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ARTS & LEISURE

Fiber artist Bisa Butler holds first solo exhibit at Katonah Museum of Art

By **Andrea Valluzzo**

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Bisa Butler is a fiber artist known for depicting African American identity and culture on her vibrant quilts. She will be holding her first solo exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art. Butler's "Broom Jumpers" was made in 2019 from cotton, silk, wool and velvet.

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum South Hadley, Massachusetts / Contributed photo /

Editor's note: At the time of publication the Katonah Museum of Art will be closed until further notice due to coronavirus concerns. The museum has made the artwork available on their website as a virtual exhibit while it is closed. The exhibit can be viewed online at katonahmuseum.org/exhibitions/virtualexhibitions.



The faces in the life-size portraits look steadily
know them and to create a dialogue. Although

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— lost photos from a bygone era lifted from a digital database — artist Bisa Butler has constructed an identity and narrative for these men, women and children that likely would please them.

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Butler’s first solo museum exhibition, “Bisa Butler: Portraits,” on view at the Katonah Museum of Art (KMA) through June 14, features 25-30 jewel-toned and lush quilted portraits that survey African American identity and culture. The show will later travel to the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) Sept. 5 through Jan. 24 and was organized by KMA’s associate curator Michele Wije and AIC’s associate curator [Michele Wije](#) and AIC’s associate curator [Michele Wije](#). ✕

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The artist trained as a painter but had a revelatory moment during her undergraduate career as she struggled in her painting classes to create art that felt unique. She already had been sewing since she was a child and had been making many of her own clothes since high school. A professor's suggestion to incorporate how she dressed into her art led to her freeing herself from paints and canvas. She put away her brushes and sat down at her sewing machine to use fabrics and quilting to make art. A quilt she made a few years later during a fiber arts class in graduate school was a revelation that quilts could be pictorial, cementing a new direction for her artmaking. Although she uses African cloth in her work, as cloth is a traditional quiltmaker's material, she is also drawn to nontraditional materials like silks, chiffon and shantung. "I was always combining textures and colors that were from different eras and different materials," Butler said.

The marriage of technical intricacy and narrative complexity here will captivate viewers and takes the historic tradition of portraiture in new directions to embody the African American experience.



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“The KMA decided to give Bisa Butler her first solo museum exhibition because we felt that her work is not only visually stunning, but that her transformation of historical photography into evocative, narrative, quilted portraits presents a new and exceptional interpretation of African American identity,” said Wije, adding that audiences will be impressed by the scale and visual splendor of these portraits and that the specific iconography of the fabrics that reveal the stories associated with each of the sitters.

KMA executive director Michael Gitlitz initially was drawn by the powerful and beautiful aesthetics of her work. “Almost immediately it became clear to me that these were more than just portraits, they were complex narratives. I could see that these works fit into the tradition of best narrative portrait statements of the old and modern master,” he said.

Drawing on her own cultural background, Butler often pored over old photographs with her grandmother as a child to learn the stories of her ancestors. Today, she creates portraits of African American life to tell stories and make affirmations about our shared society and identity. She has her own personal iconography but often uses African fabrics from her father’s homeland of Ghana, batiks from Nigeria, and prints from South Africa in making quilts.



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because they are my people. I can imagine their lives because they are me and I am them. I grew up listening to the tales of my elders and I heard about what it felt like to be cold and hungry, but also to have love for one family.”

Butler hopes that when people see the exhibit, they are reaffirmed in the humanity of people and that old-fashioned skills like sewing are still valid. “The humanity that I want to illustrate in my portraits for people who ever had a question or maybe didn’t understand African American people,” she said, adding she wants viewers to see that kinship and similarity. “And African American people who see it will feel affirmation that I see you and I understand you and I want our story to be told to the world.”

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Andrea Valluzzo



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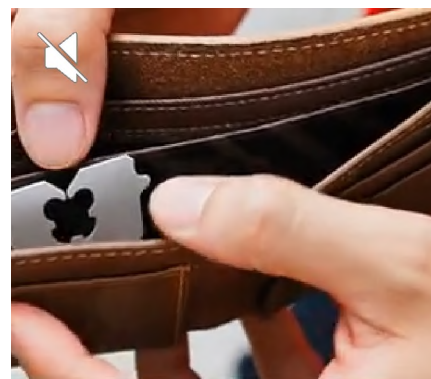
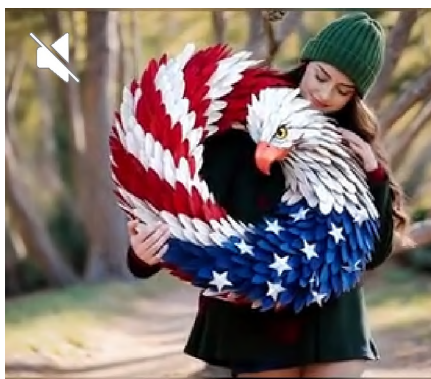
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