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.
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 paths, often in oppressive circumstances. She also specializes in artists who transformed their personal realms into comprehensive art environments. Umberger is known for situating lesser-known artists within meaningful 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 sat a thousand questions firing off in my mind. I was overcome with intrigue; I had been involved in 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. It was truly a display of immense visual power. But Gee’s Bend, Georgia, is fairly isolated, and that project was the Gee’s Bend show (2002) at the Whitney Museum of American Art—and that exhibition included 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. Butler’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 really emphasized the insularity of that locale and group. 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. Butler’s Bend, Georgia, is fairly isolated, and that project really emphasized the insularity of that locale and group. When I saw Corrine Riley’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.

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. Butler’s Bend, Georgia, is fairly isolated, and that project really emphasized the insularity of that locale and group. When I saw Corrine Riley’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.