

American Artist: To Acorn

October 24, 2025–March 15, 2026, Reference Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center



American Artist, *To Acorn* (1985), 2023. Steel, acrylic, hardware, 107 × 33 × 33 in. (272 × 84 × 84 cm). Courtesy the artist

Front cover:
American Artist, *The Monophobic Response* (film), 2024 (still). Two-channel video installation. Courtesy the artist

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American Artist's multidisciplinary work mines the history of technology, race, and knowledge production.

Since 2013, when they legally changed their name, American Artist has examined the boundaries and fissures of subject production under racial capitalism. Their recent body of work takes inspiration from Octavia Butler's speculative fiction and, as Artist puts it, "her empathetic yet stark narratives about humanity's perilous patterns and blindspots."¹ Artist draws on the resonances of Butler's fiction in the present, as well as personal convergences in their biographies: Both are part of the Black diaspora in Los Angeles, whose ancestors left the southern US during the Great Migration, and Artist and Butler attended the same high school in Pasadena. Across their practices, both also create "thought experiments" that stretch and reimagine the given terms of the present.

Several of Artist's recent works draw links to Butler's Earthseed series: *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Set in a climate-ravaged, authoritarian America of the 2020s and beyond, these parables of survival have experienced a recent revival, their warnings uncannily forecasting many of the crises of our time. Speaking at MIT in 1998, Butler acknowledged, "Sometime ago I read some place that Robert A. Heinlein had these three categories of science-fiction stories: The what-if category; the if-only category; and the if-this-goes-on category. And I liked the idea. So this is definitely an if-this-goes-on story. And if it's true, if it's anywhere near true, we're all in trouble."² They are, nevertheless, a warning, as Artist interprets, that "when demagogues and oligarchs hold power and oppose everything you value, you'd better have an escape plan."³

Across both *Parable* novels, readers follow the journal entries of Lauren Oya Olamina, which begin in her mid-teens, and continue into her eighties. Olamina is a visionary figure whose drive to found the belief system and community of Earthseed sometimes verges on the quixotic, yet embodies an Afrofuturist vision of survival, transformation, and communalism amid social, political, and planetary catastrophe. The title of the exhibition, *To Acorn*, references the name of the community Olamina founded in *Parable*, a place anchored by her Earthseed philosophy, in which collectivity, equality, and mutual aid are central tenets. For Butler, this articulation of survival and community was looking toward a future but was equally attentive toward the past, and sensitive to her mother's and grandmother's migration from a Louisiana sugar plantation to Southern California in their own search for freedom, safety, and opportunity.

Artist's multiyear study of Butler's papers at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, also surfaces in meticulous graphite tracings of notes and fragments they encountered there. These archival moments—including traces of Butler's relationship with her mother—are balanced with more speculative engagements with the writer's life and work, a multidisciplinary practice of studying (with) Butler that has yielded a vision of Southern California (and the US) that spans past and future, utopia and cataclysm.

- 1 American Artist, et al., *American Artist: Shaper of God*, ed. Zainab Aliyu (Pioneer Works Press, 2025), 9.
- 2 Octavia E. Butler, "'Devil Girl From Mars': Why I Write Science Fiction," introduction to a discussion on science fiction and modern culture, MIT, February 19, 1998, http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/articles/butler_talk_index.html.
- 3 Artist, *American Artist*, 10.



Exhibition view: *American Artist: The Monophobic Response*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, 2024

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The Monophobic Response (film), 2024 *The Monophobic Response (sculpture), 2024*

The Monophobic Response interlaces a historic rocket test with the writing of Octavia Butler to consider how technological ambition and collective survival are entwined. The sculpture is a full-scale replica of a 1930s rocket engine, originally designed by students of the Guggenheim Aeronautical Lab at California Institute of Technology (GALCIT). Based on sketches by engineer Frank Malina, recovered from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory archives, the work brings into the gallery one of the earliest experiments in bipropellant rocket technology. In 1936, Malina and Jack Parsons tested this design in the Arroyo Seco Canyon, California, and their experiments laid the foundations for US space travel.

Decades later, writing from the same Southern California terrain, Butler imagined Earthseed, a religion founded by Lauren Oya Olamina, the protagonist of her *Parable* novels. Earthseed's destiny, Olamina writes, is to "take root among the stars." At the end of *Parable of the Talents*, an eighty-one-year-old Olamina witnesses her vision of survival alongside a competing project of colonization, observing the launch of shuttles carrying cargo to the Earth's first starship, the *Christopher Columbus*.

In *The Monophobic Response (film)* (2024), Artist restages the 1936 rocket test in the Mojave Desert, California, not as a literal re-enactment but as an improvised performance with Butler scholars, artists, and engineers.⁴

Framed by recitations from *The Book of the Living*—the scripture authored by Olamina, which sets out the tenets of Earthseed—the gathering transforms the technical origin of propulsion into a collective ritual. Performers recite Olamina's scripture and her insistence that "we are all that we have," contrasting the drive toward conquest with a vision of interdependence and mutual care.

The title, *The Monophobic Response*, comes from a 1993 essay by Butler, written the same year as *Parable of the Sower*. In it, she describes humanity's "monophobic response"—a fear of being alone in an indifferent universe—as an impulse that shapes social behavior. "No wonder we so often project alienness on one another," Butler writes.⁵ Against this tendency toward alienation, rivalry, or hate, Olamina's Earthseed

offers community as a means of survival. *The Monophobic Response (film)* stages a scene of self-emancipation through technology and community, reflecting both hope and tension: between collective survival and escapism, aspiration and vulnerability. Earthseed's tenet that "God is change" frames technological innovation as neither threat nor salvation alone, but a force to be embraced and reshaped in the pursuit of collective survival.

To Acorn (1985), 2023

To Acorn is a series of sculptures that reimagines bus stop signs marking the route from Pasadena to Downtown Los Angeles, where Butler—who did not drive—often worked in the city's Central Library. Each sign recalls how it might have appeared during different periods of her life, from her teenage years through adulthood—this one capturing the aesthetic of the 1980s.

In *Parable of the Sower*, set in a near-future California, the fictional community of Robledo is destroyed, compelling the young protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, to lead a group of survivors north. Their journey culminates in the founding of Acorn,

a settlement fortified by a wall of agave plants. Echoing this protective threshold, these sculptures center on a steel agave that anchors their forms, standing as both barrier and marker of passage. By weaving together the physical geographies Butler inhabited with the speculative worlds she created, *To Acorn (1985)* (2023) becomes a portal: between past and future, Butler's speculative vision and our own world, grounded in her sharp observations of the Los Angeles landscape—its stark contrasts of wealth and poverty, possibility and precarity—glimpsed from the seat of a city bus.

4 Further details on the firing and replica study are documented by Dave Nordling on the website of the Reaction Research Society: <https://rrs.org/2024/06/15/mta-firing-event-2024-06-08/>.
5 Octavia E. Butler, "The Monophobic Response," in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (Warner Books, 2000), 415.

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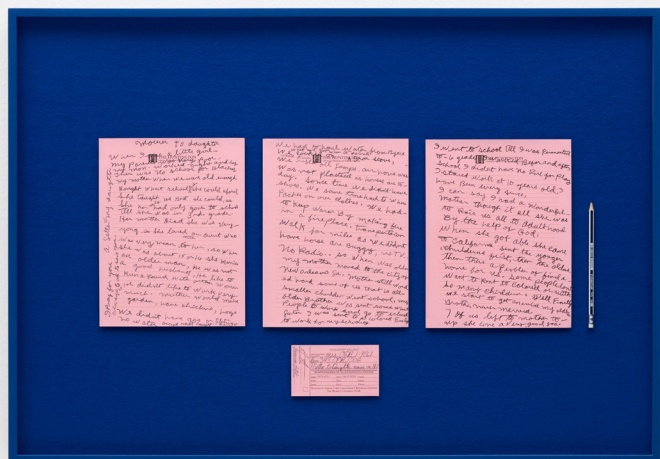
Octavia E. Butler Papers: mssOEB 1-9062 I (Mother to Daughter), 2022

Octavia E. Butler Papers: mssOEB 1-9062 I (Only Dirt Roads), 2022

Artist's drawings are meticulously traced from items they encountered during their research into the Octavia E. Butler papers at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Photography or scanning of Butler's archive was not allowed, so Artist's drawings serve as artistic facsimiles, in pencil on pink Huntington stationery. The works' titles refer to the numbers of the original documents, underscoring the procedures that mediated Artist's access to Butler's life, as well as the nature of their encounters with Butler's personal history.

Both drawings included here feature writings by Butler's mother, Octavia Margaret Butler,

about her life and upbringing. The elder Butler recounts the diligence and care of her own mother, who raised her children "healthy and well" in rural Louisiana despite the context of poverty and racial segregation. Together, these works trace a lineage of Black female world-making that spans history and fiction. *Octavia E. Butler Papers: mssOEB 1-9062 I (Only Dirt Roads)* (2022) also indexes a 1968 schedule for a bus line between Pasadena and Los Angeles, a trace of Butler's frequent bus rides between the two cities.



American Artist, *Octavia E. Butler Papers: mssOEB 1-9062 I (Mother to Daughter)*, 2022. Huntington Library stationery, graphite, pencil, felt, 26 1/2 x 38 x 1 3/4 in. (67 x 97 x 4.4 cm) framed. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council

ABOUT THE ARTIST

American Artist (b. 1989, Altadena, CA) is a New York-based artist who works across sculpture, software, video, and installation. They received an MFA from The New School (2015) and a BFA from California Polytechnic University, Pomona (2011). Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn; REDCAT, Los Angeles; and the Queens Museum, New York. Their work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and KADIST Art Foundation, Paris, among others. They are a former resident of Smack Mellon, Brooklyn; Red Bull Arts, Detroit; Abrons Art Center, New York; Recess, Brooklyn; EYEBEAM; Pioneer Works; and the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, New York. Artist is also a former codirector of the School for Poetic Computation and faculty at Yale University.

American Artist: To Acorn is organized by Natalie Bell, Chief Curator, with Zach Ngien, Curatorial Assistant.

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RELATED PROGRAMS



Exhibition Tour

November 1, 2025, 2:00–3:00 PM

Public program – Reference Gallery



Behind the Scenes: Fall Exhibitions

November 13, 2025, 5:30–6:30 PM

Member program – List Center Atrium



Reading Discussion with MIT Science Fiction Society

December 3, 2025, 5:30–6:30 PM

Public program – MIT Science Fiction Library

February 11, 2026, 5:30–6:30 PM

Public program – Reference Gallery

All List Visual Arts Center programs are free and open to the public. Registration is required. For more information about events and programs related to this exhibition, please visit: listart.mit.edu/events-programs

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FURTHER READING

Artist, American. *American Artist: Shaper of God*. Edited by Zainab Aliyu. Pioneer Works Press, 2025.

Brown, Jayna. *Black Utopias*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993.

Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Talents*. Seven Stories Press, 1998.

Butler, Octavia E. "The Monophobic Response." In *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. Edited by Sheree R. Thomas. Warner Books, 1994.

Byrne-Smith, Dan, ed. *Science Fiction*. Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2020.

Eshun, Ekow. *In the Black Fantastic*. MIT Press, 2022.

Keeling, Kara. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York University Press, 2019.

Yoshinaga, Ida, Sean Guynes, and Gerry Canavan, eds. *Uneven Futures: Strategies for Community Survival from Speculative Fiction*. MIT Press, 2022.

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