BISA BUTLER
BY HALIMA TAH

Africobra's Daughter
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More than 80,000 people converge annually upon Miami during the first week in December in pursuit of fine art from leading galleries that represent artists from all over the world. They expect to see art from modern and contemporary masters, as well as discover a new generation of emerging stars. With so many ideas, themes and media to digest, it is not unusual for art devotees or professionals to experience visual fatigue throughout the week and to overlook new discoveries within the fair.
The first time I saw the work of Bisa Butler was in Miami at the Pulse Art Fair during Art Basel. On this auspicious day, destiny restrained me from missing this distinct talent. When I turned toward the exit, I was immobilized by a series of large, phenomenally intricate quilts with bright patterns and textured fabrics, striped into cloth collages, capturing decisive moments in the lives of women, men and children. The subjects were welcoming with recognizable familiarity, while possessing a surrogate presence.

The faces and bodies were beckoning participation in their celebratory moment of joy, dignity, beauty and family. The most arresting quality of these quilted images was the way so many similarities in structured form seamlessly led to a compelling and unique aesthetic.

Geometry is integral to quilt making, but when skillfully combined with robust fabric, hypnotic collage and scintillating colors, Butler bends time and place into bejeweled, prismatic portraits. Within this scope, she has repeatedly earned a place among the “top picks” at exhibitions such as the Pulse Art Fair and the Chicago Expo.

Previously, Butler was a high school art teacher supporting her art practice like her favorite expressionist painter, Alma Thomas (1891-1978), who herself followed the tradition of many noted artists/teachers who elevated the awareness of the African American art canon, including James Porter (1905-1970), Dr. Samella Lewis (b. 1924) and David Driskell (b. 1931).

These thought leaders nurtured the development of several generations of talented artists and critical thinkers from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Although Butler did not study directly with Dr. Samella Lewis or David Driskell she, like many Howard University freshman, took a mandatory Black Arts course, which required reading scholarship that validated and recorded the importance of black cultural production in the U.S.

Among the scholars were Dr. Alain Locke, who helped launch black modernism by encouraging black artists during the Harlem Renaissance to look to Africa, instead of Europe for inspiration, hence the moniker, "Father of the Harlem Renaissance.” James Porter's classic, first art-history book about black artists, Modern Negro Art, with Dr. Samella Lewis’ Art: African American, and David Driskell’s Two Centuries of Black American Art provided solid footing for every art student at the nation's top HBCU colleges. Most American art history curricula are incomplete without exposure to these seminal texts.

In addition, the poetry of Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni were discussed with regular critiques and studio visits from several mid-career and established artists including: Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012), Lois Mailou Jones (1905-1998), Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), Frank Smith (b. 1935), Ernie Barnes (1938-2009) and Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), to provide insight, encouragement and practical knowledge.

Emphasizing the discipline and value of an artist’s work ethic, Hale Woodruff asserted, “It’s very important to keep your artistic level at the highest possible range of development while making your work convey a telling quality in terms of what we are as a people.”

Butler was inspired by Elizabeth Catlett’s strong forms and figures. In the tradition of the academy, she duplicated Lois Mailou Jones’ Ubi Girl because she was fascinated by her realistic figuration and flat graphic backgrounds that looked both modern and ancient.

Howard University’s time-honored tradition of sharing experiential wisdom continues with a recent visit by contemporary artist, Mark Bradford.

As an art student, Butler had the good fortune to study under the tutelage of Jeff Donaldson, former dean of Howard University’s Fine Arts Program, and one of the first five members of AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) with Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu and Gerald Williams. Additional members included Nelson Stevens, Napoleon Jones-Henderson, Carolyn Lawrence, Frank Smith, James Phillips and Robert Paige.

This artist collective emerged from the south side of Chicago in 1968. The origin of this group had roots in
the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), which was committed to finding ways to use art to address various social and cultural concerns affecting the African American community in the 1960s.

In 1967, many in this group participated in the completion of OBAC's monumental 20-by-60-foot mural in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood called the Wall of Respect. This infamous mural was composed of a montage of black heroes and heroines whose ideas and work were pivotal to African American history. Notable images included W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Muhammad Ali, Elijah Muhammad and Aretha Franklin.

The Wall of Respect inspired a black mural tradition that continues today and spawned many other artistic movements, including AfriCOBRA, which helped shape the Black Arts Movement.

The significance of the Wall of Respect was that it affirmed that black facial features were beautiful, which was important because of the devastating impact of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), which describes a set of behaviors, beliefs and actions associated with or related to multi-generational trauma experienced by African Americans that include, but are not limited to undiagnosed and untreated Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in enslaved Africans and their descendants.

In essence, negative post-colonial conditioned responses to self-love, beauty, value, purpose, masculinity and femininity continue to destroy generations of descendants of enslaved Africans, which defines the imperative for positive images, words and thoughts that reinforce a healthy identity.

Currently, AfriCOBRA is celebrating its 50th anniversary with an exhibition at the 2019 Venice Biennale. The group's work was prominently included in the Soul of a Nation exhibition, featuring 60 artists working from 1963-1983, which originated at the Tate Modern in London, traveling to the Brooklyn Museum in New York and recently closed at The Broad in Los Angeles.

Over the years, discourse among AfriCOBRA members revolved around a visual language that encapsulated contemporary Blackness as an aesthetic movement, which would immediately be recognized as work created by Black people.

Philosophically, this idea incorporated several distinct elements, including high-impact text, positive figurative images of Black people, abstract patterns evolving from African artistic traditions and bright, luminescent "cool-aid colors." Inasmuch as this aesthetic embraced all media including, but not exclusive to drawing, painting, sculpture and fashion I ask, how did Bisa Butler internalize this infused aesthetic?

With deliberate observation, there is a notable correlation between Butler's work and the AfriCOBRA philosophy on shaping the direction of Butler's approach to color, pattern, subject matter and purposefulness in her work. Evidence of corresponding AfriCOBRA influences can be seen in the pattern and aesthetic elements in the work of Jeff Donaldson, Jae Jarrell and Wadsworth Jarrell.

Nelson Stevens inspired Butler's work by the way he used color. He shattered faces into diamond facets and broke planes into complex images. Jae Jarrell's influence on Butler is based on introducing the idea of clothing as art. When she first saw Jae Jarrell's work, she realized clothing could be more than utilitarian or simply sewn.

Her epiphany was that she could use fabric to make art that made a statement about beauty, family and black people. "I was also able to relate to Jae being the first and only woman and later one of two women among a group of men. In art school, for every 25 students, five would be female. I admired her self-assuredness."

For Butler, anything less than the best, was cultivated by the same people whom collectors and curators are just discovering, and who have inculcated her with focus, purposefulness and community. In the wake of the art world's recent discovery of the cultural production of meritorious work by American artists of African de-
scent, Butler is stunned that her artist professors, whom she always thought of as respect-worthy superstars, are only now beginning to receive notoriety and relevance to the art canon.

Now, the historic and aesthetic gaps in private and institutional collections are embracing work that is no longer being boxed out because of “color blindness.” It took 50 years for the cataracts to be removed.

Symbolically, AfriCOBRA pushed material and conceptual boundaries to uphold the value of black artists in way. She recalls Professor E. Sorrels Adewale pulling her out of class after a critique demanding to know what she thought she was doing in terms of wasting both of their time, because she clearly was not putting full effort into her work.

Conversely, Professor Al Smith noticed she was fulfilling her course requirements, but that there was a disconnect from her work. He made a commitment to determine the disconnect that was keeping her from realizing her full potential. He asked permission to see what her painting environment looked like.

When he arrived, he saw her and her roommates clad in beautiful fabrics and headwraps. Music reverberated throughout the space, simultaneous to the cacophony of friends happily coming and going. The energetic sounds and gesticulation of communal student life was so vibrant and dynamic that he asked, “Why aren’t you integrating the way you dress and live with all the joy, patterns and colors in your paintings?”

He introduced her to the work of Romare Bearden to exemplify how to capture her lifestyle in color, pattern and movement through collage with paper, and encouraged her to do the same with paint and fabric. When she first saw Bearden’s Mecklenburg Memories series, “I was struck by the way he used color to intensify and accentuate the subject. After a while, I was drawn into his stories. Years later, Professor Smith’s lesson set in and I learned that my life and lifestyle was a valid story to tell.”

Her professor opened a door to a broadened perspective that collage was not limited to paper. She could integrate the use of fabric, sewing and quilt making handed down from her mother and grandmother to tell her own story and the story of her community.

Inasmuch as Butler has inherited an aesthetic pedigree from her direct experience with laudable professors and AfriCOBRA innovators, she has distinguished herself by amalgamating sewing, quilting, storytelling, collage, painting and intergenerational histories inspired by old photographs.

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America with the creation of the “cool-aid color” palate. White pigment had no value in AfriCOBRA’s aesthetic ecosystem. When colors were combined, they used yellow or pink instead of white because black America had been “whitewashed” to believe they were “less than” without “whiteness.”

Novelist John O. Killens asserts, “Only through this kind of definition and control can we achieve human dignity, self-realization, and the liberation of our people throughout the world.”

During college at Howard, Butler studied with legendary faculty, including Dr. Tritobia Hayes Benjamin, Dr. Raymond Dobard, Winnie Owens Hart & Alexander “Skunder” Boghossian. There were harsh and compassionate critiques that forced her to get out of her own
She uses syncopated repetition with constant shifts in color, texture, shape, pattern and movement. There is clarity of form and line in her compositions based on the interesting irregularity and balance that comes from the movement reflected by the way she positions bright “cool-aid colors” to harmoniously coexist.

There is no doubt that the benefit of studying at one of the leading historically black colleges in the country, combined with the support and encouragement of her family enabled Butler to evolve through a natural progression of self-discovery.

Since family is a central theme in Butler’s work, she dedicated the first five years to parenting, during which her creative thought process did not die with the privilege of motherhood. In fact, the opportunity to see the world anew from a child’s perspective cultivated a more open and playful quality in her work.

The moral support and friendship of audio artist and husband, John Butler underscores the importance of family to her creative process.

“Women need support from their partners that is not exclusive to money. Having mutual respect, friendship, intimacy and companionship has enabled both of us to pursue our dreams fully together.”

“When I see vintage lace and aged satin, it tells the story of delicacy and refinement of times gone by. When you see African printed cotton and mud cloth in my work, I am telling the story of my ancestral homeland in Ghana, in Africa—the cradle of civilization.”

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Germane to her distinct aesthetic and meticulous technique, Butler’s cultural history is sustained by family traditions in craft and storytelling as the bedrock for her talent to raise the bar as a fine artist and quiltmaker. “I have always been drawn to portraits because of the family photographs my grandmother would share with me.

“When I was a little girl, I would sit next to her and ask her to tell me the stories about the people in the picture. Today, I am drawn to photographs of black people whom I do not know.

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When she gathers abandoned photographs, she brings the same inquiry about who they were and what they did. Since there is no one to answer her questions, she uses a spectral knowing to remove them from the obscurity of forgotten lives and creates imagined narratives and images of people who matter and whom the community values.

On the surface, one sees compelling colors in swathes of fabric from various countries in West Africa to Harlem, New York—like theatrical scrims—layered to direct the eye to the vivid faces of men, women and children. These are the inhabitants of her world, who build and nurture her community of strong, intelligent, compassionate, loving, articulate, responsible and beautiful black people.

Bisa Butler is the heir apparent as AfriCOBRA’S daughter. A pedigree that she is sewing into her own aesthetic with the same self-love and affirmation that #BLACKLIVESMATTER.

Halima Taha, writer, arts & cultural strategist and author of Collecting African American Art: Works on Paper and Canvas