Scrap-Patchwork Shelter
+ By Leslie Umberger

David Butler remade the world around him through an array of hammered, cut, bent, painted, and assembled sculptural works that were simultaneously inventive, narrative, aesthetically surprising, and protective. His project was highly personal, yet common threads connect it to an expanse of African American art that pieces together fragments of the available world to meaningfully reshape the surrounding world. The circumstances that drove Butler’s embellished space were both personal and cultural.

Butler was born in 1898 in Good Hope, Louisiana, along the Mississippi River just outside New Orleans. His father was a carpenter and his mother a Baptist missionary, and Butler carried forward both an ability to craft things with his hands and a strong belief in the spiritual world. This pairing of traits would bloom into a purposefully embellished yard and home beginning in the late 1960s. Butler’s art is deeply attached to his identity as an African American born in the Deep South in the late nineteenth century. His childhood was mired in poverty, which truncated his education and made frugality a mandate. He learned to make the things he needed and look to the heavens when earthly challenges seemed insurmountable.

In the unpredictable and harsh world of Jim Crow segregation, African Americans had limited options for staying healthy and safe. In parts of the South, these oppressive realities dragged on well past the Civil Rights movement.

Beginning with the first slaves forced to leave African religions behind and adopt Christianity, the imposed religion has often been used as a framework on which to attach veiled beliefs and worldviews. In America, African folkways and religions flowed into the waters of that landscape; they commingled and flourished, even if largely under the surface. Butler’s garden became a prime example of these amalgamated beliefs and practices, often depicting Biblical scenes even as the subtext of his installation revealed deeper beliefs about charmed and protective spaces. Butler’s feeling of vulnerability became acute after he suffered a head injury at work and could no longer earn a living. When his wife died, his fragile circumstance became still more pronounced and his overt need to feel protected intensified. Between 1968 and 1985, Butler transformed his home and yard from something plain and untended into a scintillating, activated space that he believed repelled evil spirits.

The garden Butler made primarily from cut and pounded roofing tin was durable; it had to be to withstand the intense heat and moisture of the bayou region. His sculptures were planted in the ground throughout the yard and attached to the exterior of the house, particularly as window coverings that let the sunlight slink through their cutout gaps. Butler’s figures whimsically meld human and animal forms and his loosely narrative scenes never followed one clear thread but seemed to be part Bible story, part folktale, and part
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Her wild dream. His go-to style of painted stripes, polka dots, and stars lent the color and beauty that completed the recipe. The painted metal scraps, conjoined with the discarded light bulbs, plastic toys, bicycle reflectors, twist ties, and other forlorn bits and pieces, carried with them the story of their arduous journey in southern Louisiana and metaphorically mirrored that of their maker. The tiered layers, joined parts, and cutout shapes created an animated array as wind and light toyed with his installation. What Butler created was a live-in amulet, a shelter from things uncontrollable. His project was perfectly connected to the African American tradition of yard shows that aim to ward off evil spirits with a space that is lively, bright, and dizzying.

The idea of protection and shelter is central to countless African American vernacular forms, but perhaps nowhere is the connection more evident than in the improvisational quilts made by African American women across the South. The quilt tradition is both age-old and bedrock. The need for protection and warmth while sleeping is universal, and the task of creating bedding for homes in the United States has most commonly fallen to women. From the early years of slavery through the Great Depression and after, fabric was valuable. While it may seem an oversimplification to say that quilts made from large swaths of matched, high quality fabric speak of well-to-do households and leisure time—while quilts made from scraps tell a different story—there is truth to the notion that an aesthetic entailing astonishing, fragmented color and pattern was rooted in need-based salvage. These are not quilts in which tiny and perfect stitches evidence quality. They are more commonly stitched with strong thread in large, utilitarian stitches meant to bind and last. Improvisational quilts don’t embody a romantic, sentimentally bright and simple American home life—they are icons of grit and survival. Mary Lee Bendolf, a quilter from Gee’s Bend, explained, “A woman made utility quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn’t freeze, and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn’t break.”

On plantations some slaves would have been trained to make quilts for the white family in the traditional Anglo-American styles. What they made for their own homes, however, varied in part because of time constraints and available materials, but also to clearly define a different aesthetic. Salvaged fragments of fabrics from family members were essentially scrapbooked in the quilts they became, and pattern choices and color combinations were simultaneously unique to the maker and unifying for the larger African American community. The patched patterns are often visually akin to African strip weaves and reflect a predilection for optically pulsating triangle patterns. Art historian Maude Southwell Wahlman has noted, “Similar designs in African quilted textiles and African American quilts might be coincidental, due to the technical process of piecing that reduces cloth to geometric shapes—squares and triangles. All of these techniques—piecing, applique, and quilting—were known in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States; yet some African American quilts are profoundly different from European or Anglo-American quilts. The difference lies in historically dissimilar aesthetic principles, with both technical and religious dimensions.”

The now well-known quilts by makers in Gee’s Bend, Alabama, convey a great deal about a tightly knit folk
Culture and the trajectories of communal tradition in a relatively isolated rural community in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Corrine Riley formed a sizable and important collection of African American quilts that, conversely, span the entire South and lower Midwest over the same date range. She began collecting in the 1970s, when African American quilts were rarely recognized or valued beyond the communities that produced them, and the identities of their makers were rarely preserved in tandem with the object. Riley took road trips in search of these textiles and made notes about interesting features as well as where a quilt was found. She recognized that their worn, fragile condition and lost stories were an inherent part of their journey and that bringing them together to testify to their unity was part of hers.

The quilts in Riley’s collection evidence that the aesthetics, patterns, materials, and structural styles seen in the Gee’s Bend quilts extend to a broad African American community, and the materials, methods, and styles speak to a widespread culture that indeed endured and salvaged, but also defiantly reshaped the world to declare and demarcate personal domain. John Michael Vlach related this very same aesthetic to blues music, with the bending of notes, the interplay of order and freedom, and endlessly flexible composition, “just as blues singers will vary the length of their stanzas according to how they feel at the moment.” And like Butler’s scrap-patchwork sculptures, these quilts are both durable and beautiful. They affirm an overarching aesthetic of visual syncopation with patterns that are abruptly broken or marked by dramatic color shifts. They employ light and shadow, but with contrasting fabrics rather than with form and space.

The pinwheel pattern that crops up in many improvisational quilts may be the most overtly linked to Butler’s aesthetic, as he literally attached small pinwheel shapes and propellers to some of his works, where they spun in the wind. In fabric, the motion is entirely visual, yet the effect of contrasting triangles flowing around a center axis gives a strong sense of spinning or leaves fluttering in the wind.

The pattern of the X is another favorite; it is both graphically powerful and symbolic. Its connections are wide-ranging but include the Christian cross, the Kongo cosmogram—and perhaps most significantly—the crossroads, which in both folklore and some religions represents a liminal space or gateway between the spiritual and physical realm and a place for making important choices. African American folk practices such as conjure and hoodoo maintain that one might barter with the devil in dark hours at the crossroads. In Haitian voudou and Louisiana voodoo, Papa Legba is the spirit who guards the crossroads gateway and may open or close the door to the spiritual realm. Legba has other names in the many polytheistic, diasporic African religions, but it is some iteration of him that one must petition for help in the event of special problems.

Art historian Robert Farris Thompson notes that crossroads remains “an indelible concept in the Kongo-Atlantic world, as the point of intersection between the ancestors and the living.” Farris-Thomson and Africanist Wyatt MacGaffey have detailed the Kongo cruciform, or cosmogram as a key ideographic symbol.
in the West African Kongo culture, and one that survived in America. The symbol, made as an X or + within a circle, square, or diamond, marks the four points of the sun as it traverses the physical and spiritual worlds (sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight) and represents an everlasting cycle of life. In Christianity, the cross can both engage the Holy Spirit as a divine advocate and ward off the devil. In *Nativity*, Butler made the holy star in the shape of an X, or cross. The multifaceted and ambiguous form of the X lends it great appeal and even at its most simple, it denotes a special place or reads as a powerful barrier. In both of these quilts the maker summons the X shape from a storm of bits and pieces—colors colliding and conjoining into a pattern that is both elusive and adamant.

Some of the improvisational quilts Riley gathered have riotous patterns of fragmented color and dizzying patterns, while others are somber with large blocks of wool suiting or softened corduroy. The dark patches and bright moments both convey what Amiri Baraka has called “the Blues aesthetic,” or creative works expressing ongoing struggle and persistence. Seen together, Butler’s sculptures and African American improvisational quilts bolster and enrich our understanding of an aesthetic that is adaptive, dynamic, and assertive. These objects are kindred as they mark the creative act as a negotiation with an uncontrollable world and an inherent desire to employ aesthetics towards a richer and more secure-feeling place in the world. They indicate the transformation of personal places into realms of self-determination, physical safety, and spiritual salvation.

1 Art historian Maude Southwell Wahlman notes that in Africa, men are often the primary textile artists, but that in America, American plantation owners adhered to the European system of labor division and the tradition thus shifted that work to women. Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs & Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts* (Atlanta, Georgia: Tinwood Books, 2001), 25.


3 Wahlman, 26.

