

This exhibition is supported in part by a grant from the **Wisconsin Arts Board** with funds from the **State of Wisconsin**, the **Wisconsin Department of Tourism**, and the **National Endowment for the Arts**. Funding was also provided by the **Institute of Museum and Library Services**, **Kohler Trust for the Arts and Education**, **Kohler Foundation, Inc.**, and **Sargento Foods Inc.** The Arts Center thanks its many members for their support of exhibitions and programs through the year. The John Michael Kohler Arts Center is a 501(c)(3) (nonprofit) organization; donations are tax deductible.

The Road Less Traveled 50th anniversary program was conceived by Amy Horst, deputy director for programming. The exhibition series was organized and curated by Arts Center Curator Karen Patterson. Special thanks to Emily Schlemowitz, assistant curator, and Amy Chaloupka, guest curator.

Front Image Cutline:
David Butler with his sculptural bicycle, Patterson, LA, c. 1980. Photo: Richard Gasperi.



JOHN MICHAEL **KOHLER ARTS CENTER**

SHELTER: DAVID BUTLER

+ Leslie Umberger

May 21–September 10, 2017

Born in Saint Mary Parish, David Butler (1898–1997) lived in New Hope, near Patterson, Louisiana. In his early sixties, he suffered a work-related accident and was forced to retire, at which time he began to fill his yard with all manner of cutout sculptures. Using the most basic materials and tools, he crafted wildly imaginative and kinetic sculptures that formed the basis for a “yard show”—an African American tradition common in the South—around his modest home. Colorfully painted and patterned exotic animals, sea creatures, farm animals, and imaginary forms populated his yard. Butler managed to bridge his private environment and the broader art world, first rising to prominence with the landmark 1982 exhibition *Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980* at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC. Only a year later, his yard environment was dismantled when illness required him to move in with family.

SHELTER is one of fifteen exhibitions on view throughout 2017 as part of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center’s fiftieth-anniversary series, THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED. Twenty thought leaders were invited to lend their expertise and provide new insight into the Arts Center’s collection of works created by art-environment builders.

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David Butler house and yard (site view, Patterson, LA), c. 1968–1985. Photo: John Geldersma, c. 1971–74.

Leslie Umberger is curator of folk and self-taught art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Umberger's research interests include artists who navigated their own artistic path, often in oppressive surroundings. She also specializes in artists who transformed their personal realms into comprehensive art environments. Umberger is known for situating lesser-known artists within meaningful cultural contexts and establishing frameworks for their art within the larger fabric of art history.

How were you first introduced to the work of David Butler?

I came across David Butler's work in the 1990s when I was researching, in a general way, "folk art." When I began, I was thinking about tradition-based objects like carved wooden canes and boxes, baskets, and ceramic pieces. But I stumbled across a couple books with really interesting work, particularly *Black Folk Art in America* and *Passionate Visions of the American South*. It was not at all what I thought of as "folk art," but it opened a door and set a thousand questions firing off in my mind. I was overcome with intrigue; I had been involved in art my whole life and had never seen anything like the work that was in those books! I recall being especially transfixed by J.B. Murray and David Butler and the black and white photographs of the artists and their homes and yards, which were clearly extended parts of their artistic practice; their encompassing visions had radically altered the world they lived in. It seemed so rich and rooted, original and intensely powerful and a world apart from studio art. I really never looked back; it revealed a new path to explore, and I've been on it ever since.

How does your own background inform your response to Butler's work?

After attending art school in the late 1980s, I was acutely aware of the dissonance between the art I had always made for myself and the expectations imposed on trained artists—or at least those who wanted to be "successful." So when I discovered artists who had followed their own uninterrupted line of thought for decades on end, I was struck by the intense power of their work. As I moved into art history, I focused on the impacts of training, ethnicity, and social agency.

I have worked as a curator since 1998 and my interest in artist-environment builders has grown through years of work on artists like Butler, Emery Blagdon, Levi Fisher Ames—and all the environment builders that cumulatively shaped my 2007 exhibition and book, *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*. Each artist who reshaped their world in answer to some intense personal need influenced what I came to see as the most critical elements of creativity. As a quilter myself, I think I immediately gravitated to Butler's way of intuitively patching things together, cutting and customizing the various pieces and inventing something larger. Butler's need to feel like he was truly at home where he was and in full control of his domain was a powerful drive, and so clearly related to a larger sphere of homemaking and artistic nest building. He was brilliant at what he did, and yet his story is also sobering when it's viewed in terms of race relations in America.



Unknown (Louisiana), untitled (quilt no. 06), c. 1940; fiber; 84 x 86 in. Collection of Corrine Riley.



David Butler house (site view, small window screen, Patterson, LA). Photo: Richard Gasperi, c. 1980–1989.

Has working on this exhibition changed or expanded your notions about what you do?

Butler has been in my head for a number of years now. And quilts have been too, but the two really came together for me when I saw Corrine Riley's collection several years ago. I was familiar with African American strip quilts and housetop patterns, but had not seen so many examples together in one place. The exception to that was the Gee's Bend show (2002) at the Whitney Museum of American Art—and that exhibition was truly a display of immense visual power. But Gee's Bend, Georgia, is fairly isolated, and that project really emphasized the insularity of that locale and group. When I saw Corrine's collection, it was much more evident that improvisation and visual syncopation signified something broader, deeper, and totally interconnected. The art historian Richard J. Powell wrote, "the blues whips up a panorama of extra-musical associations that, whether one chooses to acknowledge them or not, situate it in Afro-American life of this century," and those quilts, seen together, whipped up a similar awareness, an extra-visual sensation of what Powell termed the "blues aesthetic." Seeing African American quilts from all over—Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, many states across the South and Midwest—made the far-reaching tentacles of this tradition absolutely evident. The colors, patterns, and overall aesthetic choices are symbolic abstractions of the need for protection and shelter in a harsh world—the relationships between Butler's sculptures and vernacular quilts from the black community are powerful, and this opportunity to bring them together for deeper consideration is so important.

¹Richard J. Powell "The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism," in *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, D.C., Washington Project for the Arts, 1989); in this essay Powell was referring to the twentieth century.