

Project Space

# Renee Butler: TRAVELIN' LIGHT



**PROJECT • SPACE**

American University Museum



Renee Butler:  
TRAVELIN'  
LIGHT

Jack Rasmussen, Curator  
June 15 – August 11, 2024



*Ziploc® Bags Triangle Film Silver Two*, 2021. Film, paper and plastic, 60 x 48 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

# Foreword

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The American University Museum is delighted to present *Renee Butler: Travelin' Light*, an exhibition so representative of the art of her time in Washington and, at the same time, so original! It is appropriate for her showing to be in our Project Space, dedicated as it is to presenting art in a wider, interdisciplinary context.

Butler's approach to art-making was born of her long and intimate association with the artists of the Washington Color School. Beginning as a student of second-generation Color School artists Anne Truitt and Sam Gilliam, Renee worked with, collected, and advocated for the likes of Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Gene Davis. These artists influenced Butler's generation to move beyond abstract expressionism and minimalism and push against conventional artistic boundaries.

Fundamental to Butler's art is her reconsideration of the relationship between painting and sculpture. Sam Gilliam's dynamic, draped canvases liberated Butler from the constraints of the stretcher, while Anne Truitt's minimalist sculptures embody a poetic simplicity that resonated with Butler's intuitive emotional structures. Ken Noland's vibrant palette, Morris Louis's ethereal beauty, and Gene Davis's pulsing, rhythmic compositions can all be found in Butler's stunning work.

And yet, Butler's art is her own, from her innovative use of materials to the imagery captured in her photographs "framed" in Ziploc® bags and suspended in grids. She has never stopped pushing against boundaries or upsetting expectations. Hers is a spirit that sets Washington apart from the steady drumbeat of art history. She and her partner, the painter Joe White, are intent on making their own.

Jack Rasmussen  
C. Nicholas Keating and Carleen B. Keating Director  
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center  
Washington, DC

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*Head Shots Three*, 2022. Photographic prints and plastic, 24 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

# Renee Butler: Travelin' Light

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By Jean Lawlor Cohen

Renee Butler fears no material. Years ago, at the University of Maryland, she worked with antique lace in Anne Truitt's course and with a parachute in Sam Gilliam's. Those teachers became mentors and friends, and she gladly acknowledges their influence surfacing still in the formats, experimentation, and rigor of her career.

Early on at Yaddo and MacDowell, Butler strung open spaces with gauze, cheesecloth and synthetic quartz crystals, initiating a lifelong practice of suspension. Later, for performance pieces, she appropriated theater gels now claimed for geometric "floaters." More recently, after a hurricane shattered her Miami apartment window, she imbedded constructions with shards of glass.

But now she adopts an even more surprising material—the Ziploc®! This dutiful product allows for transparency, preservation, subtle framing and the serial configuration of albums that, thanks to silver paper, reflect the passing scene. The precedent for these recent "tapestries"? Butler's large-scale installation *Faces*, ascending rows of actual T-shirts silkscreened with Renaissance portraits that she photographed at the National Gallery.

Despite its rigidity, the grid allows for whimsy in Butler's placement of elements—her own photos, the theater gels she scissors, the textiles she salvages. She credits her strong verticals and horizontals to the geometry of Washington Color School artists like Noland, Downing, and Louis. But she relates her content to synthetic cubism—the interaction of planes, the illusion of depth beyond surfaces. She identifies this as a central paradox, "flat static imagery on changing mirror space." For viewers, the grid requires a transit of random paths, a brief pause at dimmed or empty panels, even a stepping back to see some cinematic passages whole.

Butler delights in the memory of her father who draped the windows of his fabric store with textiles. He would be amused now by a daughter who suspends her pattern-rich "scrim" on gallery walls.



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*Cut-Out of Africa 2 (detail), 2022.*



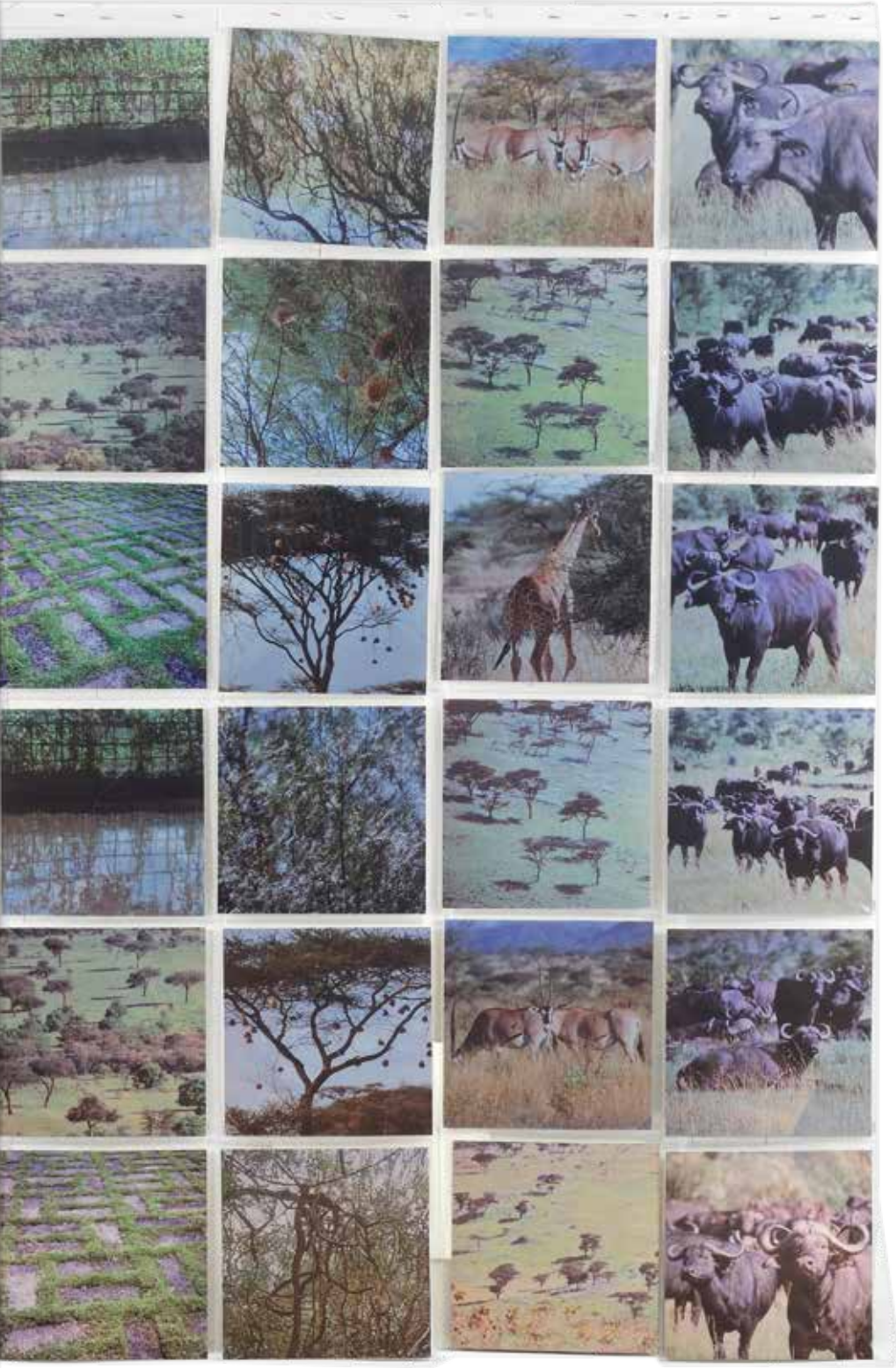
## OUT OF AFRICA

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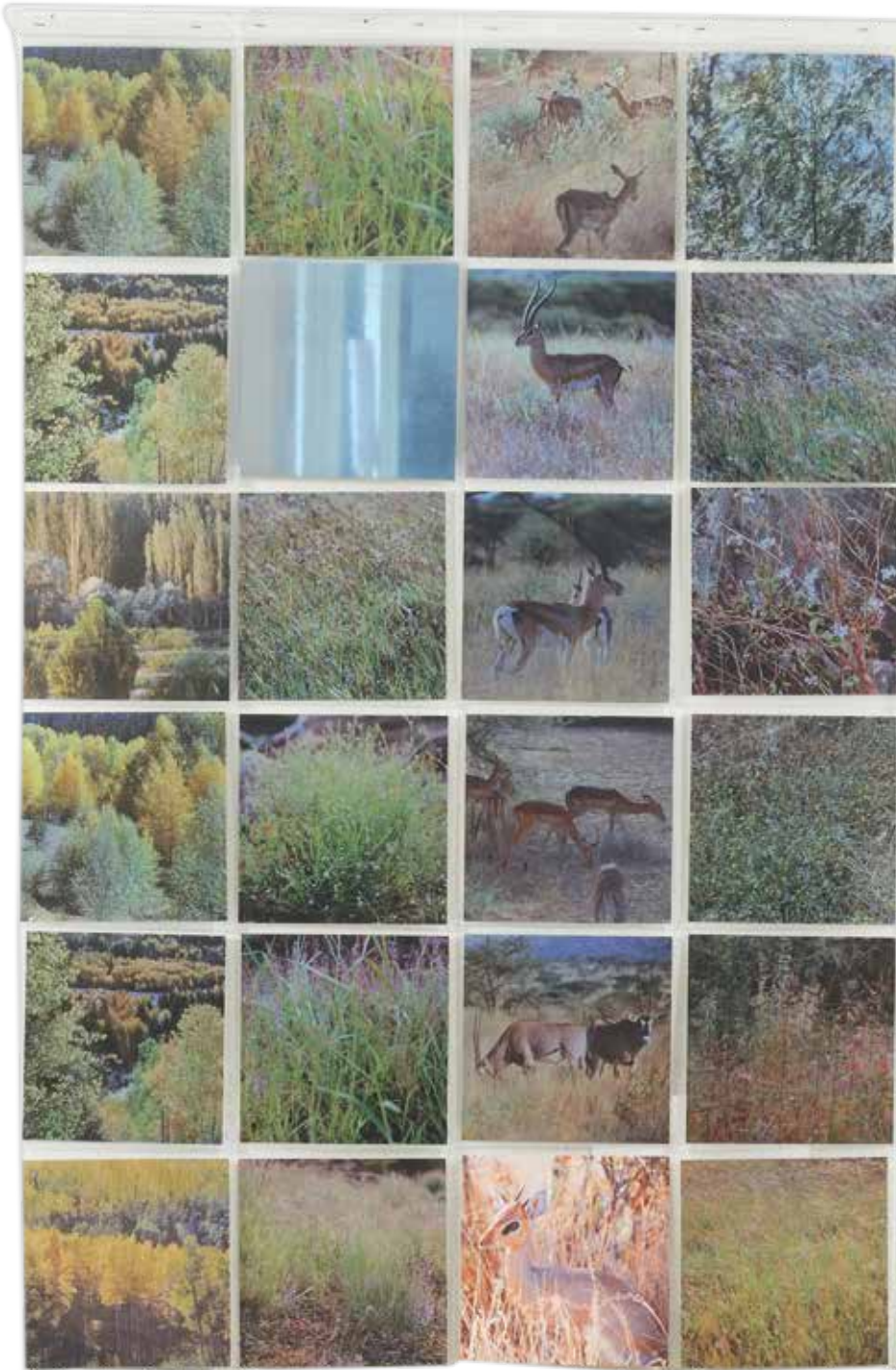
Like the avant-garde music that Butler recorded for performances, her safari shoots have a dramatic drumbeat progression without an obvious structure. Animals advance and retreat, pose alert and still. As images morph through variants and appear in no logical order or hierarchy, they become a montage of multiple viewpoints, a democracy of glimpses. Like her large-scale, years-ago installations of light, projection, and sound, these too can be experienced as “resonant environments.”

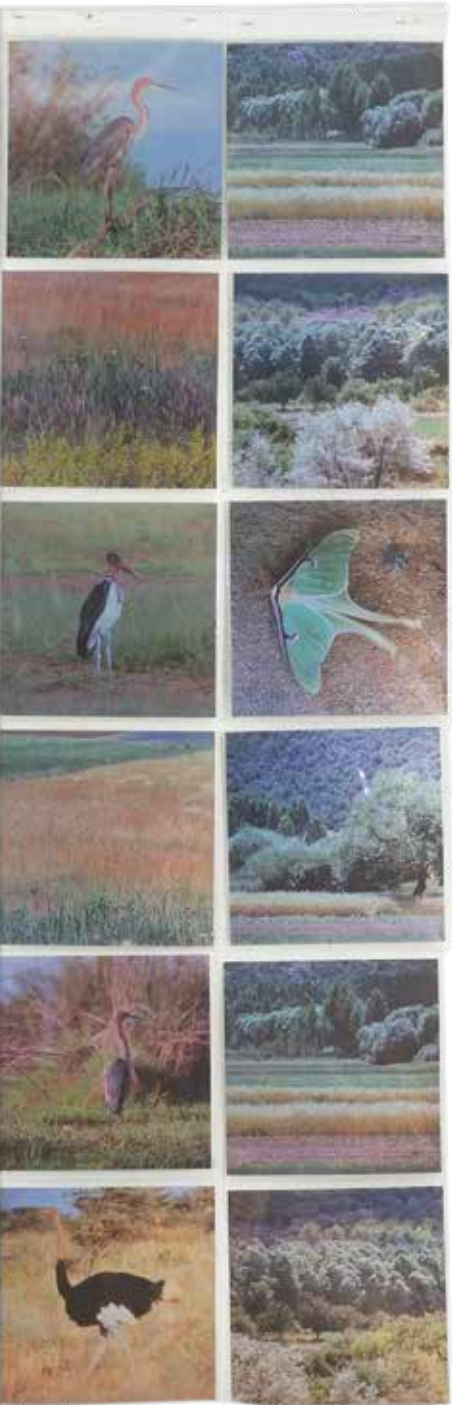
*Out of Africa 4*, 2020. Photographic prints and plastic, 60 x 50 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



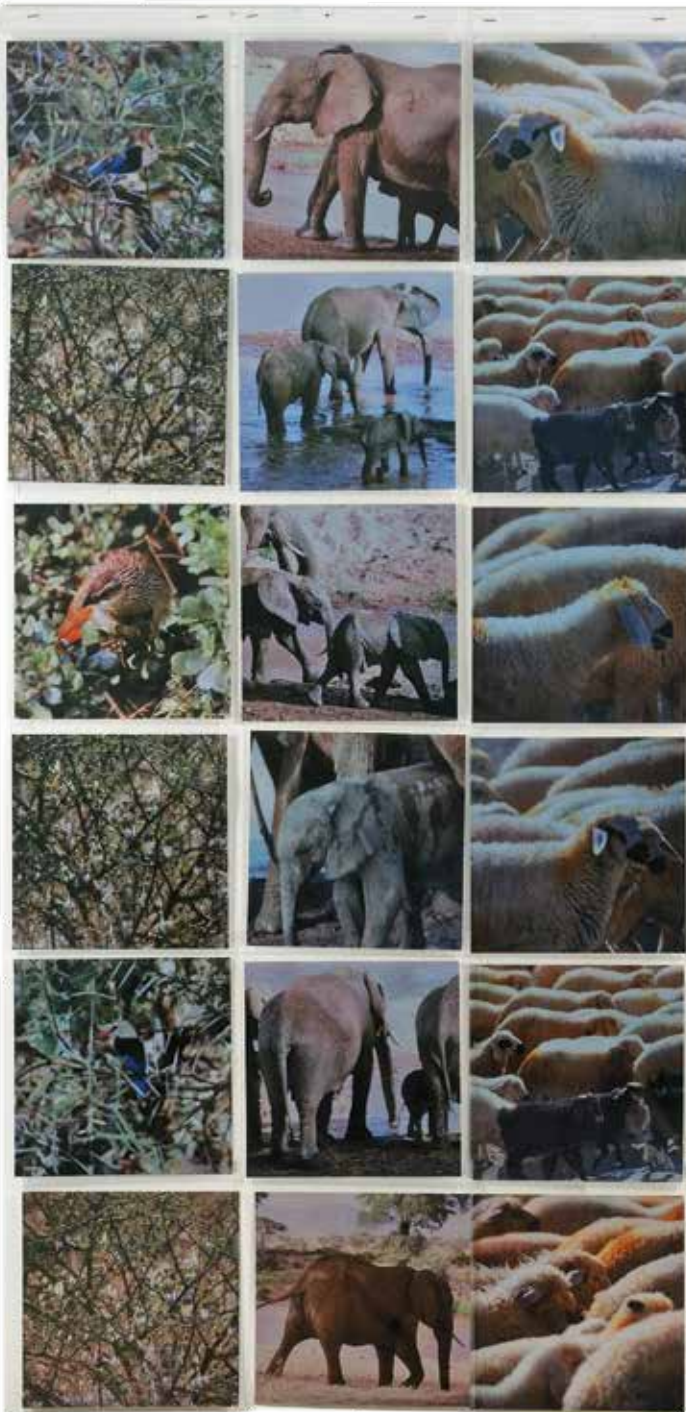


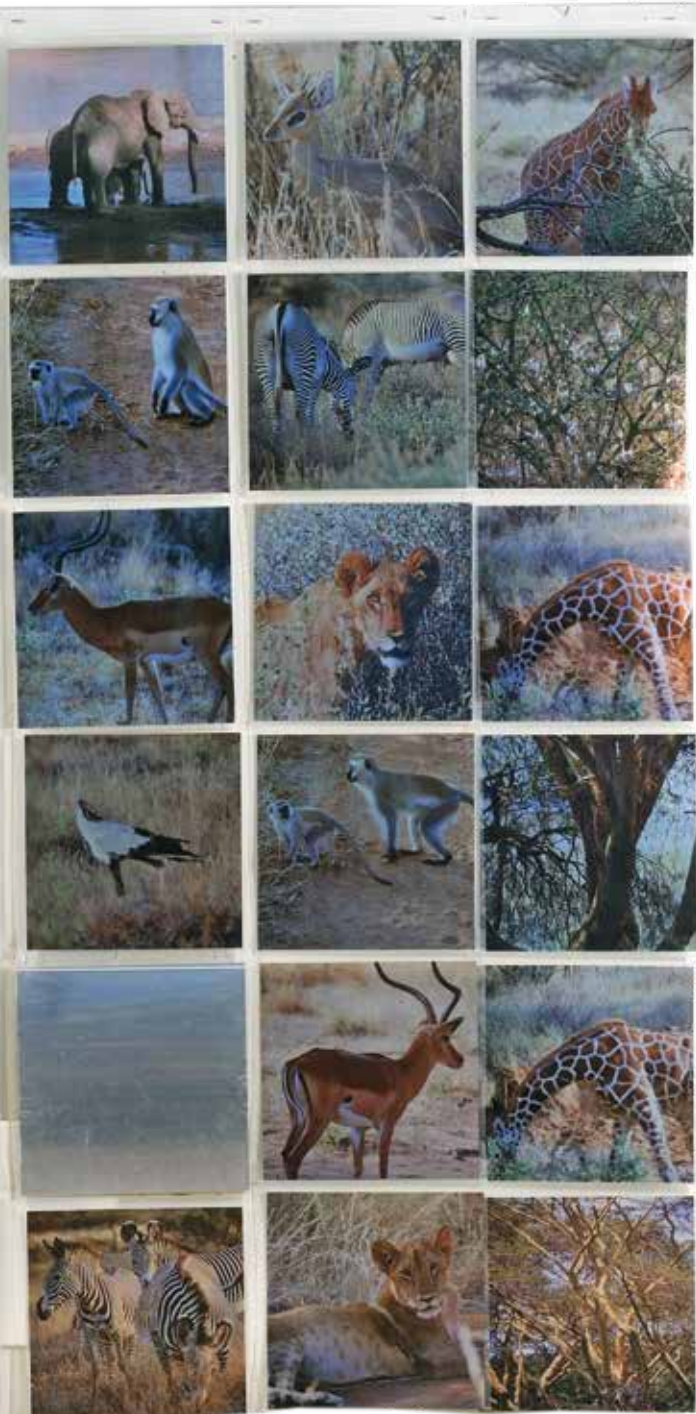
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*Out of Africa 1*, 2020. Photographic prints and plastic, 60 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley





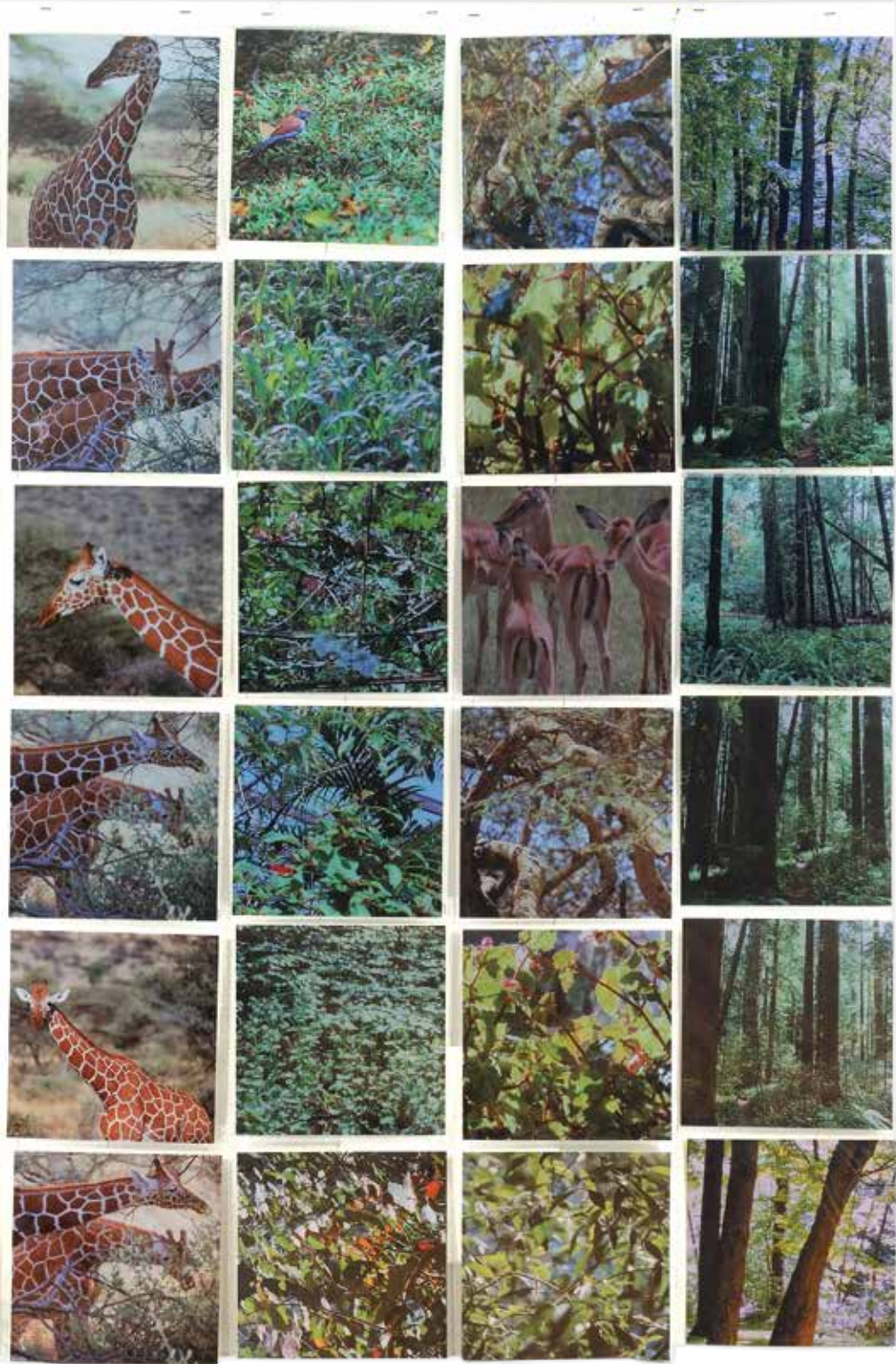
13

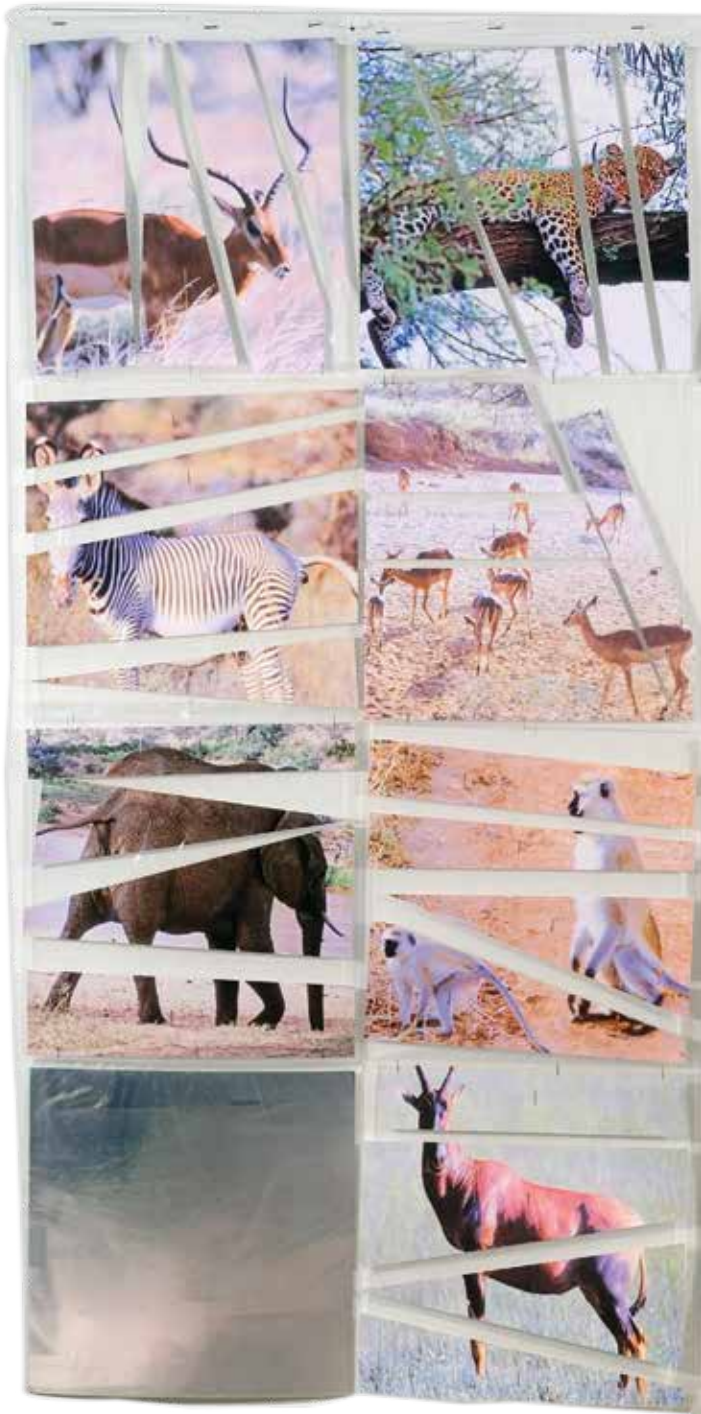
*Out of Africa 2*, 2022. Photographic prints and plastic, 60 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley

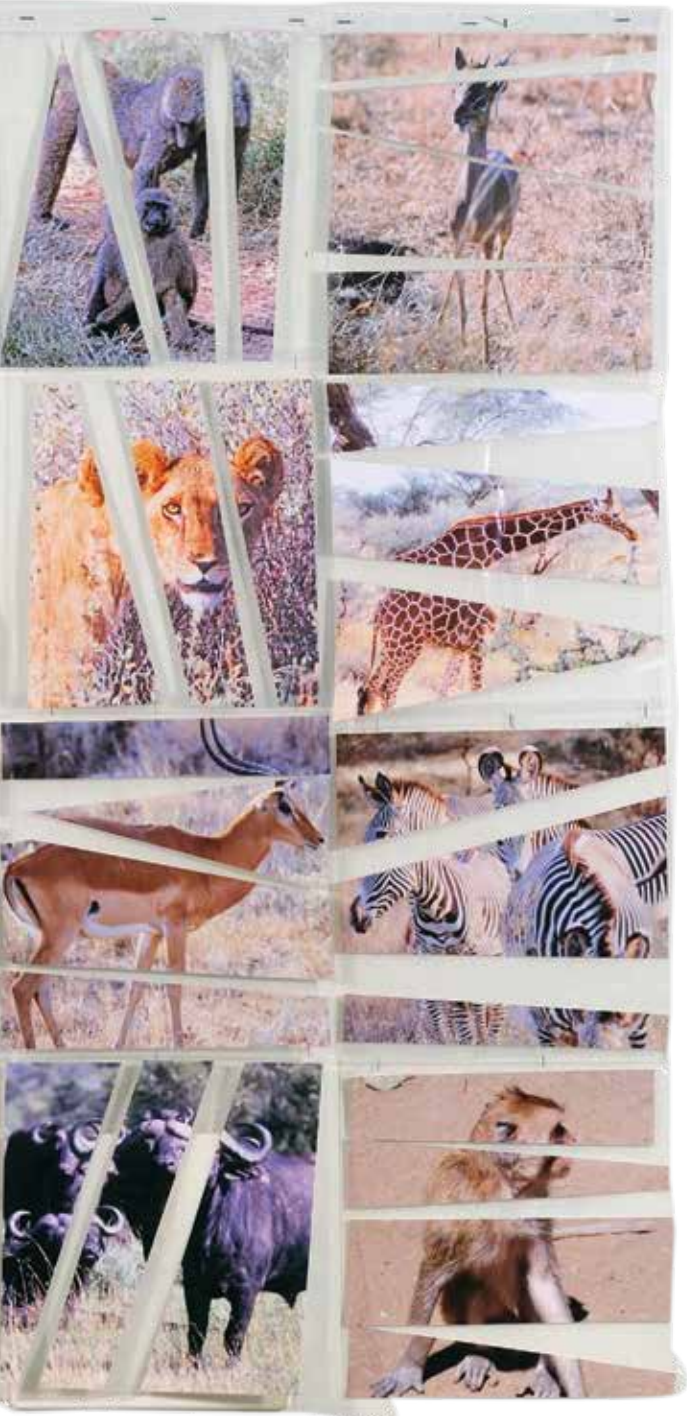


*Out of Africa 5*, 2020. Photographic prints and plastic, 60 x 50 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley







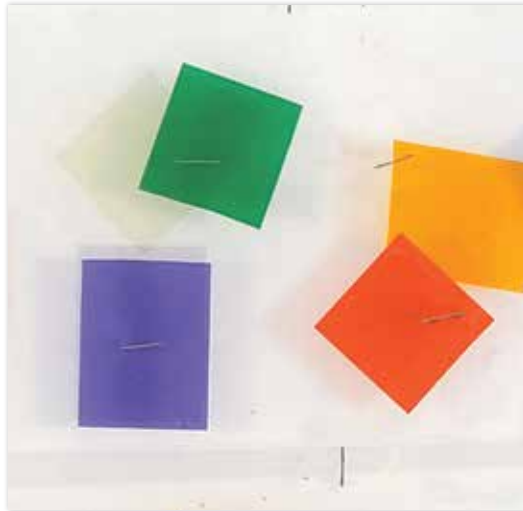


*Cut-Out of Africa 2*, 2022. Photographic prints and plastic, 48 x 48 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley

## THE NONOBJECTIVES

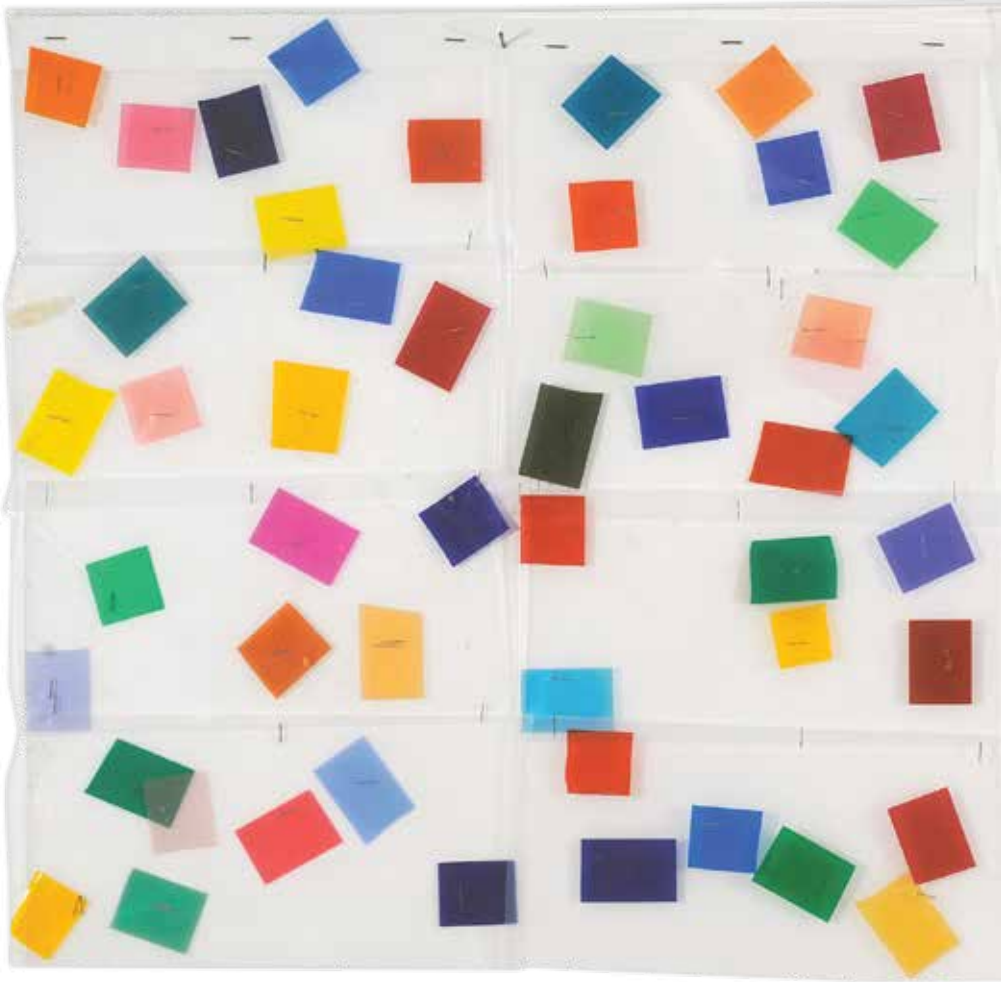
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Despite her fascination with what a camera sees, Butler brings a formalist's eye to the movement of water and sky. In *Atmosphere* (page 54), she shoots from her beachside balcony, claiming only that view's shimmering details. In *Abstraction/*  
18 *Distractions*, *Altering Emptiness*, and *Fair and Square*, she whimsically scatters her hard-edge fragments but denies any fine-art seriousness with an overlay of metal staples.



*Fair and Square* (detail), 2024.

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*Fair and Square*, 2024. Shaped theater gels and plastic, 22 x 48 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley







*Altering Emptiness, 2024.*  
Shaped theater gels and plastic, 20 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



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*Abstraction/Distractions*, 2024. Shaped theater gels and plastic, 29 x 85 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley

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*Quilt 4* (detail), 2022.

## ONCE UPON A TIME

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More “discomforter” than comforter, this work simulates or parodies a quilt, here useless without seams. Its title signals a nostalgic tale, but no fantasy or romance can be read in this colonnade of fabrics. There may be humor, however, in the offhand homage her swatches pay to Color School stripes and wallpaper.

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*Once Upon a Time...*, 2023. Antique fabrics and plastic, 44 x 88 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley

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*Quilt 4*, 2022. Antique fabrics, paper and plastic, 60 x 84 in.  
Courtesy of the artist





*Quilt Space*, 2022. Antique fabrics, photographic prints and plastic, 44 x 51 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

## SHELF LIFE

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Perceived at first as homage to western world abundance, the series gradually shifts toward pop art tapestry. Serial line-ups tease the notion that an encyclopedia of variants will somehow allow an essential nature to emerge. The series title serves as cautionary tale, reminding that objects spoil, nature decomposes, and transience is inevitable.



*Mickey Mouse (detail), 2023.*

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*Shelf Life 1*, 2023. Photographic prints and plastic, 32 x 84 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley

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*Shelf Life 3*, 2023. Photographic prints and plastic, 30 x 27 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



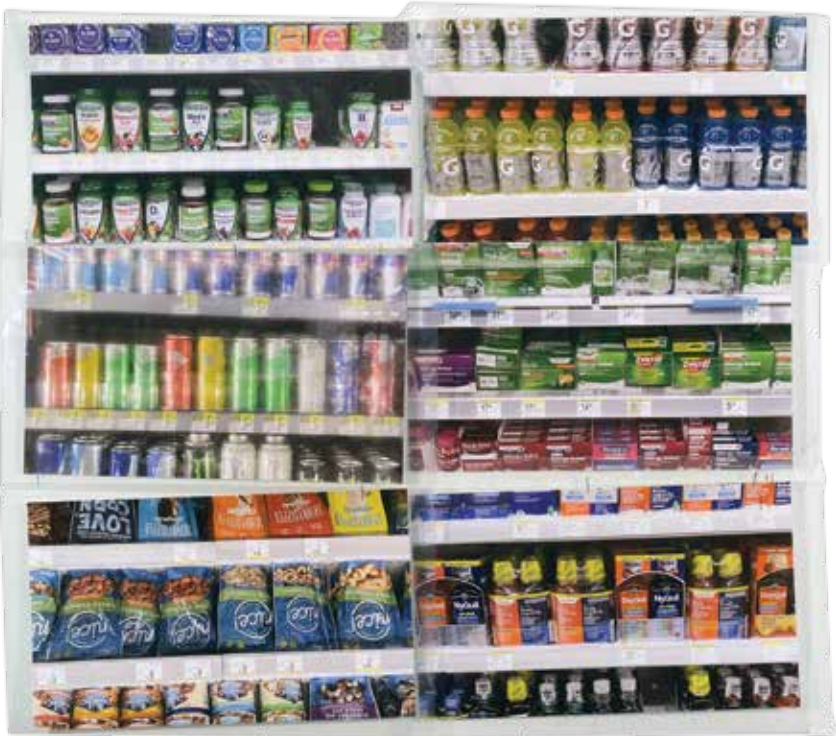
*Shelf Life 4*, 2023. Photographic prints and plastic, 23 x 26 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



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*Shelf Life*, 2023. 42 x 48 in. Photographic prints and plastic, 27 x 30 in.  
Courtesy of the artist





*Shelf Life 5*, 2023. Photographic prints and plastic, 23 x 26 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



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*Mickey Mouse*, 2023. Photographic prints and plastic, 32 x 72 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

## GRASS FLOWERS

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This array of close-ups documents the minimalist beauty of florets and stem systems. Its images of contained “roadside” wildness recall the brushstrokes of expressionism, at least until that singleton of Queen Anne’s Lace in *Grass Flowers Three* pulls all back from abstraction.



*Grass Flowers Three* (detail), 2021.



*Grass Flowers One*, 2021. Photographic prints and plastic, 36 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

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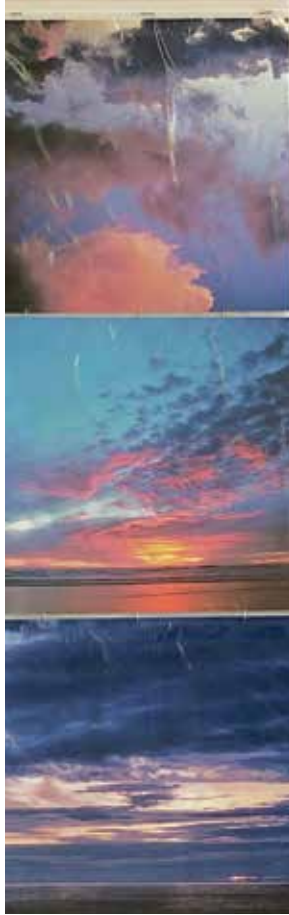


*Grass Flowers Two*, 2021. Photographic prints and plastic, 36 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



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*Grass Flowers Three*, 2021. Photographic prints and plastic, 48 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



*Cloud Color* (detail), 2021.

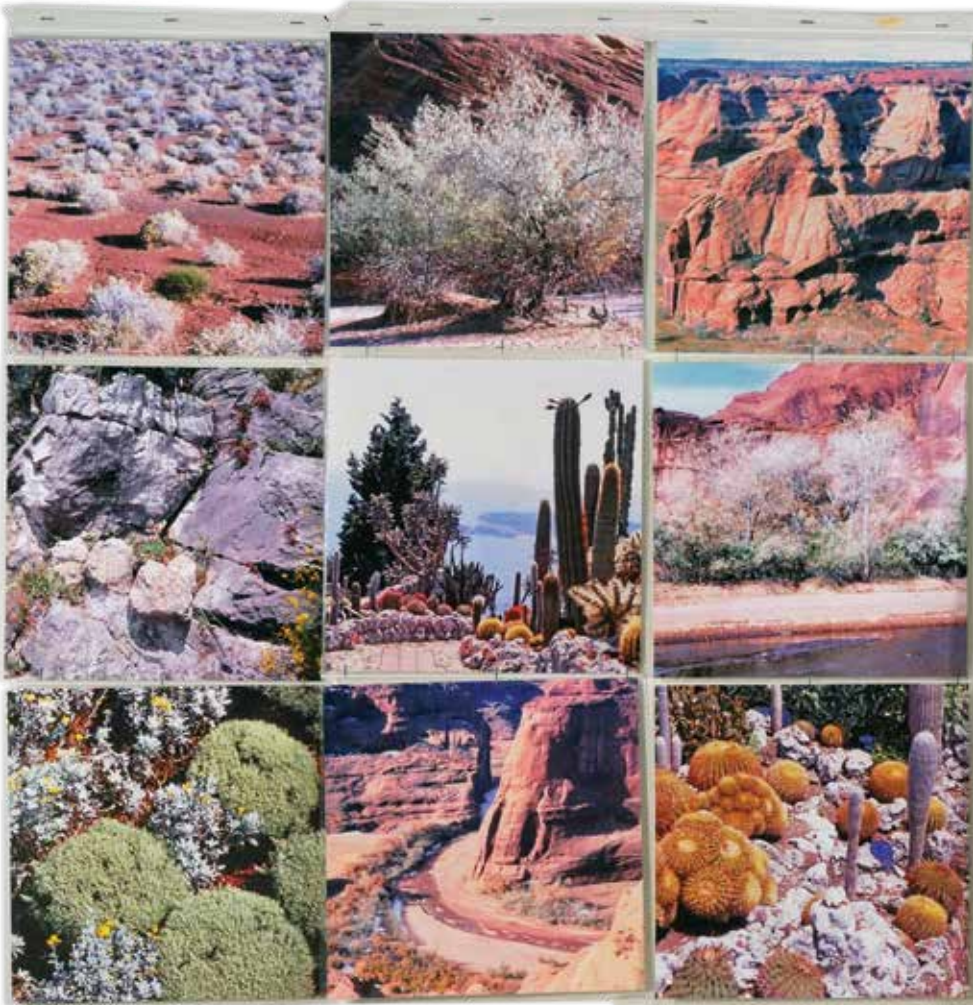


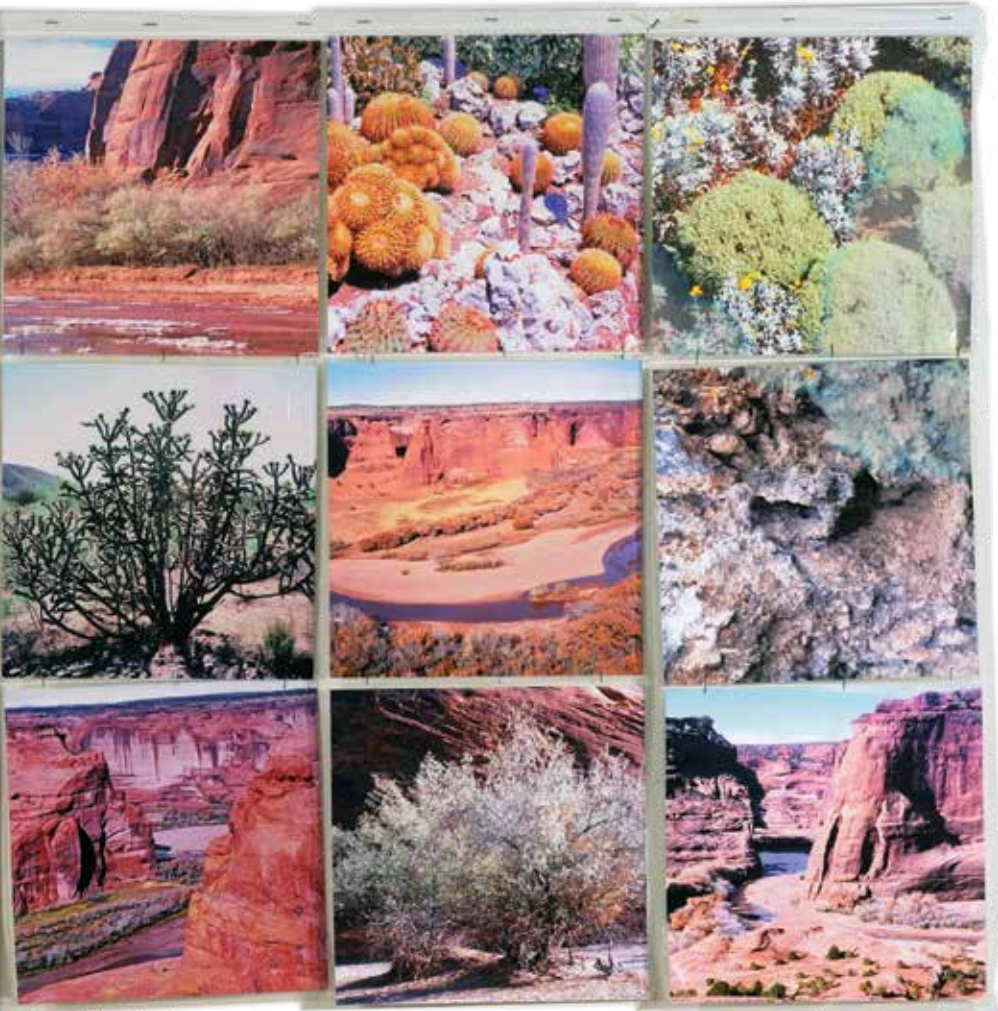
## TRAVELIN' LIGHT

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In Butler's large installations, she calls upon projected light to infuse the pendant materials. In her photos, however, natural illumination determines patterns and erratic rhythms. The sun at break of day or the fiery edge of a lava flow provides a latter-day book of hours.

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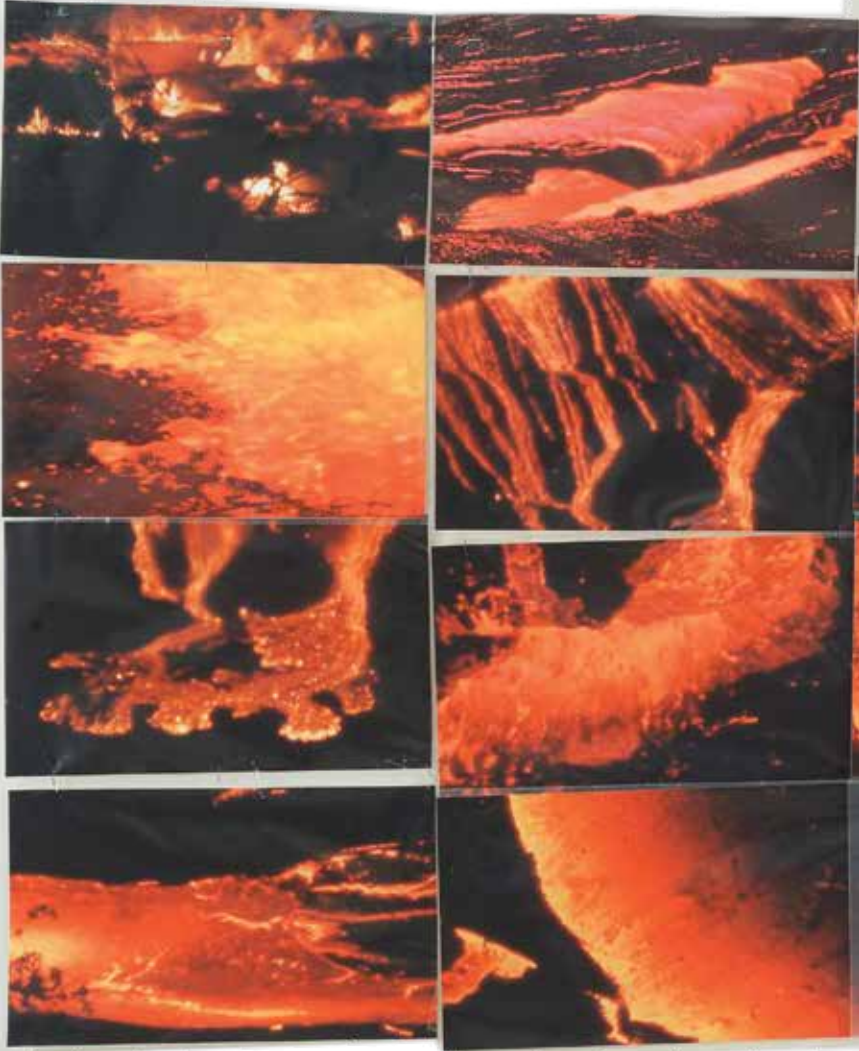


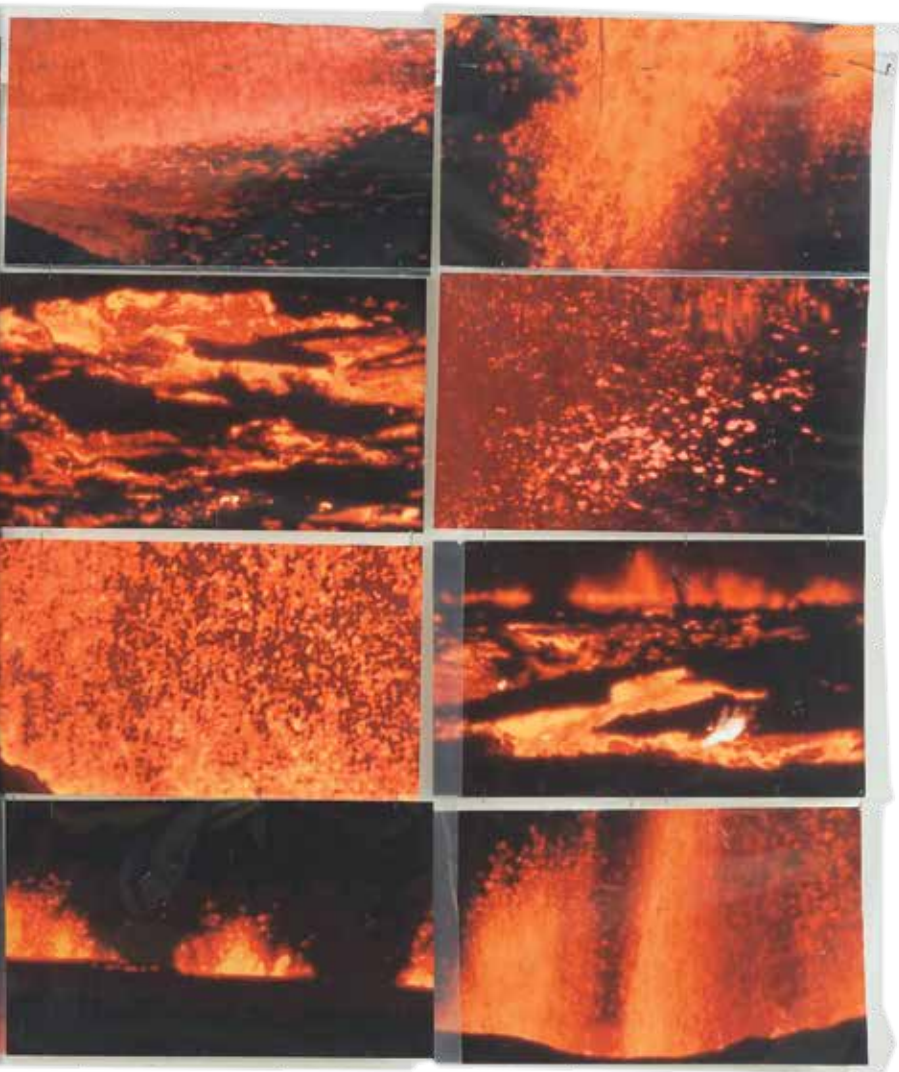
*Travelin' Light 4*, 2021. Photographic prints and plastic, 36 x 72 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



*Sunrise, 2020.*  
Photographic prints and plastic, 60 X 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley





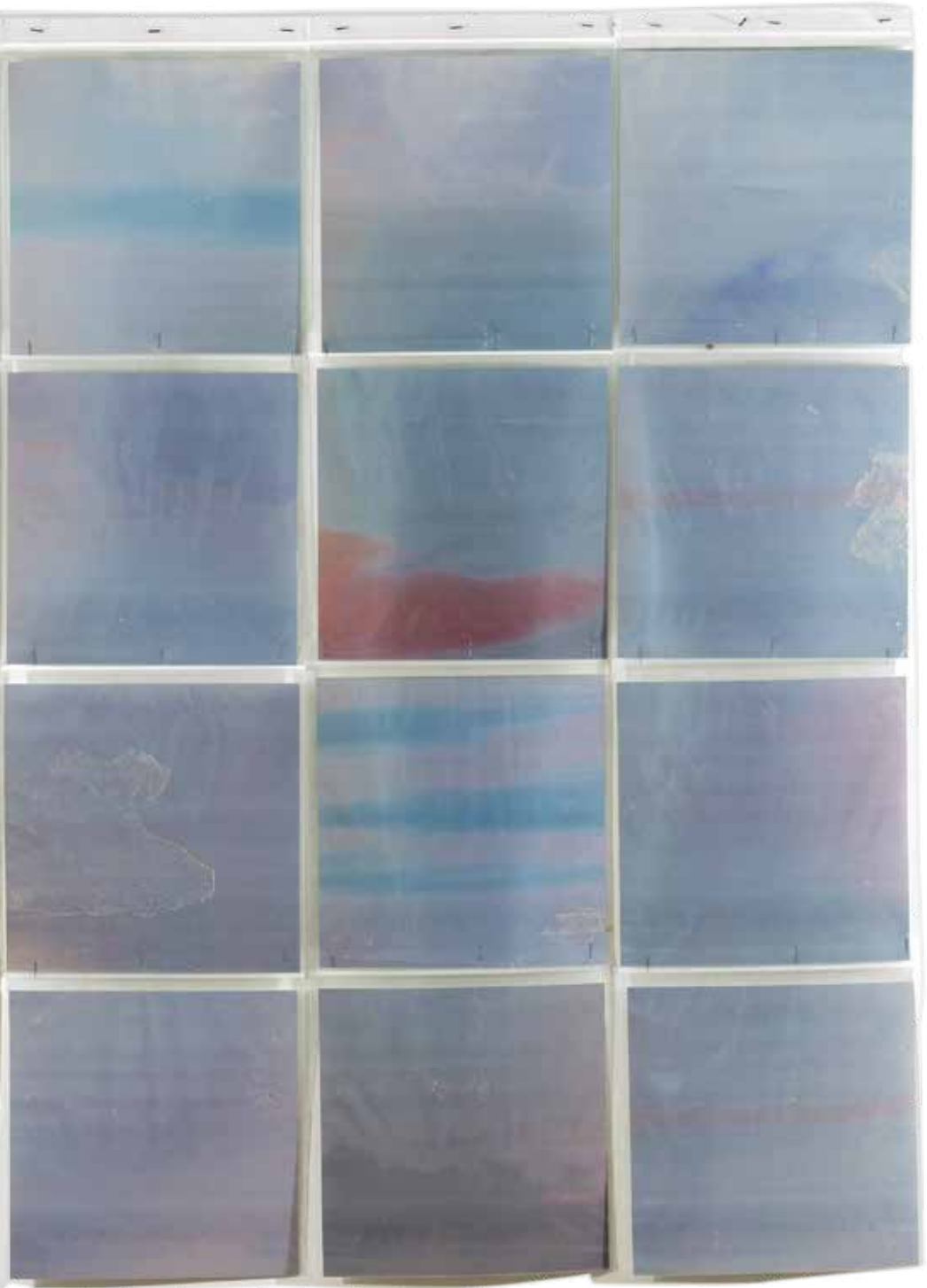


*Travelin' Light 2*, 2022. Photographic prints and plastic, 31 x 53 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



*Atmosphere 4*, 2020. Photographic prints and plastic, 40 x 40 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley









*Cloud Color*, 2021.  
Photographic prints and plastic, 39 x 52 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

# QUOTES



Quotes One, 2021. Paper and plastic, 56 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



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Quotes Two, 2021. Paper and plastic, 56 x 36 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

# RECEIPTS AND COSMOS



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*Receipts and Cosmos*, 2021. Photographic prints, paper and plastic 30 x 40 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

## SHOW BUSINESS

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*Show Business 2022*, Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

## DAILY VIEWS

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*Daily Views 7-DC (detail), 2022.*





*Daily Views 2-Decoplage*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 84 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Daily Views 1-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

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*Daily Views 2-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Daily Views 3-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Daily Views 4-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Daily Views 6-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

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*Daily Views 7-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Daily Views 8-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Daily Views 9-DC*, 2022. Photographic prints, paper and plastic, 48 x 60 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

## JEW'S NEWS

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*Jews News Two, 2023. Paper, string and plastic, 52 x 62 in.  
Courtesy of the artist*



*Jews News B*, 2023. Paper and tape, 48 x 32 in.



*Jews News D*, 2023. Paper and tape, 48 x 32 in.



*Jews News G*, 2023. Paper and tape, 48 x 32 in.  
All courtesy of the artist

## HEAD SHOTS

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*Head Shots One*, 2022. Photographic prints and plastic, 60 x 72 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



*Head Shots Two*, 2022. Photographic prints and plastic, 60 x 72 in.  
Courtesy of the artist



## About the Artist

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Renee Butler received a B.A. in art history from the University of Maryland in 1977, having taken studio courses there from Anne Truitt and Sam Gilliam. In the early 1980s, she was awarded art colony fellowships from Yaddo, the Karolyi Foundation, MacDowell, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She received grants from the DC Commission for the Arts, the InterArts Program of the NEA, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Pennsylvania Council on the Art Interdisciplinary Program, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and the Fairfax Council of the Arts. In the late 1980s, she worked with the Marilyn DeReggi Arts Ensemble creating stage set/installations for new music composers working with John Cage and Virgil Thomson at such venues as the French Embassy, Strathmore Hall, and the Baltimore and Walters Museums. Solo shows since 1986 include these venues: Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, MOCA-DC, Ellipse Gallery, McLean Project for the Arts, Gallery K, and many others. She has also participated in group shows in New York and Washington, DC. From 1999 to 2009, she co-founded, directed, and curated the Washington Arts Museum, which exhibited the work of under-recognized Washington, DC artists.

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Front cover: *Fair and Square*, 2024. Shaped theater gels and plastic, 48 x 22 in.  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo by Greg Staley



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM  
AT THE KATZEN ARTS CENTER

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The AU Museum Project Space, launched in Summer 2019, is dedicated to working with academics and non-traditional curators to create exhibitions addressing special topics of interest across the university and the greater Washington community.

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