

Painting was once Butler's focus, as a student at Howard University, the iconic HBCU in Washington, D.C. In the mid-1990s, she found that half of the faculty in the department had been members of the 1960s group Chicago's AfriCOBRA (or African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), pushing vibrancy and positivity in their students' depictions of the African-American experience. One of the defining inspirations for her and most of her peers was Romare Bearden, the multidisciplinary artist who The New York Times called "the nation's foremost collageist" upon his death in 1988. Butler says Bearden is "the measure that we all try to live up to because of his success and his prolific and long career."

"My professor at Howard suggested I study [his] work in particular because I had started to collage fabric and paint onto my canvases," Butler says today. "I was intrigued by the way Bearden used intense almost ink like watercolors in his Mecklenburg County series. I loved

"The more worn a fabric is, to me, the more spirit and soul in it. It has the essence of the people who wore it."

OPPOSITE: Detail from "The Mighty Gents", 67" x 78", cotton, silk, wool, and velvet quilting and applique, 2018, The Beth DeWoody Collection, photo by The Claire Oliver Gallery.

ABOVE: "Four Little Girls", 78" x 61", cotton, silk, wool, and velvet quilting and applique, 2018, private collection, photo by The Claire Oliver Gallery.
OPPOSITE: Detail from “The Three Kings”, 95” x 72”, cotton, silk, wool, and velvet quilting and appliqué, 2018, 21c Museum Hotels collection, photo by The Claire Oliver Gallery.

ABOVE: “The Tea”, 54” x 80”, cotton, silk, wool and velvet quilting and appliqué, 2018, private collection, photo by The Claire Oliver Gallery.
the way he memorialized his grandmother and his summers spent in the South with her. Romare Bearden used collage in ways that hadn't been seen before; his cut-up magazine images emphasized and exaggerated African-American features and gestures and I wanted to celebrate Black life the way he did. To this day I always make an effort to show the true beauty of African-Americans. I use collage techniques and I use vibrant colors; and all of these things are inspired in part by the work of Romare Bearden.”

What would push Butler fully into sewing—a practice that both her mother and grandmother took part in—would follow her time at Howard. She made a quilt for her grandmother as she was on her deathbed, and her practice would then focus on the form. She would go on to base quilts on photos of her family and friends—and in other cases, craft portraits of African-American icons in music, politics, and beyond. Actual clothes worn by the subject would be entwined into her process, adding a metaphysical quality and energy to the final product. In a 2015 talk, Butler told a crowd about how she's used fabrics left to her by her grandmother, including aprons. "The more worn a fabric is, to me, the more spirit and soul in it. It has the essence of the people who wore it. It has their DNA on it, even if it's been washed, there are bits in it. So they're more alive." And as her work has expanded, so has the size of her work, with pieces expanding across gallery walls and recently, attracting small crowds at art fairs like PULSE in Miami.

These days, she pulls source imagery from archival photos, such as the Farm Security Administration files of photography from the early-twentieth century. These photos of unidentified African-Americans—who Butler reminds us “never got to see a printed copy of their photographs”—provide the artist a chance to honor their memory. This is why she crafts her quilts to such large sizes. “I am at trying to bring these peoples images—thei very essence—back into the present.” Butler says. “I want them to get the respect they never got. I am using a life-sized scale so that my subjects are eye to eye with us. They existed too long as negatives in a file and I don’t want them to be ignored again. This scale presents them as peers even though they may or may not have had the means that we do, and even though they may have been dead for one hundred years, they are not objects of pity or paternalistic sympathy. Unfortunately, because some people still do not seem to understand that African Americans are equals I think it is important for everyone viewing my pieces to be confronted with these vibrant figures, bedecked in their African textiles and be forced to reconcile their own preconceived notions of African-Americans.”

ABOVE: 
"I Am Not Your Negro", 50” x 72”, cotton, silk, wool, and velvet quilting and applique, 2019, private collection, photo by The Claire Oliver Gallery.

OPPOSITE: 
Detail from “The Three Kings, 95” x 72”, cotton, silk, wool and velvet quilting and applique, 2018, 21c Museum Hotels collection, photo by The Claire Oliver Gallery.
"I AM USING A LIFESIZED SCALE SO THAT MY SUBJECTS ARE EYE TO EYE WITH US."

Her largest work to date was unveiled at Expo Chicago in September 2019, "To Truth and God," at ten feet by twelve feet, is inspired by a photo of the Morris Brown College baseball snapped in 1899. That's thirty-seven years after the abolition of slavery, Butler notes. "During the slavery era, African-Americans could be punished and even killed for reading," she says. "In the early 1900s, more than fifty percent of African-Americans were illiterate and not only were these young men in college, but they were athletes as well. The fact that they played baseball is significant because it is America's pastime: America's favorite sport, and these young men were active participants. Some could even say that baseball and racism are American traditions as clearly they coexisted and were captured in the photo that inspired "To Truth and God."

The massive work offers subtle, meticulous touches throughout. Each figure wears a "particular Dutch West African print called 'Jumping Horses,' which is known colloquially as 'Je Cours Plus Vite Que Ma Rivale Les Cours' or 'I Run Faster than My Rivals,'" Butler says. "I want my quilt to represent the truth that these young men were intelligent scholars and athletes and indeed have outlasted their enemies as we are still admiring their likenesses today. The title 'To Truth and God' is the Morris Brown motto."

Over the past decade, Butler's garnered much recognition for her pieces. Her quilts were shown at the Smithsonian Museum of American History; she was announced as a Burke Prize finalist in 2019. "The Safety Patrol," the 2018 work of a group of children led by a school safety patrol deputy, was acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago this year. And she was featured alongside the work of Bearden in a Black History Month exhibition in Morristown called The Art of Jazz. As of our recent interview, Butler was toiling on her next big milestone: her first solo museum exhibition, opening on March 5, 2020, at The Katonah Museum of Art, and then heads to the Art Institute of Chicago later in the year (September 15, 2020).

Twenty-five pieces will be exhibited in a survey of my work to date, from the first quilt she made back in 2000, to more recent pieces. The majority of pieces in the exhibition were made between 2015 and 2019. "Most of my pieces take three hundred to four hundred hours to complete, so there are many, many long hours of work that went into this exhibit," Butler says.

In the past, Butler has spoken about how particular she is about the spaces she works with. When asked, "Why this museum?" the answer seems to be similar to what drives her work: The venue offers deeply personal possibilities. "It is the perfect fit for such an occasion because they have historically been an institution that is interested in having dynamic exhibits that feature living artists, artists of all colors and ethnicities, and artists who work in textiles," Butler says. "The Katonah Museum is an honor from where I grew up so the location factors in, because all of my friends and family members will be coming to the reception. Many of my students supported me emotionally when I decided to leave teaching and work full time as an artist and they reach out to me often to see how I am doing. My exhibit at the Katonah Museum will give my former students front row seats to see my work in a beautiful setting and it will also teach them an important lesson about art being a viable and possible career."