



Claire Oliver Gallery is proud to present  
for EXPO Chicago 2019  
a curated two-person exhibition of new works of art by  
**Bisa Butler and Leonardo Benzant** entitled: *Upending the Narrative*

The two artists featured in *Upending the Narrative* work slowly and methodically -- almost ritualistically. They create detailed and sumptuous works of art redolent with content and mystery; these works demand to be studied. Equally important to the painstaking "making" is their studio practices exploring the current condition in their own African American communities. Each speak about the real life versus media portrayal/stereotype of the African American family: grandfather, mother, brother, daughter and the normal if invisible successful black community.

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 pretense, provide a bridge between ordinary experience and concepts that transcend the viewer's physicality. In *Upending the Narrative*, Claire Oliver Gallery attempts to confront the accepted narratives, instigate conversations and question the status quo. This has long been the domain of artists.

Walking the pathway forged by feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, Bisa Butler challenges the division between textiles and fine art. Embracing techniques that were conventionally relegated to the realm of 'women's crafts', Butler's visual storytelling combines painterly high decoration and an exploration of community and spirituality. Butler holds a master's degree from Howard University, where her teachers, members of the AfriCOBRA artist's collective, encouraged her use of bright colors and nontraditional materials to portray her African American community in an engaging and positive light. 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. The 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 call to action.

Leonardo Benzant's studio practice is informed by both his African and Caribbean family roots. It is performative, ritualistic, labor-intensive and slow. The slowness itself contributes part of the work's meaning; our fast-paced world has somewhat forgotten that craft and mastery involve overcoming our impulse toward instant-gratification. Fabric is cut, rolled, sewn: papier-mâché is wrapped, very long and carefully curated strings of glass and metal beads are strung, embroidery, paint, and collage are added to create the artist's culturally aware works of art. Benzant's visual vocabulary is informed by diasporic culture and personal insights fueled with periods of addiction, recovery, initiations and spiritual practices. His art does not exist solely within a Western framework but embodies the dynamics of being both sacred and secular. Contemporary discourse informs his practice, focusing on adaptation, re-invention, and innovation to bridge the past and create connections with a mindfulness and conviviality. By preserving and encouraging long established traditional techniques Butler and Benzant stifle the current urge for instant gratification in favor of allowing a slower and more full-blown concept to emerge in each piece. By using established fine art techniques in a new way, these artists create an urgent chance to defend and recognize the strong connections between planet, people, politics and culture.