

At the Art Institute, Bisa Butler's quilted portraits depict Black figures in a new light

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Artist Bisa Butler stands with her piece "The Warmth of Other Sons," at the Art Institute of Chicago on Nov. 13, 2020. Her exhibition, "Bisa Butler:

Getting "Bisa Butler: Portraits" before the public has been a struggle against COVID-19 from the start.

Days before the exhibition of the artist's extraordinary and ebullient quilted portraits of African Americans was to premiere at the Katonah Museum of Art north of New York City, the seriousness of the pandemic became clear and the state went into lockdown.

For her first solo museum show's next stop, the Art Institute of Chicago, a November debut was set. The quilts were hung. The signs on the wall were in place. Butler had done some interviews and was excited that her work was mounted in the very rooms that had last hosted paintings by the old master El Greco, the museum's first exhibition by a living artist to hang in its classical European galleries.

But state and national COVID rates were climbing, and in the very week of opening, the virus and state rules forced the museum to close down for its second time.

"It was kind of like déjà vu in Chicago," the artist, 47, said this week from her home in New Jersey. "It was an unreal sense of déjà vu, but I think it kind of suits the times, where we all feel like we're on hamster wheels or something."

Butler is finding the silver lining. She and the museum have extended the show through Sept. 6, which, she figures, will mean it'll be available to more people as vaccination numbers climb.

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And the show opening last week along with the Art Institute's reopening put it in elite company: The Van Gogh inspired visual experience "Immersive Van Gogh" debuted the same day in a new North Side venue, and the Art Institute's "Monet in Chicago" exhibition was also reopening

and also extended.

“All of the newspaper headlines say, ‘Van Gogh, Monet and Bisa Butler,’” the artist said. “I can’t be mad at that lineup.”

Her journey into such company has been both rapid and the byproduct of a lifetime spent finding her medium and honing her skills in it, which allow her to essentially paint her subjects using fabric.



Artist Bisa Butler poses for a photograph in front of her work, "The Warmth of Other Sons," at the Art Institute Friday, Nov. 13, 2020, in Chicago. Her exhibition, "Bisa Butler: Portraits," is open to the public from Nov. 16, 2020, to April 19, 2021. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

“They’re so complex and powerful -- ... quilts and collages of stunning virtuosity,” said Katonah Executive Director Michael Gitlitz in a summertime web conversation with

Butler about the exhibition. "She elevates these subjects to the status of royalty, the mythical and the divine."

Butler is, the director said, "an overnight sensation 20 years in the making."

Just a few short years ago, she was teaching high school art in Elizabeth, New Jersey, declining her gallery's invitation to join an exhibit in Switzerland, she recalled, because she needed to help her students with the typical end-of-year issues.

Nonetheless she became a sensation on the art fair circuit, including at 2018's Expo Chicago, where she showed with New York's Claire Oliver Gallery. She made a new quilt specifically for that show that she titled "Southside Sunday Morning."

Its source is a photograph, like most of Butler's works, but recontextualized and, of course, rendered into grand-scale fabric concoctions. Sometimes she uses family pictures or obscure ones or combinations of several, but in this case the image comes from a well-known black-and-white Russell Lee picture, "Negro Boys on Easter Morning," shot in Bronzeville in 1941.

Butler removes the car they are sitting on and turns the background from a cityscape to tufted zig zag stripes. She

makes their already dapper clothing colorful and expressive, a riot of fabrics, and their faces glow with color. But the essence of the photo is the same, the boys' penetrating gaze, unflinching, directly at the viewer.

"I wanted to make a special piece to sort of make myself visible in an expo where there's so many people," Butler explained during a November interview, when she was in Chicago helping install the exhibition. "It was twofold. I wanted the Black people of Chicago to understand that I'm using this iconic image of these Black boys to say that, 'I am you. I know you, I recognize you. I respect you.'

"And then to the City of Chicago itself, I wanted it to be like a love letter, like, 'I'm coming from the outside, but I recognize this long tradition of celebrating the arts.'"

You could call it a highlight of the show -- especially hung along with the source photo as reference -- but this exhibition is virtually all highlights, breathtaking works whose scale asks you to get lost in them; whose execution, painting in fabric with audacious highlights and subtle details, makes you think you are seeing something entirely new; whose subject matter asks profound questions about the 20th century African American experience.

Who is this large family traveling to Chicago as part of the Great Migration in "The Warmth of Other Sons," and what

became of them when they got here? How can promise and despair be captured so completely, as in "Four Little Girls, September 15, 1963," the day of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama

The exhibition, organized in Chicago by Art Institute Associate Curator of Textiles Erica Warren, includes some of Butler's influences and references: the collage work of painter Romare Bearden, the "Kool-Aid colors" of the 1960s and '70s Chicago-based AfriCOBRA movement in Black art, the enduring photography of Gordon Parks, the quilts of Faith Ringgold.



Artist Bisa Butler, right, and curator Dr. Erica Warren pose for a photograph in front of Butler's work, "Southside Sunday Morning," at the Art Institute Friday, Nov. 13, 2020, in Chicago. Butler's exhibition, "Bisa Butler: Portraits," is open to the public from Nov. 16,

Warren first saw Butler's work at the 2018 Expo, she said, and immediately "thought that it was amazing." Those pieces sold out quickly, but she worked so that the museum could acquire a Butler work, "The Safety Patrol," which now hangs as the piece that greets visitors as they enter the exhibition.

The trompe l'oeil effect created by the scores of hours Butler puts into a work is powerful, Warren points out: "I think a lot of people, when they see the work, they think it's a painting. I knew it wasn't, and I'm still totally amazed when I get in close and see all these layers, all these small pieces of fabric... and the kind of interdisciplinary approach to materiality, where she is trained as a painter, but she's using photographs and using these printed textiles and she's quilting."

But beyond the technical skill, Warren said, Butler draws you in to her characters, "telling these really personal stories about these people," whether known figures like Frederick Douglass or relatives.

"I operate in a way like a cultural anthropologist," Butler said during an Art Institute video tour of the exhibition in November. "I like to imagine a life for the images I see." At the same time, she said, "a lot of times in my work I'm trying

to dispute falsehoods and stereotypes... I'm trying to refute that and set the story straight."

She trained at Howard University as a painter but did not find her artistic spark, Butler said, until switching to fabric. And now the first portrait she made in the medium, of her grandparents, is hanging on an Art Institute wall.

It's all been a lot to take in, said the artist, especially considering she's only been working "on a national scale" for about four years. Still, though, she had an inkling. She remembers one time when her brother wanted to take one of the quilts that she kept under her bed and sell it on the street, promising he could get \$100 for it.

"He was like, one foot out the door, and I yelled at him, 'No!'" she said. "I knew that I wanted my work to be in museums and galleries. I had never even exhibited in one. He was like, 'You're not going to be in a museum or gallery. This is going to be rolled up under a bed as soon as I leave.'"

Now to get to Butler's exhibition at the Art Institute, one of the world's great museums, you go up the Grand Staircase at the main entrance. You take in the artist's name on the banners. And her work, unrolled, brings a new kind of life to its walls.

"I don't know if I'm actually processing it," said Butler. "It

went beyond what I dreamed of, which means that I really need to dream bigger."

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