



Boundary Breaker

Acclaimed New Jersey-born artist Bisa Butler is set to unveil her first solo show, at the Katonah Museum of Art. We asked the artist and the exhibit's curator why it's such an important moment for both Butler and the KMA. **BY PAUL ADLER**

Bisa Butler is well on her way to becoming a household name among art aficionados. While the West Orange, NJ-based artist has already exhibited in such hallowed spots as the Smithsonian Museum of American History, it will be here in Westchester that Butler unveils her first solo show, *Portraits*, running from March 15 to June 14 at the Katonah Museum of Art (KMA).

Known for her vibrant, quilt-like tex-

tiles that mimic the look of paintings, Butler's work often depicts people of color from varying backgrounds and historical periods in punchy, bold tones. "Bisa Butler is a fiber artist, but I don't think of her as a quilter at all, even though she obviously draws from the quilting tradition," explains Michele Wije, curator of exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts, a former longtime curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and curator of the KMA's

Butler show. "She was trained as a painter, so I think she comes from the sensibility of painting and is using fabric and textiles in the way that you would use paint with a paintbrush."

According to Butler, both her material and subject matter echo her cultural and familial past. "I feel like I am carrying on the tradition of African American quilting into a new form of expression," she explains. "African Americans originally quilted out of the necessity to stay warm in places unlike their homelands, and we had very little resources. Our quilts were made of patches because those small rags were all we had to spare in a time when we wore our clothes until they literally fell apart. My quilts are reminders of those times with their materials — and some of the subjects themselves are reminders — but the difference is they are made simply to be seen not used."

In fact, it was Butler's mother and grandmother who introduced her to this tradition of textile work. "When I first started making quilted artworks, I only used fabrics left to me by my grandmother and mother... [They] sewed every day, making clothing and home décor, and they taught me the power of being able to make something for yourself," Butler notes. "Fiber and fabric appealed to me because I could manipulate them and work while sitting next to my small children. I could explore the intense colors of my background and create something new."

Butler has been producing her quilted works since 2000, and while the majority of the pieces in *Portraits* date from 2015 to 2019, several items have been produced in just the last 12 to 15 months, with others still being finalized at press time. "I started creating this series in 2017, after I left my full-time teaching position to pursue art full-time," Butler says of *Portraits*. "I didn't necessarily set out to exclusively create images of African Americans, but my subjects were the people who were in my life — my friends and family. My intention in this series was to create works that honored them and showed them how much I admired and loved them. All of my figures have dignity, pride, and beauty because that is the way I see them."

"Initially, she only had an African American audience in mind, because she was creating these quilts for people she knew," explains Wije of Butler's ar-

PHOTO BY BOLU GBADEBO



Dear Mama, 2019
Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd
73 x 53 in. (185.4 x 134.6 cm)
Courtesy of Scott and Cissy Wolfe
Rancho Santa Fe, California

tistic genesis. "Then, she began working with photographs, especially vintage photographs...and started to look at historic photography of African Americans. That's when [Butler's] work really developed and changed. What we are hoping to show in this exhibition is this kind of growth in her work."

Through an innovative use of color, Butler's images also push forward a fascinating reevaluation of what unites us. "One of the things I was interested in is that most of the faces are in different colors. Bisa has this Impressionistic way of dealing with [portraits], so a lot of the faces are blue and green and other hues," notes Wije. "She told me she wants people to see beyond race and just to look at the image itself."

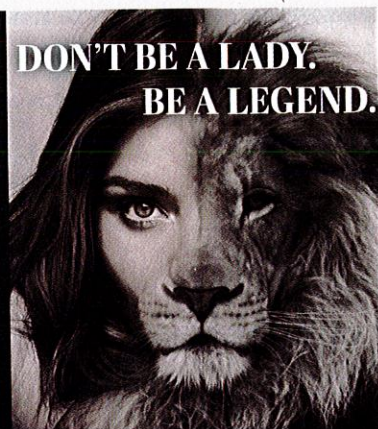
Butler adds that she chooses "bright technicolor cloth to represent our skin because these colors are how African Americans refer to our complexions. We may be brown, but we use terms like blue-black to refer to someone who has very, very dark skin, or high yellow if the person is very fair, and red bone if the person is fair and blushes easily," she notes. "I also use color to communicate a mood. If a figure is in shades of cool blue, I am trying to communicate that this person has a laid-back, even temperament. If a sub-

ject is bright crimson and deep burgundy, I am communicating that this person is passionate and can be fiery."

Wije attests that the show represents a very important moment for Butler, as well as for the KMA. "I think giving Bisa her first museum show really puts her on the map as an artist. I'm also really delighted that we are borrowing her work *The Safety Patrol* from The Art Institute of Chicago and that I was able to negotiate with them that they are now taking the show after it finishes in Katonah," shares Wije. "I think it's wonderful for Bisa, in that she is getting a lot of exposure, but it is also wonderful for the Katonah Museum of Art, in that they are collaborating with such a large institution."

For the artist, *Portraits* is perhaps most about uniting people from vastly different backgrounds, cultures, and even time periods. "These people represent people who are familiar to me," says Butler of her subjects. "They are mothers, fathers, friends, and neighbors, and it's amazing even to me that when I create a color image of an old black-and-white photo, the people look so contemporary. I feel like my images erase the years between us and make us all peers." **W**

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