

# Bisa Butler: Portraits



# Bisa Butler: Portraits

WITH ESSAYS BY  
MICHELE WIJE  
AND  
ERICA WARREN

## Bisa Butler: Portraits

MARCH 15 – JUNE 14, 2020

Katonah Museum of Art

SEPTEMBER 5, 2020 – JANUARY 24, 2021

The Art Institute of Chicago

This publication is made possible in part by The Coby Foundation, Ltd.



The Katonah Museum of Art is sponsored in part by ArtsWestchester with support by the Westchester County Government, The New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.



Council on  
the Arts



Published by the Katonah Museum of Art  
134 Jay Street, Katonah, New York 10536  
www.katonahmuseum.org

© 2020 Katonah Museum of Art

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or information retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

Michael Gitlitz, Editor in Chief  
Caroline Holder, Copy Editor and Designer  
Jeanne Markel, Logo Designer  
Nancy Hitchcock, Copy Editor  
Michele Wijje, Copy Editor  
Jennifer Bossert, Proofreader  
Nancy Moore, Proofreader

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2019919288

ISBN: 978-0-578-62260-6

 **Katonah Museum of Art**

**ART  
INSTITUTE  
CHICAGO**

FRONT COVER: *I Am Not Your Negro*, 2019, Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd, 79 x 60 in. (200.6 x 152.4 cm), Private collection, New York

BACK COVER: *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

Printed by Shapco Printing, Minneapolis, Minnesota

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD | 4

MICHAEL GITLITZ

## INTRODUCTION | 7

MICHELE WIJE

## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: OBSERVATIONS

## ABOUT BISA BUTLER'S PORTRAITS | 9

MICHELE WIJE

## BISA BUTLER'S PORTRAIT QUILTS: UNTANGLING MYTHIC

## DISCOURSES AND MATERIAL HIERARCHIES | 17

ERICA WARREN

## WORKS IN EXHIBITION | 24

## CHECKLIST | 48

## LENDERS AND PHOTO CREDITS | 50

# FOREWORD

MICHAEL GITLITZ

Executive Director

At the Katonah Museum of Art, it is one of our great pleasures to have the opportunity to present powerful works of art and to create moments of aesthetic exhilaration and intellectual curiosity that we can share with our visitors. I experienced just such a moment when I came upon Bisa Butler's work in 2018 – vivid and larger-than-life quilted portraits that employ a multitude of vibrant fabrics, colors and textures to depict figures from her family and community, and from history. I was immediately captivated. Testament to her work's power and allure was that it stood out amid a cacophonous sea of hundreds of thousands of artworks of every imaginable kind that make up the enormous spectacle of a large group of art fairs. Upon inquiring about Butler's work and learning that the work had been sold to an institution, I mentioned that fortunately, I represented the Katonah Museum of Art, a very special kunsthalle, or non-collecting institution. My sole motivation was to learn more about this artist and to share her work with our community.

After showing images of Butler's work to Curator Michele Wijje, I was pleased that she was just as excited about this idea, as were the members of our Exhibitions Committee. Michele immediately began research, and we were surprised to learn that Butler had not yet had a solo museum exhibition. The KMA quickly proposed such an exhibition to Butler and to her devoted gallerist, Claire Oliver, and we were thrilled to learn that Butler was indeed amenable to the idea of an exhibition here. As it turned out, we were just in time. Once again, the Katonah Museum of Art was able, through its nimble structure and talented staff, to be at the forefront of artistic discovery. The seeds were thus sewn for the present exhibition, *Bisa Butler: Portraits*. In this exhibition and accompanying catalogue we are proud to present over two dozen of the artist's works from the last two decades.

The prescience and importance of the KMA's discovery soon became apparent since Butler's work has increasingly garnered international attention from institutions and private collectors alike. The KMA's excitement was compounded when we approached The Art Institute of Chicago, which generously agreed to collaborate on this exhibition. The works in *Bisa Butler: Portraits* will travel from the KMA to The AIC, where, alongside other works from The AIC's collection, the exhibition will be curated by AIC Associate Curator Erica Warren and will be on view from September 2020 to January 2021. The KMA is delighted to be partnering with President and Eloise W. Martin Director James Rondeau and with the staff of The AIC. It has been an honor and a pleasure for the KMA to work on this exhibition with such an eminent institution.

At the KMA, *Bisa Butler: Portraits* was carefully and studiously curated by Michele Wijje. We are delighted that the exhibition is a collaborative effort with The AIC and that the catalogue accompanying the exhibition features both an engrossing essay by Michele Wijje as well as the fine scholarship of Erica Warren. We are very grateful for their contributions to both the exhibition and catalogue. This KMA exhibition was facilitated through the tireless efforts of Claire Oliver and Ian Rubinstein, committed champions of Butler's work; KMA Registrar Nancy Hitchcock; Marketing and Communications Manager Caroline Holder and the dedicated members of the KMA staff. We are very grateful for the support of The Coby Foundation, Ltd. in making this exhibition and catalogue possible. The exhibition was brought

to fruition through the generous loan of works from private and public collections throughout the United States, including The Art Institute of Chicago; the Byron Nelson Family Collection; Audry X. Casusol; Bob and Jane Clark; Beth Rudin DeWoody; the Dimmitt Davies Collection; the Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection; Cathy Lee; the Love, Luck & Faith Foundation; Mount Holyoke College Art Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; the Claire Oliver Gallery; Michelle and Pete Scantland; Diane and Glenn Scotland; Julie and William Shearburn; Scott and Cissy Wolfe; and, not least, the artist herself.

Bisa Butler's work bridges the worlds of craft and fine art. It explores African American identity and culture and, in its seductive layering of fiber and meaning, speaks to a wide audience. We are very grateful for the opportunity to present this important artist's work at the Katonah Museum of Art.



*The Safety Patrol*, 2018 | PLATE 1



# INTRODUCTION

MICHELE WIJE

Curator

Bisa Butler, a formally trained African American artist of Ghanaian heritage, uses her large-scale portrait quilts to examine contemporary African American identity and culture. The images, often taken from vintage photographs, are strikingly representational, yet Butler's colorful fabric choices and asymmetrical shapes exemplify the bold aesthetics of primarily Ghanaian textiles, imbuing her work with individual memory, narrative and a layer of futuristic abstraction. The significance of her oeuvre lies in both the adaptation and transformation of traditional patchwork and appliqué quilting techniques and in the dramatic choice of distinctly American, figural subject matter positioned against a background that conveys her African heritage.

Butler's emergence as a quilt artist began humbly when, as a result of a fiber arts class taken at Howard University, she constructed a quilt for her ailing grandmother. As a child, Butler had pored over black and white photographs with her grandmother, who told her stories about the people in each one. This experience of creating narratives about her heritage within the larger context of African American lived experience thus informs her work. She uses texture, color and the cultural origin of fabric to construct an iconography that makes statements about society and identity.

African mud cloth and Kente cloth evoke her ancestral homeland while vintage lace, multi-colored organza and layered netting suggest a bygone era. The nature of the work, with its reliance on piecing and stitching, acknowledges the traditions of needlework often associated with women, femininity and domesticity. Butler subverts and questions these associations through her choice of motifs, embellishments, patterning and scale, all drawn from African textiles. What results are compositions that transform family memories and cultural practices into powerful social statements that transcend the connotations and traditional limitations, within art historical discourse, of the materials and methods of creation.

The Tea, 2017 | PLATE 2



## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: OBSERVATIONS ABOUT BISA BUTLER'S PORTRAITS

MICHELE WIJE

### FROM PHOTOGRAPH TO QUILT TO PORTRAIT

Bisa Butler is not a quilter. She is also not a photographer. Nevertheless, her artistic practice results in powerfully vivid portraits of African American men and women and is indelibly rooted in both of these mediums. Butler, formally trained as a fine artist, constructs her work from an intricate array of textiles, choosing to use the needle as her paintbrush and fabric in place of paint. She discovers her subject matter in historical or vintage family photographs, but this source medium becomes so transformed by the expressive color, vivid line and layered texture of her selected fabrics that it is rendered nearly invisible. Sometimes, the only vestige of the photograph's original presence is discernible in the careful planning of the gaze, the posture or the gesture of the sitters. While her portrait quilts are mimetic to the extent that they resemble recognizable people, they can be read conceptually in the sense that the original photograph disappears and is replaced by layers of colorful fabric that bear no direct reference to the source and thus reinvent it. At the same time, having chosen to create a work of fine art that happens to use textile as both medium and support, Butler remains keenly aware of and comfortable with the inextricable connection she has to the rich cultural heritage of quilt production that has informed American identity in general and African American identity in particular.

Butler uses the photograph as her point of departure, produces a portrait in a medium that is usually associated with craft, but changes and elevates both of them to establish a new criterion for the genre. This artistic metamorphosis is unconventional because the photograph, a medium of mechanical and mass production, is reinterpreted by the artist as a representational, unique, but non-naturalistic work of art that necessitates intricate work by hand. Butler views this inverse relationship in purely visual and artistic terms:

The photo is already a mechanical process of flattening a three-dimensional object and then recreating it on a 2-D surface. I'm interested in the human contribution – how we see things. I think the more we rely on technology for art, the less humanity it has.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, there is not just a physical complexity and exactitude to her work in the deconstruction of photographs that are enlarged, cut into pattern pieces, matched with fabrics that are then reconstructed and sewn layer upon layer to make a portrait, but also a cerebral one. Butler repositions the social and practical functions of both the photograph and the quilt into the sphere of the purely aesthetic and, in the process, she overturns traditional portrait practice based on the direct relationship between the artist and the sitter to create a new way of seeing and understanding her subject matter. *I Am Not Your Negro*, 2019 exemplifies this idea. (Plate 3, p. 8)

*I Am Not Your Negro*, 2019 | PLATE 3

## I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO, 2019



Fig. 1, Dorothea Lange, *Negro in Greenville, Mississippi*, 1936

The title of this work derives from a 2016 documentary directed by Raoul Peck about the history of racism in the United States, which itself is based on an unfinished manuscript by the writer James Baldwin in which the author reminisces about civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. The photographic source for *I Am Not Your Negro* comes from a picture taken by Dorothea Lange for an agency that was later absorbed into the Farm Securities Administration (FSA), an organization created in 1937 as part of The New Deal.<sup>2</sup> Lange's black and white photograph, titled *Negro in Greenville, Mississippi* and taken in 1936, depicts a man sitting on a wall with a dignified posture near what looks to be an empty storefront in a small town (Fig. 1). The confidence of his demeanor belies the hardship conveyed by his patched pants and worn jacket. Lange took four different poses of the man, none of them as compelling as this one, and imposed her own standards on her subject. As Susan Sontag has pointed out about FSA photographers in general, "the precise expression of their subject's face supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture and geometry."<sup>3</sup> Butler removes the man from his surroundings and places him against a decorative pink background, half floral, half abstract. His legs are crossed casually, and he still chews on his thumbnail, but he is also holding his hat rather than having it by his side. Butler has also reimagined his profession. This is not the sharecropper or wage laborer that the FSA photographers, including Lange, sought out, but in Butler's eyes he is a writer, poet or philosopher. The fabric of his pants has a specific meaning to the artist:

The man is wearing airplanes on his pants because he, like James Baldwin, is an expat. I imagine him being [someone] who lives in Europe, travels through Africa and Asia, but is an African American. The planes symbolize his travels and his cosmopolitan psyche unlike so many of his peers in the US.<sup>4</sup>

Butler created the piece to pay homage to those forward thinkers who would not have been able to live and work in their chosen professions in the United States, like James Baldwin, who resided in France. As in the photograph, the man looks at the viewer intently but with an air of insouciance that borders on insolence. Butler notes, "He is not a yes man, he will challenge the status quo."<sup>5</sup> In Butler's interpretation of the image, the relationship between viewer and sitter has been sharply reversed. It is not us, the viewer, who gazes at and assesses him, but the sitter who is sizing us up, placing us in the uncomfortable position of being evaluated by him. The title, *I Am Not Your Negro*, neatly captures this sentiment and, as Butler states, means, "I am a black man, an African American man, and I am not 'your' negro. I am not an intellectual inferior to anyone."<sup>6</sup> Butler's transformation of the photograph in this way by using the title and the source material to create new meaning in the work of art reflects Marshall McLuhan's enigmatic dictum, "the medium is the message,"<sup>7</sup> in which the philosopher notes that, "the form of a message determines the way in which the message will be perceived."<sup>8</sup> It is instructive to read Butler's portrait quilts within this context to understand how her work makes historical and cultural statements.

## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

Though McLuhan was primarily writing about innovations in mass communication and technology, his definitions of "medium" and "message" also relate directly to cultural production. In his terms, the "medium" is something which extends from ourselves, an idea or innovation which, when shared, will effect change. The "message" is not the actual content of the innovation, but the change that results from it. For example, a news story about hurricanes and flooding might alter attitudes toward climate change. As Mark Federman writes, "A McLuhan message always tells us to look beyond the obvious and seek the non-obvious changes that are enabled...by the new thing."<sup>9</sup> This also holds true for a work of art where the object itself, the medium, can convey a message that will alter the point of view of its audience. Butler's quilts are a convincing example of this concept.



*The Princess*, 2018 (detail), see also PLATE 17, p. 36

One of the striking aspects of Butler's work is that, although the source for her subjects is often black and white photography of African American men, women and children, the artist represents their skin purely expressionistically in vivid hues of blues, yellows, greens and hot pinks that convey emotion rather than focusing on race. Butler notes,

I am definitely trying to get people to see beyond race... the race of my subjects [is] obvious in their features but my original audience was the subjects themselves, who were all mostly African Americans and Africans from the continent. I like to subvert the colorism in the community where yes, you can see the people are black but you can't get a read on whether or not they are dark or light. African Americans often start with a person's complexion by way of a descriptor. They'll say "that dark skinned guy," or "that light skinned woman." They focus on the hair texture and will mention if the hair is "good," which sadly would mean straighter. I deliberately confuse that with my skin choice colors so that it becomes unclear. Once the viewer must concede that it is not going to be revealed, they have to deal with the subjects on different terms. So, I'd say while the race of my subjects is obvious, the particular shade of skin is unclear.<sup>10</sup>

This innovative approach of encouraging the viewer to set aside questions of race and look more deeply was recently referred to in a similar fashion by Amy Sberald, who painted *First Lady Michelle Obama* in 2018. In a talk on her painting practice, Sberald acknowledged that she preferred using a gray scale for skin color, stating, "Black bodies carry a politic [sic] narrative...gray allows you to see something else..."<sup>11</sup>

By acknowledging race but taking it off the table as a signifier for skin, Butler is also able to focus on meaning in a different way. This is evident in works like *Southside Sunday Morning*, 2018 and *Les Sapeurs*, 2018. In *Southside Sunday Morning*, five dapper young men, dressed for church on Easter morning on the South Side of Chicago, are posed as a group leaning on the hood of an invisible car and exude the confidence of youth. Dressed to the



Fig. 2, Russell Lee, *Negro Boys on Easter Morning*. Southside, Chicago, Illinois, 1941

men challenge viewers to reconsider their own perceptions. While the South Side is portrayed in the media as a dangerous and undesirable place, the dress and confident poses of these young men demonstrate that they literally and figuratively own their neighborhood and, in doing so, challenge viewers to reconsider their own pre-conceived ideas about social identity.

*Les Sapeurs*, 2018 uses a social and cultural metaphor to investigate identity. The term "SAPE" is an acronym based on the phrase *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (society of ambience makers and elegant people) whose adherents are *Sapeurs*, and the word also hints at the French slang for "attire." It references a subculture centered mainly on the cities Kinshasa and Brazzaville in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The movement embodies the elegance in style and manners of a colonial predecessor. The French colonial powers thought that by bringing secondhand clothing from Europe, they would civilize the "uncouth and naked" African people. White rulers often paid their houseboys in clothing, who thus became the first to embrace European modernity in terms of fashion. Butler has referenced and updated these dandies to the present day and has removed them from their historical and geographical context. They in turn reference a cultural heritage that uses luxury and high culture to

escape its own parochial status. The young man in the foreground with his folded arms powerfully confronts us and arrests our attention. The men behind him move rhythmically into our space, equally cool and self-reliant as their leader. The overall effect is a dynamism that extends beyond the static nature of the photograph. Butler is skilled at using figurative poses to communicate a message about her work to her audience. The language of posing, which has a long history in portraiture, becomes a medium through which Butler can make cultural and social statements.



*Les Sapeurs*, 2018, see also PLATE 18, p. 37

nines, the central figure leans back nonchalantly, commanding the viewer's attention (Fig. 2, Plate 19, p. 38). Surrounding him are four younger boys, one, with his hand clasped to his chin, his blue face highlighted by green fabric on the nose and purple lips, stares out looking bored, waiting for something to happen. The use of brilliant tones of non-natural skin color allows the viewer to concentrate on the nuances of the child's expression and emotions rather than making overt associations to race. In their dress and self-assured poses, the young

## THE LANGUAGES OF FABRIC AND PROSE

In many of Butler's quilts, body language and fabric choices convey specific meaning and are often used together to make a particular point. In *The Mighty Gents*, 2018 three young men stand in relaxed poses with their hands in their pockets against a neutral, striped background (Plate 16, p. 35). While two look out at the viewer, the third gazes out to his left, his body posed in profile as if he is about to walk off a stage. His pants are made from vibrant Kente cloth created by the Asante and Ewe peoples of Ghana and probably the best known of all African textiles. It is a cloth primarily woven by men and connotes authority. Originally, Kente cloth was reserved for royalty, and even though it became accessible to those outside of the royal court it is still associated with high status and cultural sophistication and is thus a mark of power.<sup>12</sup> Butler's use of Kente cloth here becomes important in the context of the work as a whole. In 1978, Richard Wesley, whom Butler has known since she was a child, wrote a play titled *The Mighty Gents*. It is the story of the members of a gang called by that name who had conquered their rival gang and ruled the Central Ward of Newark. *The Mighty Gents* were "warriors," the "roughest, meanest teenage gang who ruled the Central Ward,"<sup>13</sup> but by the time the play begins, their glory days are over and the gang members are in their 30s, impoverished and left with only the recollections of their earlier success. Butler collapses narrative time and chooses to depict the men at the peak of their power, young and confident in their solidarity and shared pride and strength, a sentiment symbolized by the Kente cloth. The man who adorns himself with it is a king of the streets. The center figure wears a vest with apartment-style windows to indicate his urban existence. His pants are covered in lotus flowers but, as Butler has pointed out, she likes the idea that the lotus flower:

starts off as a bud underwater and grows until it emerges from the muddy waters into a beautiful blooming flower...I think of young African American men in the situation of growing up in a crowded, tough urban city when historically their ancestors may have lived in tropical calm environments. It's like they are all fish out of water, just trying to survive.<sup>14</sup>

Where *The Mighty Gents* creates a narrative of male bonding and strength, in *The Tea*, 2018 (Plate 2, p. 6), Butler uses the language of the pose to create a narrative about female friendship and socialization. The image is based on a photograph of three women on Easter Sunday (Fig. 3). Here three women dressed in fine clothes, adorned with hats of lace and wearing gloves as if ready for church or leaving a service, are engaged in one of the oldest human social activities: gossiping. According to Butler, "spilling the tea" is a phrase common among young black girls that refers to a gossip session. "*The Tea* is about women banding together, gossiping, laughing and maybe even spilling secrets," she notes.<sup>15</sup> Unlike *The Mighty Gents*, where the men deliberately look outward and away from one another yet give off a united front, the women look inward. The central figure, who presides over the proceedings, engages the viewer directly, her arms folded in the gesture of judge and jury and appearing to only listen to the chatter of her friends. She is flanked by two women who draw the viewer in to the story, effectively inviting them to participate as the fourth person in the group. Much of Butler's work begins with a photograph whose subjects' identity has been lost to time. However, in several instances she has sourced real events and people to create quilts that make overt historical comments.



Fig. 3, Russell Lee, *Part of the Easter parade on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, 1941*

## HISTORICAL STATEMENTS

The quilt medium is a particularly poignant and appropriate choice for *Four Little Girls, September 15, 1963*, 2018 (Plate 14, p. 33) as it references the killing of four African American girls in Birmingham, Alabama, when the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church. The site was a meeting place for civil rights leaders. Except for one conviction and minimal sentencing, the perpetrators were cleared of wrongdoing. It was described by Martin Luther King Jr. as “one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.”<sup>16</sup> However, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing marked a turning point in the United States during the civil rights movement and contributed to support for the passage by Congress of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is the title of the work that conveys the message. Butler creates four little girls who could be 14-year-old Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carol Denise McNair, but also depicts the girls as younger and removes any overt reference to the incident. Butler makes the point that “they could be any four little girls.”<sup>17</sup> She captures them as four free spirits dressed in their best Sunday clothes, ready to go to church. All of them are in motion, almost twirling in their dresses and expressing the exuberance of a young life. The artist has paid particular attention to their nuanced expressions, building light and shadow into their facial features with layers of purples, pinks and blues that invite us to focus on them as individuals yet make a statement that these could be any four little girls.

In *Black Star Family, first class tickets to Liberia*, 2018 (Plate 13, p. 32), meaning also comes from the title of the work. Butler uses unidentified people to denote the movement of African Americans to Liberia a century ago. In 1919, Marcus Garvey, who was a political activist and orator for black nationalism, set up the shipping company, Black Star Line, under the auspices of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which he had founded in 1912, and by then had grown to include more than four million members. Not long after the Black Star Line had purchased its first ship, the company began its “African Redemption” Liberia program, with the idea of establishing a nation on the west coast of Africa for African Americans, for those who were born into slavery or were the descendants of slaves. Butler further encodes meaning into the piece because the Ghanaian flag, which consists of the Pan-African colors, red, gold and green, adopted a black star in its center, which is thought to be an homage to the shipping line and also a reference to Ghana’s status as the first independent African nation of the 20th century. The life-sized family pictured in Butler’s quilt is exquisitely dressed to make its trip to ultimate freedom, a fact that is signified by the father’s jacket, embellished with the photographic portrait of South Africa’s anti-apartheid leader, Nelson Mandela.

## CONCLUSION

Butler continues to investigate subjects of African American history and identity in her work. Her artistic practice is a contemporary reinterpretation of both photography and quilting. In her selection of photographic material, be it from a famous photographer or a family snapshot, Butler shares a connection to a particular time and place. A photograph, as Susan Sontag reminded us, “furnishes evidence,” and for Butler portrait photography provides source material for a new way of looking at the portrait genre.<sup>18</sup> In a day and age when the photographic image is so widespread in both traditional and social media that it has become a social rite, not to mention a source of anxiety and a tool of power, Butler has managed to both negate and acknowledge its social importance. Butler literally and figuratively deconstructs photographs only to reconstruct them with scraps of fabric to create a wholly new and modernized image in a medium that pre-dates the photograph, but she updates it in a truly contemporary manner.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bisa Butler in conversation with the author, 11.14.2019.

<sup>2</sup> The FSA ran a small but highly influential photography program that employed photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, Russell Lee and Ben Shahn among others to portray the challenges of rural poverty. Its goal as stated by its founder, Roy Stryker, was “introducing America to Americans.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farm\\_Security\\_Administration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farm_Security_Administration)

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, NY: Anchor Books / Doubleday, 1977), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Bisa Butler in conversation with the author, 11.16.2019.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan. “The Medium is the Message” in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), Chapter 1, u.p.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Federman, M. (2004, July 23). *What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message?* Retrieved 11.15.2019 from [http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article\\_mediumisthemessage.htm](http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article_mediumisthemessage.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Bisa Butler in conversation with the author, 11.14.2019.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Sherald in conversation with Ashley James, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York at NTL | Annual Leadership Series, The Manny Cantor Center, New York, November 7, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Courtney Micots, “Kente cloth,” in Smarthistory, July 18, 2017, accessed November 16, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/kente-cloth/>.

<sup>13</sup> Mel Gusso. “My Characters are Trying to be Somebody,” *New York Times*, Sunday April 16, 1978, Section 2, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Bisa Butler in conversation with the author, 11.15.2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King. Eulogy for the Martyred Children 18 September 1963. Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/eulogy-martyred-children>.

<sup>17</sup> Bisa Butler in an email to the author, 11.18.2019.

<sup>18</sup> Sontag, 9.



A Man's Worth, 2019 | PLATE 4

# BISA BUTLER'S PORTRAIT QUILTS:

## UNTANGLING MYTHIC DISCOURSES AND MATERIAL HIERARCHIES

ERICA WARREN

Associate Curator, Department of Textiles  
Art Institute of Chicago

"I hope people seeing my work will think of me as someone continuing the African American quilting tradition but taking it into the future."<sup>1</sup>

In August of 1854, Sarah Ann Wilson carefully signed and dated an appliquéd, pieced and embroidered quilt. The quilt top features thirty undyed squares of cotton, appliquéd with stylized plants, animals, landscapes and people. The quilt maker, probably Wilson, used strips of a printed red fabric to join the squares into a neat grid, and then framed the design with a double scalloped border. The motifs, cut from colorful solid and printed fabrics and then carefully stitched onto the plain cotton squares, appear to tell a story about family and home. Notably, the figures in the quilt are sensitively portrayed, with brown fabric comprising their faces, while facial features such as eyes, noses, mouths and brows are delineated with embroidery done in pink thread. Although Wilson's role as the maker of this quilt cannot be confirmed, it seems likely that the date and signature, which appear in a square in the bottom row, mark her completion of the quilt.<sup>2</sup>

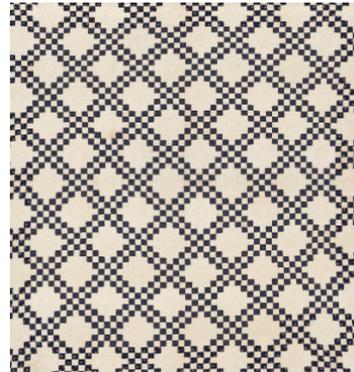


Sarah Ann Wilson, *Album Quilt*, 1854, Appliquéd, pieced and embroidered quilt; dyed, undyed and printed cotton plain weave fabrics and cotton and silk velvet fabric; cotton embroidery threads, 85 ½ x 100 ¾ in. (217.1 x 255.8 cm), The Art Institute of Chicago, Restricted gift of Mrs. David W. Grainger, 1999.509

One hundred and fifty years later, Bisa Butler, a graduate student studying art education at Montclair State University in New Jersey, implemented some of the same techniques and approaches to design as Wilson (and indeed many other quilters including Harriet Powers, Bertha Stenge and Faith Ringgold) while making a class project. The resulting work, a small appliquéd portrait quilt based on a wedding photograph of her maternal grandmother and grandfather (Plate 5, p. 24), relishes in this joyful image, much like Wilson's quilt. Although the scale and format of these works are quite different, they both incorporate piecing and appliquéd techniques and gesture toward the representational. The juxtaposition of these quilts begins to elucidate the ways in which Butler's work finds a home in the history of quilt making in

America. Butler embraces her role and place in this historiography and her work surfaces narratives less considered and emphasized in art historical discourse. Quilt history is marked by mythic narratives that scholars and artists have reiterated and revised, and Butler's work takes part in this process while also challenging pejorative and reductive notions about quilt making and materiality.

The year 1971 proved to be a hallmark moment for situating quilts within the field of American art, as the Whitney Museum of American Art held the exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, which featured the collection of Jonathan Holstein and Gail van der Hoof. Although the exhibition included sixty-one quilts, they all adhered to a specific and limited vision of what constituted "abstract design" – a vision shaped by Holstein's narrow view of modern art.



Unknown (U.S.), *Double Irish Chain Quilt*, about 1850, Cotton, plain weave; pieced with cotton, plain weave, printed; quilted; backed with cotton, plain weave, 77 1/8 x 73 1/8 in. (196 x 185.7 cm), The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Emma B. Hodge, 1919.530

All of the quilts in the exhibition were pieced block quilts, a technique which Holstein described as "an exercise in frugality; boughten cloth was expensive, homemade took much labor, and this was the logical way to get the most from each precious remnant of material."<sup>3</sup> Careful examination of quilts from different times and places has provided evidence that quilts were not necessarily nor exclusively exercises in frugality or thrift. Indeed a great variety of extant quilts was not made with remnants or scraps, but instead with new materials.<sup>4</sup> A blue and white *Double Irish Chain Quilt*, close in date to Wilson's work, interprets the same pieced block design as two of the quilts from Holstein's collection included in *Abstract Design*.<sup>5</sup> Close examination of this quilt reveals that the quilter used only two different fabrics, a printed blue one and a plain undyed cotton. As the scale of the quilt necessitated a large volume of both fabrics, it is likely that the maker acquired the cloth with this particular project in mind. Still, Holstein perpetuated this myth of frugality, eager to acknowledge quilters' industrious approach to sourcing and utilizing materials.

In addition to the myth of frugality, Holstein also perpetuated the notion that quilts were the products of anonymous women's labor, referring to the quilting bee as "the great women's social institution of the nineteenth century."<sup>6</sup> While Holstein invested some effort in identifying the places of origin for the quilts in his collection, narrowing the location to a state, he does not manage to identify a single quilter by name. Although quilts often can be difficult to attribute to a named maker, his vast generalization about the role of the quilting bee in the nineteenth century homogenizes women and elides the grave inequities of gender, race and class that marked this period.

Moreover, while he venerated the fact that pieced quilts "show the highest degree of control for visual effect," and exemplify a so-called traditional American approach to design, he remained clear that although they feature abstract, geometric patterns, quilts "were in no sense foreign or strange . . . as if they were some form of avant-garde art."<sup>7</sup> Since Holstein's project rested on the supposedly novel observation that some quilts share striking visual similarities with twentieth-century paintings, he carefully proscribed quilts as decidedly not avant-garde and positioned them outside of the canonical progressive narrative of art history that exalts the work of chiefly white male artists.

His bias toward the masculine comes across clearly in the way he instrumentalized a technical distinction to categorically dismiss appliquéd quilts. To explain his reasons for choosing pieced quilts exclusively, he asserted that the project "concentrates on examples which provide a cohesive and strong visual statement." He acknowledged appliquéd quilts as being part of the American contribution to the "art of quilting," but then set them aside entirely,

arguing, "But appliquéd quilts are usually more decorative, and while often beautiful, seem to lack the stronger visual characteristics we see in pieced quilts."<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on strength and dismissal of the decorative rehearses familiar hierarchies of gender and materiality in the discourse of American art.<sup>9</sup>

In describing her work as "quiltlike" and proudly identifying herself as a quilter, Bisa Butler situates her art within this complex discourse and historiography.<sup>10</sup> Butler's arresting portraits, which integrate aspects of painting, photography and textiles, disturb staid notions of art and challenge discursive material hierarchies that position quilts, particularly appliquéd quilts, as decorative and therefore outside the parameters of art. Butler's work, positioned between and within art and craft, takes advantage of the productive potential of this hierarchical tension. Elissa Auther, in *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, considers "craft's subordination and marginality as indispensable to the evolution of art" and argues compellingly that, "The hierarchy of art and craft in this view is not just an oppressive cultural force but also an important catalyst for new work."<sup>11</sup> Butler's work, nestled at the intersection of multiple artforms, embodies this catalytic possibility.

Juxtapositions of vibrant colors, delicate stitched lines that delineate compositional details, and a vital sense of the subjects captured in the moment all feature prominently in Butler's work. *The Safety Patrol*, a group portrait of seven children, each comprised of vibrant fabrics, meticulously cut, layered and then stitched in place on a floral-patterned ground fabric, exemplifies Butler's practice. The vivid flesh tones of blue, green, orange, yellow, red, pink and violet imbue each figure with a personality that Butler imagines them to possess. She layers translucent tulle fabrics over bright solids to create subtle topographic renderings of faces as well as arms, hands and legs. African-print fabrics given the same treatment make up the clothing and accessories of the figures. Butler, who studied painting at Howard University, layers fabrics as a painter might layer glazes. She uses thread to draw, defining curls and plaits of hair, furrowed brows and rumpled, slouching socks. A photographic negative, unprinted, inspired her composition, while her choices of fabrics bring the figures to life and animate their gazes and circumspect expressions.



*The Safety Patrol*, 2018, see also PLATE 1, p. 5

Butler's representational, figurative, detailed and appliquéd quilt speaks to a history of quilts and quilt makers that Holstein roundly dismissed in his project. The problematic oversights and limitations of *Abstract Design in American Quilts* as well as subsequent related exhibitions came to the fore when Patricia Mainardi incisively critiqued his narrow focus in her 1973 article, "Quilts: The Great American Art." In the article, Mainardi homed in on a key problem with Holstein's framework for the exhibition, and poignantly asserted, "although the sexist and racist art world will, if forced, include token artists, they will never allow them to expand the definition of art, but will include only those whose work can be used to rubber-stamp already established white male art styles. . . . The appliquéd quilts, which current male artists have not chosen to imitate, are therefore just written off as inferior art."<sup>12</sup> Despite her sound critique, the media attention and accolades that *Abstract Design in American Quilts* garnered gave the project and its message a foothold in the subsequent art historical literature on quilts.<sup>13</sup> Fortunately, in addition to Mainardi, numerous scholarly and artistic voices have worked to challenge and expand this discourse, and as Auther argues at the close of her book, "it is no surprise that fiber has become a major medium of contemporary art."<sup>14</sup>

Quilt historians Cuesta Benberry and Carolyn Mazloomi are among those who have revised and expanded the discourse around quilt making in America. Somewhat surprisingly, Holstein wrote a foreword for Benberry's essential volume *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*. The book, which accompanied an exhibition of the same name, considered the expansive, broad and integral role of African American quilters within American history, and critiqued histories that efface, simplify, essentialize and/or exoticize their fundamental contribution to American art.<sup>15</sup> Over twenty years later, Mazloomi reiterated Benberry's argument, affirming, "We stand solidly on evolving historical documentation that positions African American quilt making as an ever-present influence on a rich American tradition of utilitarian and artistic cultural production across all genres."<sup>16</sup> Their argument regarding the continuous, persistent and pervasive role of African Americans within quilt history poignantly applies across all of American history.

In conversation with their crucial and powerful assessment, many of Butler's works make visible through striking material representations the physical and visual presence of African Americans. At the center of *The Safety Patrol*, a boy, who wears his safety patrol belt, gazes over the top of his blue-rimmed sunglasses as he stretches his arms out in a sacrificial gesture. His six schoolmates, standing slightly behind him, each carefully face the viewer on their own terms. The work commands attention and reminds viewers that children, and black children especially, need to be seen, valued and protected. Although their clothing places them in a specific moment in time, their expressions reach across an expanse of history.

Similarly, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Plate 25, p. 44) depicts a group of four college students from the early twentieth century. Meticulously attired in high-collared dresses, pert hats and heeled boots, they sit beside one another with their legs turned toward the center of the composition and their torsos leaning inward. While their faces bear distinct expressions, all of their gazes examine the viewer. Butler's representation of these women serves as a reminder of their presence, while the arrangement of the figures hints at the contemporary advice women in professional environments receive to advocate for themselves, share their ideas and express opinions. These women and countless others undoubtedly had to do these things long before it became a newsworthy phenomenon.

Although Benberry and Mazloomi laid the groundwork for a nuanced and considered approach to quilt history that expands and critiques myths and assumptions, their work became somewhat overshadowed in the wake of exhibitions that foregrounded the work of quilters from Gee's Bend.<sup>17</sup> In 2002, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston organized an exhibition featuring a group of these quilts that were collected by William Arnett.<sup>18</sup> In her introductory essay for the accompanying catalogue, art historian Alvia Wardlaw framed the exhibition, stating, "The Quilts of Gee's Bend presents the genius of a group of exceptional women who, for well over a century, have created distinctive works of art for their homes and families." She further explained that the quilts are part of an expansive tradition of African American quilt making and then reiterated their remarkable nature, asserting, "they are in a league by themselves."<sup>19</sup> Although she nods to the work of Benberry, Wardlaw's efforts to elevate, distinguish and separate the Gee's Bend quilters ultimately positions them and their quilts as the exception to the rule. The rule then being that other quilts, African American or otherwise, are not art.

In an exhibition review for *The New York Times*, based on the installation at the Whitney, the critic Michael Kimmelman described the show as "the most ebullient of the New York art season." Although he characterized the best of the "amazingly refined, eccentric abstract designs" as "eye-poppingly gorgeous," his opening sentence still noted the "unlikely" nature of "a show of hand-stitched quilts" to have such impact. With this opening assertion, he hinted at his material prejudices, and he further revealed his bias when his seemingly laudatory assessment concluded, "There are many other artful quiltmakers around the nation. But there is nothing that has turned up yet quite akin to what's

here."<sup>20</sup> With this review, he instantiates the hierarchy of art and craft, and reiterates Wardlaw's introductory argument of exceptionalism that reproduces a narrow understanding of African American quilt making.

The work of Roberta Smith, Kimmelman's fellow critic at the *Times*, surprisingly exposed the fault in his argument of exceptionalism while at the same time reproducing the exact same narrative. In her 2018 obituary for the quilt collector Eli Leon, Smith hailed Leon as a "champion of African American quilt makers" and went on to describe him as a "savior" of the work of Rosie Lee Tompkins, who Leon met at a flea market near Oakland in 1985. Smith described Tompkins as "the only woman in the pantheon of great self-taught artists whose achievements came to light in the second half of the 20th century and have altered the shape of American art history."<sup>21</sup> This strange juxtaposition of parallel assessments regarding the work of artists who are women of color and quilt makers points to the myriad faults that arise from circumscribed art historical perspectives.

To combat the persistent inequities of art historical scholarship and criticism, Mazloomi continued to explore the historiography of American art through quilts. In anticipation of the four-hundred-year anniversary of the landing of the first enslaved Africans in America, Mazloomi curated an exhibition of contemporary quilts. She selected ninety-seven works with the intent of showcasing the African American experience across that vast expanse of time and with the goal of supporting a "rearrangement of our American memory."<sup>22</sup> Each quilt, matched with a year, marked a landmark moment or individual. Mazloomi paired the year 1896 with two quilts, one of them by Butler, that spoke to the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which legalized segregation in schooling.

Butler's work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Beats His Wings* pays homage to the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and the high school that bears his name in Washington D.C.<sup>23</sup> Butler set her appliqué portrait bust of Dunbar in front of a large stylized cage that imprisons a blue bird. In the border of the quilt, Butler includes lines from Dunbar's well-known poem *Sympathy*. The familiar verse "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me" as well as the titular "I know why he beats his wing!" register as particularly poignant within the context of the exhibition and its empowering title *And Still We Rise*.<sup>24</sup> These lines also speak to Dunbar's lived experience as a black artist navigating segregation and racism in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, in featuring Dunbar, the quilt also reminds the viewer of the poet and writer Maya Angelou, who drew the title of her moving memoir from Dunbar's poem.



Bisa Butler, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Beats His Wings*, 2012-13, 50 x 50 in. (127 x 127 cm), Cotton, rayon, linen, silk, chiffon, cotton batting; machine appliqué and quilted

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Mazloomi argued for a more inclusive quilt history, specified the need to acknowledge a diversity and multiplicity of makers and styles and asserted the need to think beyond simplifications and stereotypes in writing art history. She also pointedly critiqued what she recognized as flawed and fraught efforts of collectors, critics and scholars, arguing, "more controversial than the history of African American quilting is its historiography; that is to say, the way in which the history has been crafted and by whom."<sup>25</sup> With this appraisal, Mazloomi acknowledged the art historical neglect of Benberry's fundamental scholarship and the preference for narratives about quilt making that fit neatly into the modernist-focused canon.

Despite Mazloomi's pointed critique of quilt historiography, in the introduction to the recent exhibition catalogue *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South*, art historian Cheryl Finley summarizes the work included in the exhibition thusly: "Consisting of fifty-seven works across various media – painting, drawing and sculpture by

Dial, Minter, Lonnie Holley, Mose Tolliver and Purvis Young, among others, as well as twenty quilts from the female artist collective the Gee's Bend quilt makers."<sup>26</sup> With this introduction, Finley foregrounds the artistic media privileged in the hierarchy of art and craft, and calls out the male artists by name. She then appends the quilts and refers to the quilters as a collective of makers.

Although contemporary artists working in fiber have increasing visibility in the art world, these recent writings that address African American quilters demonstrate that the hierarchy of art and craft as well as myths about quilt making persist and with them attendant biases regarding race and gender. Butler is among many artists who have embraced fiber, and the interdisciplinary nature of her practice, as well as her reverence for the breadth of quilt history, challenges material hierarchies as well as mythic and exceptional narratives that frequently attend critical appraisals of artists who work outside of the confines of painting and sculpture, and are women and/or people of color. Butler's work commands attention and implores viewers to look and see a breadth of black lives and meet those lives with respect, compassion and humility.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bisa Butler quoted in Patricia Malarcher, "Bisa Butler: Expanding the African American Quilting Tradition," *FiberArt Now* 8.3 (Spring 2019): 26.

<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that Wilson (or the maker of Wilson's quilt) was a proficient quilter, as another quilt with the same grid design and with numerous shared appliqué motifs is known to exist and appears in the *Index of American Design*. The figures in particular, rendered in the same style and with brown fabric used to represent the faces and hands, offer further evidence that the quilt maker sought to represent the African American experience in her quilts. See Erwin O. Christensen, *The Index of American Design* (New York; Washington D.C.: The MacMillan Company and National Gallery of Art, 1950), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Holstein, *Abstract Design in American Quilts: A Biography of an Exhibition* (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1991), 214. Many authors cite the exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, held at the Whitney in 1971, as a foundational/ landmark moment for quilts in the history of art.

<sup>4</sup> Amelia Peck with the assistance of Cynthia V. A. Schaffner, *American Quilts and Coverlets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 32. See also, "Roundtable Discussion" in *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2012), 30.

<sup>5</sup> For the Double Irish Chain quilts from *Abstract Design*, see Holstein, 155 and 174.

<sup>6</sup> Holstein, 213.

<sup>7</sup> Holstein, 215.

<sup>8</sup> Holstein, 214.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Mainardi, "Quilts: The Great American Art" in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982): 330-346, and Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 34-36.

<sup>10</sup> Bisa Butler in conversation at the public program *New Paradigms: #BlackGirlMagic* at the Art Institute of Chicago, October 22, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Auther, xxx.

<sup>12</sup> Mainardi, 343.

<sup>13</sup> Twenty years later, in reflecting on the impact of *Abstract Design in American Quilts*, Holstein acknowledged Mainardi's criticism, which he described as "appallingly misinformed" and then noted that her critique "amused" him. He further stated that while Mainardi indeed raised some interesting points, they "were based on misinformation and misconceptions about the history of quilts and quilting in this country, and misinterpretations." However, Holstein failed to specify the misinformation and misconceptions in the article. Holstein, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Auther, 171. For other scholarly approaches see Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1992), and Catherine Morris, ed., *Workt by Hand: Hidden Labor and Historical Quilts* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Cuesta Benberry, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* (Louisville: The Kentucky Quilt Project, Inc., 1992), 13, 15, and 28. For an example of the type of project Benberry may be critiquing here, see Eli Leon, *Who'd a Thought It: Improvisation in African-American Quilting* (San Francisco: San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn L. Mazloomi, *And Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2015), 10. See also, Carolyn Mazloomi, *Spirits of the Cloth: Contemporary African American Quilts* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Amelia Peck helpfully outlines some of the problems that attended the Gee's Bend quilt exhibition in her essay "Quilt/Art: Deconstructing the Gee's Bend Quilt Phenomenon" in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 53.

<sup>18</sup> Loretta Pettway and Annie Mae Young, two Gee's Bend quilters, sued Arnett in 2007, alleging that he had cheated them out of the proceeds of their works as well as the copyrights. Shaila Dewan, "Handmade Alabama Quilts Find Fame and Controversy," *The New York Times* (July 29, 2007): N14.

<sup>19</sup> Alvia Wardlaw, "Introduction: The Quilts of Gee's Bend" in *The Quilts of Gee's Bend* (Atlanta; Houston: Tinwood Books in association with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2002), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "Art Review: Jazzy Geometry, Cool Quilters," *The New York Times* (November 29, 2002): E33.

<sup>21</sup> Roberta Smith, "Eli Leon, 82, Dies; Champion of African-American Quilt Makers," *The New York Times* (March 23, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Carolyn L. Mazloomi, *And Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2015), 4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Bisa Butler, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Beats His Wings" in *And Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations* (Atglen, Penn.: Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2015), 75.

<sup>24</sup> Also in the border is the verse, "When he beats his bars and would be free."

<sup>25</sup> Mazloomi, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Cheryl Finley, "Introduction: Troubling the Waters," in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 13. The Souls Grown Deep Foundation was co-founded by William Arnett.

# WORKS IN EXHIBITION



Francis and Violette (Grandparents), 2001 | PLATE 5



One Vote Can Change the World, 2008 | PLATE 6



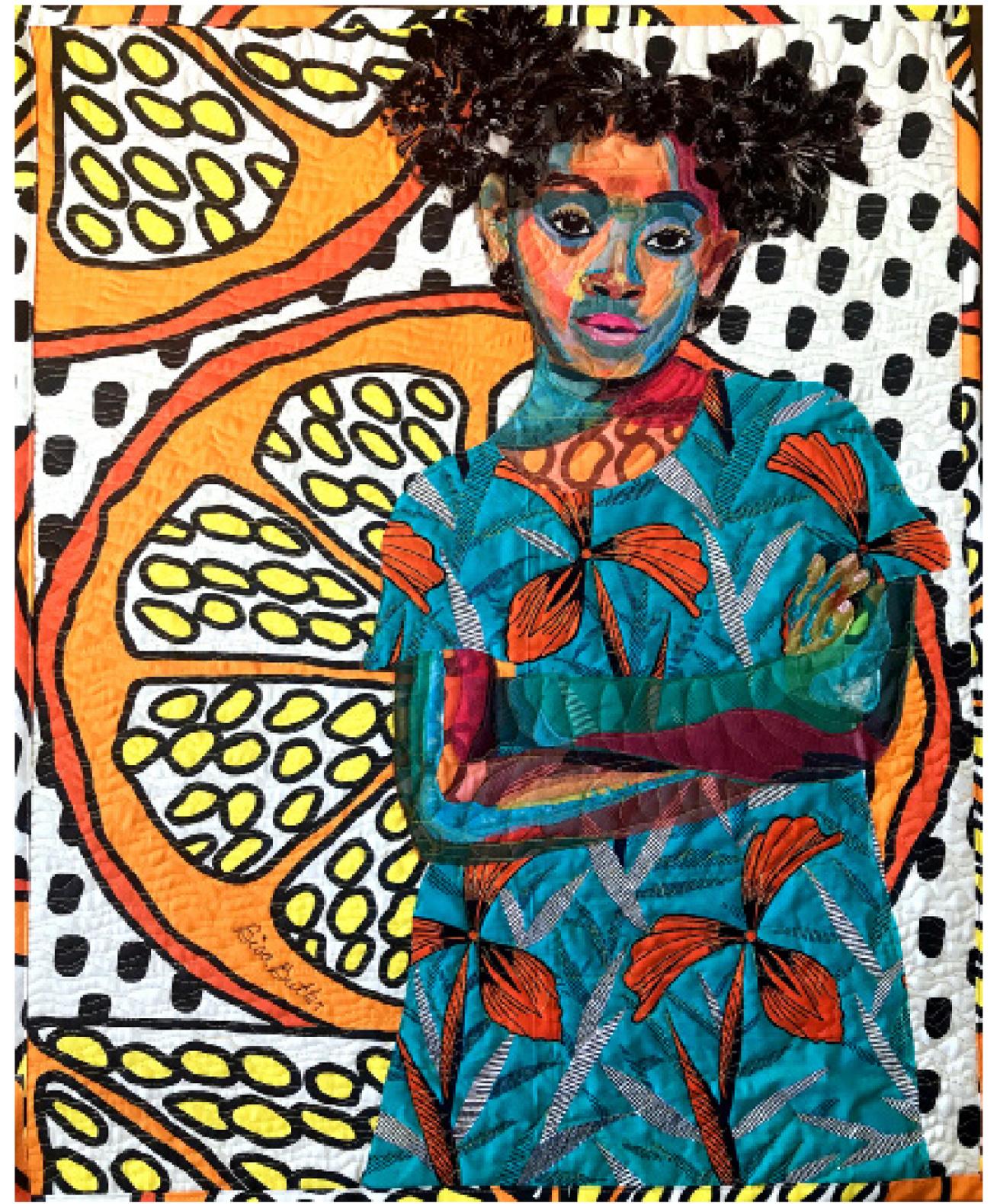
Dad, 2010 | PLATE 7



Basquiat – Black Lives Matter, 2015 | PLATE 8



*Life Like it's Golden*, 2015-16 | PLATE 9



*Anaya with Oranges*, 2017 | PLATE 10



Family, 2017 | PLATE 11



Pops, 2017 | PLATE 12



*Black Star Family, first class tickets to Liberia, 2018 | PLATE 13*



*Four Little Girls, September 15, 1963, 2018 | PLATE 14*



*Mannish Boy*, 2018 | PLATE 15



*The Mighty Gents*, 2018 | PLATE 16



The Princess, 2018 | PLATE 17



Les Sapeurs, 2018 | PLATE 18



Southside Sunday Morning, 2018 | PLATE 19



Survivor, 2018 | PLATE 20



Broom Jumpers, 2019 | PLATE 21



Dear Mama, 2019 | PLATE 22



The Equestrian, 2019 | PLATE 23



Kindred, 2019 | PLATE 24



*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 2019 | PLATE 25



To God and Truth, 2019 | PLATE 26

# CHECKLIST

*Francis and Violette (Grandparents)*, 2001

Cotton and lace, quilted and appliquéd  
27 ¼ x 24 ½ in. (69.2 x 62.2 cm)

Collection of the artist

PLATE 5

*One Vote Can Change the World*, 2008

Cotton, acrylic paint, denim, quilted and appliquéd  
27 x 38 in. (68.6 x 96.5 cm)

Collection of the artist

PLATE 6

*Dad*, 2010

Cotton, organza and sequins, quilted and appliquéd  
39 x 26 in. (99.1 x 66 cm)

Private Collection, New York

PLATE 7

*Basquiat – Black Lives Matter*, 2015

Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd  
26 ½ x 23 in. (67.3 x 58.4 cm)

Courtesy of Diane and Glenn Scotland

PLATE 8

*Life Like it's Golden*, 2015-16

Denim  
35 x 29 in. (88.9 x 73.7 cm)

Courtesy of the Byron Nelson Family Collection

PLATE 9

*Anaya with Oranges*, 2017

Cotton, organza, chiffon, lace and netting  
36 x 20 in. (91.4 x 50.8 cm)

Courtesy of the Dimmitt Davies Collection

PLATE 10

*Family*, 2017

Cotton, organza, chiffon, lace and netting  
95 x 57 in. (241.3 x 144.8 cm)

Courtesy of Michelle and Pete Scantland

PLATE 11

*Pops*, 2017

Vinyl netting, chiffon, lace, silk and cotton, quilted and appliquéd  
42 x 28 in. (106.7 x 71.2 cm)

Courtesy of Cathy Lee

PLATE 12

*The Tea*, 2017

Cotton, silk, lace and netting  
80 x 54 in. (203.2 x 137.2 cm)

Private Collection, New York

PLATE 2

*Black Star Family, first class tickets to Liberia*, 2018

Cotton, silk and denim  
85 x 79 in. (215.9 x 200.6 cm)

Courtesy of Julie and William Shearburn, Saint Louis, Missouri

PLATE 13

*Four Little Girls, September 15, 1963*, 2018

Cotton, silk and lace  
61 x 78 in. (154.9 x 198.1 cm)

Courtesy of Michelle and Pete Scantland

PLATE 14

*Mannish Boy*, 2018

Cotton, chiffon, satin lace and silk  
54 x 39 in. (137.2 x 99 cm)

Courtesy of the Byron Nelson Family Collection

PLATE 15

*The Mighty Gents*, 2018

Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd  
78 x 67 in. (198.1 x 170.1 cm)

Courtesy of Beth Rudin DeWoody

PLATE 16

*The Princess*, 2018

Cotton, chiffon, lace and satin  
70 x 46 in. (177.8 x 116.8 cm)

Collection of Bob and Jane Clark

PLATE 17

*The Safety Patrol*, 2018

Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd  
82 x 90 in. (208.3 x 228.6 cm)

The Art Institute of Chicago

Cavigga Family Trust Fund, 2019.785

PLATE 1

*Les Sapeurs*, 2018

Cotton and silk  
42 x 60 in. (106.7 x 152.4 cm)

Collection of Claire Oliver

PLATE 18

*Southside Sunday Morning*, 2018

Silk and cotton  
73 x 109 in. (185.4 x 276.8 cm)

Courtesy of the Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection

Kansas City, Missouri

PLATE 19

*Survivor*, 2018

Denim, cotton and mud cloth  
48 x 81 in. (121.9 x 205.7 cm)

Courtesy of Audry X. Casusol

PLATE 20

*Broom Jumpers*, 2019

Cotton, silk, wool and velvet  
98 x 58 in. (248.9 x 147.3 cm)

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

South Hadley, Massachusetts

PLATE 21

*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

PLATE 22

*The Equestrian*, 2019

Cotton, wool and silk, quilted and appliquéd  
68 x 43 in. (172.7 x 109.2 cm)

Courtesy of the Love, Luck & Faith Foundation

PLATE 23

*I Am Not Your Negro*, 2019

Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd  
79 x 60 in. (200.6 x 152.4 cm)

Private Collection, New York

PLATE 3

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 2019

Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd  
50 x 129 in. (127 x 327.6 cm)

Private collection, promised gift on long-term loan to

Minneapolis Institute of Art

PLATE 25

*Kindred*, 2019

Cotton, wool, silk, velvet and polyester, quilted and appliquéd  
86 7/8 x 66 5/8 in. (220.7 x 169.2 cm)

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust through the Geoge H.

and Elizabeth O. Davis Fund, 2019.45

PLATE 24

*A Man's Worth*, 2019

Cotton, wool and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd  
89 x 50 in. (226.1 x 127 cm)

Courtesy of the Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection

Kansas City, Missouri

PLATE 4

*To God and Truth*, 2019

Printed cotton, pieced, quilted and appliquéd  
117 ½ x 140 5/8 in. (299.7 x 358.1 cm)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund, The Heritage Fund

for a Diverse Collection, and Arthur Mason Knapp Fund

PLATE 26

# LENDERS AND PHOTO CREDITS

## LENDERS

The Art Institute of Chicago  
Bisa Butler  
Byron Nelson Family Collection  
Audry X. Casusol  
Bob and Jane Clark  
Beth Rudin DeWoody  
Dimmitt Davies Collection  
Bill and Christy Gautreaux Collection  
Cathy Lee  
Love, Luck & Faith Foundation  
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art  
Claire Oliver Gallery  
Private Collection  
Michelle and Pete Scantland  
Diane and Glenn Scotland  
Julie and William Shearburn  
Scott and Cissy Wolfe

## IMAGE CREDITS

All works of art and documentary photographs have been reproduced by the kind permission of the owners or their representatives. Every attempt has been made to trace the copyright holders. We apologize for any inadvertent infringement and invite appropriate rights holders to contact us. Specific acknowledgments are as follows:

## PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Cover, pp. 6, 8, 11, 12, 16, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 44, Back Cover, Claire Oliver Gallery ©2020, Photographer, Ian Rubenstein; pp. 5, 17, 18, 19, Photograph ©2020, ©The Art Institute of Chicago; p. 10, Photographic Negative, Dorothea Lange ©Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF34- 009621-E-C]; p. 12, Photographic Negative, Russell Lee ©Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF34-038825-D]; p. 13, Photographic Negative, Russell Lee Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI [LC-USF33- 013010-M3]; p. 21, Photograph ©2020, Chas E. and Mary Martin; p. 27, Photographer, Margaret Fox; p. 40, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts; p. 43, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Media Services/Photo: Gabe Hopkins; p. 46, Photograph ©2020, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Deborah Mullin, PhD, President-on-Leave  
Ellen Grimes, Acting President  
Tara Coniaris, Secretary  
Mike Davies, Treasurer  
Kathy Abbott  
Chris Burdick\*  
Winthrop Conrad, Jr.  
Craig Culver  
Vanessa Diebold  
Vida Foubister  
Marilyn D. Glass  
LaRuth Hackney Gray, EdD  
Craig Intinarelli  
Stanley Kogelman  
Jeanne Markel  
Amy Parsons  
Jerry Pinkney  
Thomas Rom  
Dyan Rosenberg\*  
Robin Simon  
James S. Snyder

## EMERITI

Mary Lou Alpert  
Inge Brown  
Ginny Gold  
Donald J. Herdrich  
Betty Himmel  
Katherine Moore  
Victoria F. Morris  
Linda Nordberg  
Yvonne S. Pollack  
Rochelle C. Rosenberg  
Joan Safir  
Rebecca Samberg  
Lisbeth S. Stern

## ADVISORY BOARD

Amanda Alfieri  
Janet Benton  
Margot Bogert  
Carol Bouyoucos  
Gail Bryan  
Casey Carter  
John Crabtree  
Douglas Durst  
Judy Evnin  
Nisa M. Geller  
Joseph Handelman  
Betty Himmel  
Paul Jenkel  
Susan Kroeger  
Linda S. Levine  
Katherine Moore  
Victoria F. Morris  
Linda Nordberg  
Yvonne S. Pollack  
Dyan Rosenberg  
Rebecca Samberg  
Lisbeth S. Stern  
Akili Tommasino  
David E. Worby

## MUSEUM STAFF

Margaret Adasko, Curator of Education  
Jennifer Bossert, Office Manager  
Gwyneth Edmunds, Development Assistant/Data Coordinator  
Michael Gitlitz, Executive Director  
Emily Handlin, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions and Programs  
Nancy Hitchcock, Registrar and Facilities Manager  
Caroline Holder, Marketing and Communications Manager  
Deena Kaye, Director of Development  
Naomi Leiseroff, Learning Center Curator  
Maria Nikitin, Education and Public Engagement Coordinator  
Michelle Rakowsky, Special Events Coordinator

\*Ex-Officio

p. 52, *Anaya with Oranges*, 2017 (detail)





you are appreciated Dear Mama  
Dont you know I love you?  
Place no one above you

Dear Mama  
I appreciate you  
I gotta thank the

That you made me  
There's no word  
How you

Always  
That you  
fun

See it  
But you  
I love you

I love you  
I love you  
I love you

Lord

has  
secret  
to how  
love  
take the  
the right  
day  
hold on  
back

understand  
and I love  
Mama  
you  
appreciate  
I love  
you