



Bisa Butler

Stitching History

Text by Jewels Dodson // Portrait by Bolu Gbadebo

Have you ever seen a picture of Frederick Douglass? I have, too. In most photographs, he is wearing a suit, carrying the weight of injustice in his furrowed brows, with an intensity in the eyes that permeates the photo's grey glaze. He sits like a king upon his throne, looking every bit the legend he will become. Fiber artist [Bisa Butler](#) captures Douglass in a new light—literally. In her version, titled *The Storm, The Whirlwind, and The Earthquake*, Douglass is imposing, towering at seven feet tall. She used various grades of silk in hues of marigold, mauve, and magenta to create Douglass's puckered lips, almond eyes, textured hair, and chiseled cheekbones. In Butler's version, Douglass feels human, and not only does he appear to be debonair, he is so fly. If this version of Douglass appeared in my dating app, I would definitely swipe right.

Butler works solely in textiles, but her most recent work, a debut exhibition at NYC's [Claire Oliver Gallery](#), where she is represented, would have you believe otherwise. In her dynamic montage of patterns and textures that interact so seamlessly, it actually appears that the works are painted. The life-size subjects, all of whom draw from the African-American and African

diasporic experiences, meet viewers at eye level and draw them in. When I visit Butler at her home-studio in West Orange, New Jersey, she is knee deep in her new work, *Warmth of Other Son*, for The Newark Museum of Art. This show and her first solo exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art were derailed by the pandemic, and though we are in tumultuous times, Butler hasn't been knocked off course; in fact, she is as focused and steadfast as ever.



Bisa Butler was born and bred in South Orange, New Jersey, to an African-American mother born in New Orleans but raised in Morocco, where Butler's grandfather worked in the Foreign Service. And her father, a hard-working Ghanaian immigrant, was the president of Essex County College in Newark for 39 years. Butler first discovered her penchant for art at what she smilingly describes as the “deep hippy” Children of the Rainbow school, located inside a big Victorian house that allowed students to wander from room to room exploring various disciplines. The diminutive Butler could never pull herself away from the art room. Much like now, she constantly worked on her pieces, and recalls, “I spent every day in the art room. That’s when I first started getting into doing hundreds of hours of artwork. And I remember people coming in the art room saying, ‘Bisa, that looks really good.’” That response stuck with her. Later, she graduated from South Orange's Columbia High School, a cradle of creativity producing alumni like Lauryn Hill and SZA. Years later, Butler worked at her alma mater while honing her own artistic practice.

On a sweltering day in early July, I arrived at Butler’s suburban home, greeted by her husband, John, and their younger daughter, who share a gracious personable warmth. Butler soon appears like an apparition from the style Gods, wearing a tailored jumpsuit made from the same West African fabrics used in her work. Like the artist herself, the jumpsuit's polychrome fabrics are vibrant and dynamic. I had briefly encountered Butler for the first time at the EXPO Chicago art fair in 2019, and, in fact, it was her monochrome chartreuse green ensemble that caught my eye before her work etched itself into my lexicon. Like body language or facial expressions, style is a form of communication, a language laced throughout Butler's work. It's no wonder her subjects always appear to be in their Sunday best, even when it's not Sunday.

As we sit under a netted gazebo on her back porch, sunlight radiates her face, her eyes are bright, her lips are full, and her skin is like pressed silk, so

rich with melanin; Hershey's owes her dividends! It's hard to believe she's a child of the 1970s. She tells me that as an art student at Howard University, she began using fabric to avoid paint, which made her nauseous while pregnant. But she realized something deeper was at play, her actual dissonance with paint. "I could follow the rules technically but I didn't have the voice. The paint didn't connect to me." Butler was introduced to textiles by her mother and grandmother, both dressmakers, who taught her how to make her own clothes. "Fabric was of my family, so using kente related to my heritage. When I made the portrait of my grandfather whom I'd never met, I realized I needed to use all African fabrics, and I used my grandmother's fabrics that were old because I wanted to assert that this man lived before," she said. Through textiles, Butler found her voice.

Although she personally found her way with fabric, her professors at Howard did not approve. In the art sphere, textiles are often deemed part of crafting, and specifically in African-American culture, quilting was linked to the slave trade. Butler recalls, "Howard [University] had this self-consciousness about being just as good as white people or better, so you wouldn't want to be a quilter because that's considered old-fashioned. It's not fine art. It's not high art. "How can we establish ourselves as just as good as white people if you keep bringing back old southern slave ideas?" she recalls. Such resistance wasn't just at the university level. As Butler began working with Black and community-based galleries, she was told there was no place for her quilting. "I couldn't switch back to painting, it was no good. There's nothing else for me to do, this is what I do with my free time. I like doing it and people liked what I was doing," Butler declares.





Butler worked as an art teacher, and her art practice became a side hustle. She figured when she retired she would be able to devote herself to art full-time, but in 2016, she was invited to participate in a Howard University charity show at the Lewis Long Gallery in Harlem. Gallerist Claire Oliver saw the show, remembering, "One small face in the back that just knocked us out. We were like, "That's amazing!" Oliver left her business card, but no

response, until a few weeks later, Oliver's preparator, who knew Butler from Newark, connected the two. Oliver went to Butler's home studio for a visit and was welcomed with homemade blueberry muffins and tea, as well as Butler's husband and two daughters who were, characteristically, there to meet Oliver, as well. "She just has the most amazing, supportive family," Claire enthused, a gallerist who's worked with all kinds of artists and believes that artists benefit from a solid family support system.

"The whole experience was like 'Yeah, she's my family now, we're a team,' and we felt it instantly," Oliver declares, while Butler shares the appreciation by explaining how, "The difference working with Claire is she's more than just a gallerist. She'll come over and sit with me and talk about what I want to do next. And she'll look at my work. I feel like she's more of a manager than just a gallerist. With other gallerists, I found there was no growing of the artist. She'll say, 'What's coming next? Tell me about it.' Everything is very cerebral." Claire says Butler offers an array of ideas for a show, and together they streamline the concept and language. "We just took off. And her work has just gotten stronger, stronger, stronger."

For a little context, let's step back into the Netherlands of the 1850s when Jean Baptiste Theodore Preveinaire and Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen tried to mass produce batik wax fabrics. The Dutch had become familiar with a Javanese method of dyeing cloth by using wax-resist techniques when they colonized Indonesia. Although batik textiles originated in China and India in the eighth century, it was the Indonesians who mastered the art in the thirteenth century. Preveinaire and Vlissingen's mass-manufactured fabrics paled in comparison to genuine batik prints, which failed to sell, not only because Javanese locals observed flaws in the prints, but also because they lacked the elemental smell of the real wax fabrics. Nevertheless, by the 1880s, the Dutch-produced prints found a thriving market in their colonies throughout West Africa. Today, the Vlisco Group is the largest producer of these textiles, manufacturing 2.1 billion yards with an annual revenue upwards of 300 million dollars.

Although wax prints began in Asia, they have become part of the iconography of West Africa. Butler's home studio is lined with the textiles, their lush colors and patterns captivating the eye. But literally, she points out, the fabrics themselves are laden with messages, and because of this, Butler will use specific fabrics to develop a subject's narrative. On the Frederick Douglass piece, his vest fabric is called "speedy bird," representing free people. Douglass's trousers are a product of a collaboration between Vlisco and the City of Joy, a Congolese safe haven for survivors of war sex crimes, so like their designers, each pant leg chronicles the journey to freedom. The sleeves of his tailed tuxedo jacket have fabric sporting alphabet letters, indicating someone who is literate.



Butler's work, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, is also fulsome with meaning, a piece featuring four African-American women sitting on the steps of Atlanta College in 1900. The fabric on their hats indicates change, property, freedom and transition. The skirt pattern printed with shiny earrings symbolizes the culture of wealth in West Africa: the bigger the earrings, the wealthier. The red shoe print conveys power, and is called Michelle Obama's Shoes, inspired by the Obamas' 2009 visit to Ghana. In this work, Butler manages to create a time-transcending connection between pioneering foremothers and a daughter who is educated,

resource-rich, and became the first Black First Lady of the United States. It's as if Butler extends deep gratitude to the maternal ancestors for lighting the way forward.

Research is the heartbeat of any substantive work, creative, scholarly or otherwise. In 1935, the Federal Writers Project was born from President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, and well-known writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were hired to document the lives of African-Americans. Prior to the FWP, there were scant records of black life in the United States. The writers of FWP interviewed thousands of African-Americans, 2,000 of whom were first-person accounts of people who were once enslaved, and many more accounts described life during Jim Crow and insights on their new lives in the North. FWP writers created an official historical record of the Black experience in America and unofficially, unbeknownst to even themselves, were documenting what later became The Great Migration.

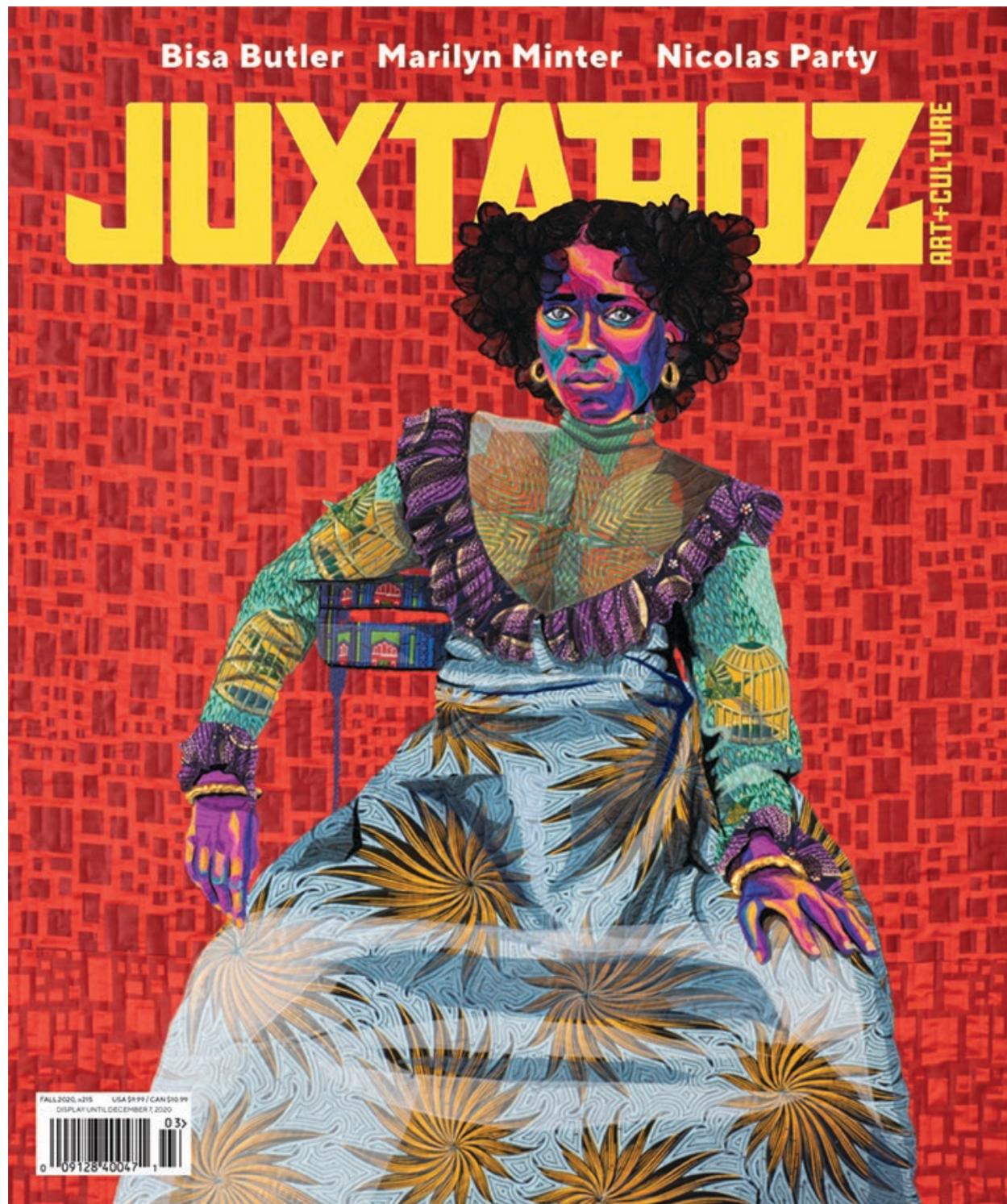


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By the end, the FWP's holdings consisted of about 300,000 items of correspondence, photos, memoranda, field reports, notes, graphs, charts, essay drafts, oral testimony, and folklore spanning 1889 to 1942. It is a rich collection of rural and urban folklore, life histories, studies on social customs of various ethnic groups, authentic slave narratives, and Negro source material gathered by project workers. In addition, drafts of publications expressed concern with the direction America was taking and with the preservation and communication of local culture. Today, these artifacts are housed in the Library of Congress and are accessible to the

public through the National Archives. This became part of the foundational bedrock of the African-American narrative, and these findings continue to inform academic, critical and creative works.

Butler finds her beloved subjects in historical, head-on, deep dives. Since her practice has grown, most of her current work consists of lesser known people who live in the shadows of history. Butler discovered the subject of her work, Africa The Land Of Hope and Promise For Negro People's of the World while rabbit-holing through images. "Then it becomes a quest. Who is Emmett J. Scott? When I looked him up, he was a Black man—Booker T. Washington's right-hand man. He was the secretary for negro affairs under Woodrow Wilson. In a sense, he is lost to history. I never heard of him before this. The year struck me: 1909. And then I thought, what makes a person have this much self-confidence? Look at his glasses, they just go on, they don't have any rims on the side, they just go on. Look at his gloves. And looking down his nose at us. There was no way I wasn't going to include him," she says.



For her work *Zouave*, she cascades through a collection of images on her iPad, pulling up an archived photo of an unknown young African soldier dressed in traditional military attire. She explains, “Look at this guy, he’s in

Paris getting ready to go to war. I'm looking at his face, he's looking at me. I'm looking at his gaze, the way he's holding his gun. I'm looking at his clothes, that's what grabbed me. Look how proud he is. I actually looked it up, he wasn't from Algeria. The French called all Africans, Algerians. But when I looked up his outfit, he's actually Senegalese. That unit was called The Senegalese Tirailleurs. They wore these Algerian style clothes because that was the unit they were part of working with the North African French defense. They put them on the frontline whether they came back or not; if they do come back, they are colonized anyway. He's fighting for France. So then it became a whole thing for me. Did he even survive the war? Did he come home? What was the respect factor? Did he even get honored for sacrificing years of his life and maybe his whole life? Did his family receive a pension?"

Through research she amasses information, learns personal histories, and discovers untold narratives, which become the foundation of her work. With this information, she works to honor lives, tell their stories and bestow what has always been stripped from them, humanity. Her former assistant, Adebunmi Gbadebo, an emerging artist also represented by the Claire Oliver gallery, says, "I do believe, in the images that Bisa chooses, there's like this spirit that's still alive and is holding her responsible to represent them in a responsible way. And she recognizes that, and she honors that, and I think all the detail, all the time, every stitch, is her way of honoring the energy that's been captured in those photographs. Her whole process is about honoring these people that have been forgotten and just discarded."

Butler tells me, "At Howard, anybody who comes out of the program and makes art, anybody who looks at your art should feel good about themselves, should see affirmations about Black culture, and they should be learning something. They drilled that into us." Informed by this artistic ideology, she combats that side effect of oppression, an insidious and pervasive self-loathing, infusing pride and dignity in her subjects, who are never portrayed as down-trodden, but always embellished in fine threads and rooted in regality. Butler says, "I hate the gaze of pity. My father grew up very poor but he's not somebody you need to look at and feel sorry for. Just because you have money doesn't mean that you need to feel sorry for

me and that I need to look up to you. Absolutely not. I think we as a people know that, but other people don't realize that."



With 95 million visuals being uploaded to Instagram daily worldwide, the value of a photo has changed. Our eyes are so over-exposed that photos can become meaningless. Butler's technicolor portraits innovate in a most classic form of photography that can't be appreciated by a quick scan on a scroll; they capture the eyes in such detail, you're riveted to attention. It is only when visiting her home studio where I can personally be intimate with the work, that I realize she uses black velvet for eyelashes and eyebrows. Gbadebo explains that, "It's about 50 pieces of fabric that make up an eye. And because we have to take the full eye and break it down to these multiple pieces, we start to have an intimate relationship with these figures in the photographs. We start to know every detail of their eyelash and every detail of their fingernail. We start to see the people in the photograph in ways that people usually don't take the care to look at them in that way. The act of looking becomes a form of care."

The precise application of detail is an integral part of Butler's growth. In earlier works based on well-known people like Malcolm X, Nina Simone, and Lauryn Hill, there is a raw, tactile quality, evident in how the fabrics are collaged together. But over the last four years, Butler's technique has evolved, as noted by her former colleague and current collaborator, fiber artist Ellen Weisbord. "She just couldn't make the work fast enough. And there was growth in the level of the work and the scale. The style started to evolve, it kind of got refined. When you look back at some of the other pieces, they are less painterly. The ones she's doing now, people really can't believe it's all fabric. The way she's using the fabric on the skin, mostly in the face, is very, very painterly."

The voice that Butler struggled to define as a younger artist is now in full effect, Weisbord continues, "The more she started getting into historic photographs, the depths of the concepts became stronger. She started tapping into her deeper cultural messaging using these fabrics with humorous reference to add depth to the piece." Over the phone, I can hear

the delight in Weisbord's voice as she explains her work dynamic with Butler, "So, we would bounce ideas about language back and forth. It was fun for me to see not just the artistic evolution but really focus on her personal voice. And truthfully, the timing for this work is just unbelievable," she says with a slight chuckle.

Bisa Butler's work has elevated the quilt and innovated the portrait, creating a formidable seat for them at the table of contemporary art. She has brought the black historical narrative and imagery of the past back into focus. At a time where black people's humanity can be stolen in 8 minutes and 46 seconds and broadcast for all the world to see, Butler's work is a much needed reminder that the lives of Black people always have and always will matter.

Bisa Butler: Portraits is on view at Katonah Museum of Art through October 4, 2020, and will be part of Radical Tradition: American Quilts and Social Change at the Toledo Museum of Art, opening November 21, 2020.