Art

African Fabrics Connect to Form Quilted Portraits of Black Figures by Bisa Butler
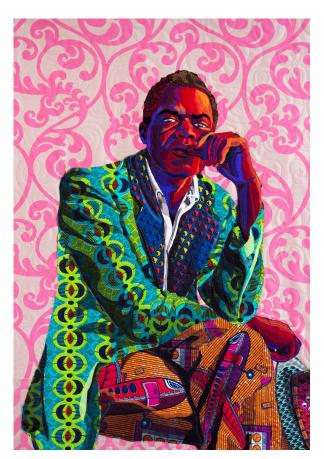
SEPTEMBER 28, 2019

ANDREW LASANE

Broom Jumpers. Credits: Ian Rubinstein / Claire Oliver Gallery

Brooklyn-based artist Bisa Butler (previously) uses brightly colored cotton, wool, and chiffon fabrics with bold patterns to piece together quilts featuring detailed portraits of Black people. The materials and themes connect American subjects with their African roots and tell visual stories of history and culture.

Butler is a New Jersey-born African American artist with Ghanian heritage. A closer look at her portraits reveals intricate mosaics of shapes and patterns and complex multi-hued skin tones. For her James Baldwin-inspired piece "I Am Not Your Negro," Butler created a portrait of a man seated in a pose similar to Rodin's "Thinker" and a warm complexion inspired by *The Fire Next Time,* an important book written by Baldwin that was first published in 1963. "I used reds and oranges in his complexion to indicate this while this man sits calmly [there] is fire inside," Butler said in a statement. "I use colorful imaginative colors in my figures because I am connecting color to emotion and I want their images to indicate a personality, mood, and temperament."

The artist's quilts also incorporate nods to Black wedding traditions, references to historically Black colleges and universities, and other elements that speak to the Black and African American experience. The Katonah Museum of Art is set to host the artist's first solo museum exhibition with approximately 25 of her quilts on display from March 15 to June 14, 2020.

To learn more about the Bisa Butler's work, head over to the Claire Oliver Gallery website and follow the artist on Instagram.

I Am Not Your Negro
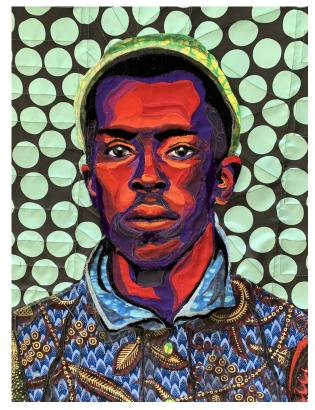

Dear Mama

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (detail)

Kindred

To God and Truth (detail)

To God and Truth (detail)

Bisa at work

Bisa at work