HYPERALLERGIC

The Political Abstractions of Beverly Buchanan

The argument driving this engrossing show is that Buchanan was actually a thematically ambitious and multi-faceted artist who participated in the avant-garde movements of her day, bringing to them a distinct perspective informed by her sense of identity as black and female.

Stephen Maine October 29, 2016

Beverly Buchanan, "Three Families (A Memorial Piece with Scars)" (1989) wood with paint, charcoal, and metal (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

The 10th anniversary of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art will be marked by an ambitious schedule of exhibitions and related public programming called "A Year of Yes: Reimaging Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum." The inaugural exhibition of this series is *Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals*, on view through March 5, 2017.

Buchanan (1940–2015) achieved a certain degree of recognition during her lifetime, primarily for small, faux-naif constructions in recycled wood and metal, which are based on the rustic

shacks — with their history of sharecropper and tenant farmer occupants — dotting the American South. But the argument driving this engrossing show is that Buchanan was actually a thematically ambitious and multifaceted artist who participated in the avant-garde movements of her day, bringing to them a distinct perspective informed by her sense of identity as black and female.

Beverly Buchanan, “House of Mystery (Florida Series)” (2008) (left) and “Low Country House” (nd) (right)

Guest curators Jennifer Burris and Park McArthur, recent graduates of the Whitney Independent Study Program, lavish attention on Buchanan’s Post-minimalist, site-specific outdoor sculptures (which share some characteristics with Land Art), and include archival materials documenting aspects of the artist’s production that could be described as performative and/or conceptual. The exhibition’s truly revelatory works, they were done between 1978 and 1986. For me, their significance relates to the potential of abstract art to embody and (with the appropriate verbal supplements) convey political meaning.

Buchanan grew up in South Carolina, and was raised by her great-aunt and -uncle in an academic setting. Her undergraduate degree was in medical technology, and from Columbia University she earned masters degrees in parasitology and public health in the late 1960s. While working in that field, she attended the Art Students League where she studied with Norman Lewis and was influenced by Romare Bearden. Her paintings and works on paper, such as “Untitled (Black Walls)” (c. 1976), were motivated by observation of New York’s aging turn-of-the-century

buildings. In 1977, with a handful of solo and group shows to her credit, she left medicine, relocated to Macon, Georgia, to teach, and devoted her time to art.

Beverly Buchanan, “Flye Town” (detail) (1990), wood, metal, and paint

Though her work seems not to be widely known in New York, Buchanan didn’t exactly languish in obscurity; she received numerous awards during her lifetime, including a Guggenheim fellowship, two NEA fellowships, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation award, and an Anonymous Was a Woman award. She is represented in dozens of public collections, including the Whitney, the Met, and the Studio Museum. “Memory Piece” (1994), a compact conglomeration of found

objects that occupies a prominent location in the present show, was made for her longtime advocate, the historian and curator Lowry Stokes Sims.

Beverly Buchanan, “Memory Piece” (1994), mixed media

At seven sites across Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, Buchanan constructed “ruins” out of local earth and ground rock mixed with cement and other ingredients. The physical labor involved in their fabrication resonates with their locations, which often relate to the fraught history of race relations in the South. (Not that it’s been much less fraught north of the Mason-Dixon line.) In her studio, she cast rough, blocky, or slab-like forms of similar materials, sometimes inflecting their coloration with acrylic paint or natural pigments such as clay. Some of

these objects have been installed for years in outdoor locations, and their physical condition is thus augmented — enhanced or deteriorated, depending on one's view — by weather and time.

In its concern with geological processes, indeterminacy, artistic labor, and the nature of art's relationship to audience, this work is in tune with the period's avant-garde. In 1977, Carl Andre horrified the middlebrow city of Hartford, Connecticut, with "Stone Field," a precise arrangement of 36 boulders pulled from nearby quarries. Jackie Winsor was fabricating "Burnt Piece" (1977-78), in which she imparted subtle distortions to a three-foot cube of wood, wire and concrete by way of five hours in a bonfire. And Buchanan's outdoor works relate to Robert Smithson's formulation of "ruins in reverse," as he called the ahistorical environment of the northern New Jersey industrial landscape.

Beverly Buchanan, "Wall Column" (1980) (left) and "Untitled (Frustula Series)" (ca. 1978) (right). Park McArthur, Jason Hirata and Jennifer Burris, "June 10–19, 2016" (2016) (background)

According to Andre, “A place is an area within an environment that has been altered in such a way to make the general environment more conspicuous.” In a three-channel video projection titled “June 10-16, 2016” (2016) by Burris, McArthur and Jason Hirata, four of Buchanan’s major site works are revealed as “places” consistent with Andre’s definition. With great success, the curators address the problem of how to document site-specific work and give a sense of the “general environment” through which so much of its significance derives.

The four projects — “Ruins and Rituals” (1979) and “Unity Stones” (1983) in Macon; “Marsh Ruins” (1981) near Brunswick, Georgia; and “Blue Station Stones (1986) in Miami — are shown sequentially in three simultaneous projections. They are framed from various perspectives and distances, from establishing shots incorporating the local architecture and streetscape, to extreme close-ups of craggy, timeworn surfaces. The viewer’s physical relationship to the projected images — near and far, direct and oblique — replay the camera’s relationship with the artworks.

Beverly Buchanan, “House of Mystery (Florida Series)” (2008), foamcore, acrylic paint

The footage of “Marsh Ruins” lingers over grasses waving in the breeze and fiddler crabs scampering around in the wet sand. The whine and whoosh of not-too-distant automobile traffic is integral to this site, as is afternoon sunlight glinting off the rippling water. Viewing the video requires patience. It is slow. Its effect is to take viewers out of their museum-going mind, which expects to encounter one thing after another, and relocate us to where sensations are simultaneous, where place reflects environment back on itself.

It also does interesting things perceptually. Sharing the space with the video projections are several small sculptures from 1978-81, termed “Frustula” (fragments or small structural pieces), placed on low platforms that, in the presence of the larger, projected images (and fellow museum-goers) assume a thrilling elasticity of scale. The small works sometimes look monumental, as if they had somehow slipped out of the projected images and taken up residency in real space.

Beverly Buchanan, “Back Wall” (1981), cast concrete

The relationship of materials to site in the early works skews their reading toward the socially engaged, and demonstrates one way that abstract works, without relying on depictive imagery or narrative, can carry content of sociohistorical or even political import. “Marsh Ruins” is a group of three big chunks of custom-made aggregate that suggests the remains of a warehouse or factory. Located in a park on the edge of the Marshes of Glynn, the piece is in the process of erosion — cracking up and gradually sinking into the mud.

Beverly Buchanan, “White Shack” (1987)

The key component is tabby, a crude form of concrete made from sand, water and lime. An ancient European construction technique, it was introduced in the New World by Spanish and English invaders. As the exhibition literature points out, in these coastal areas the lime was extracted by slave labor from great mounds of oyster shells left behind by the displaced native Timucua and Creek populations. The tabby was then used for plantation buildings, in particular for those very slaves’ living quarters.

“Marsh Ruins” is located near Igbo Landing on Dunbar Creek, where in 1803 a group of captive members of the Igbo people from southern Nigeria, having survived the Middle Passage, committed mass suicide by drowning rather than submit to slavery.

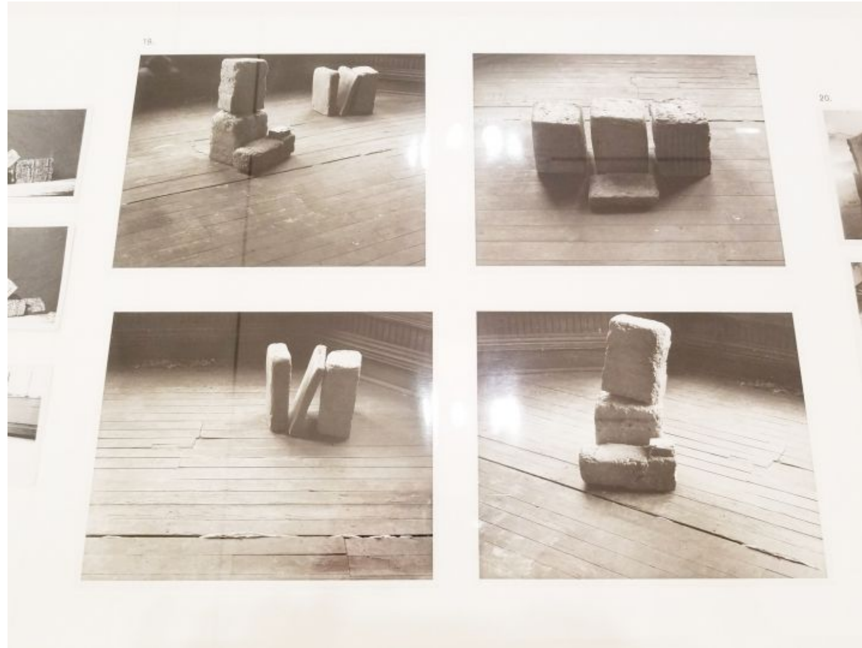
Accompanying the show is a slim but extremely useful paperback titled *Beverly Buchanan, 1978-1981*, published last year by Athénée Press (where co-curator Burris is director), in Mexico City. It includes an anecdote, taken from a conversation between Buchanan and McArthur, further illustrating the commemorative impulse behind her site works:

> I did a piece somewhere in Orangeburg, somewhere in my hometown. It's probably overgrown now because it was just spontaneous […]. I had some stones in the car, actually looking for a place to put them. And I saw this site [in] an industrial area that had recently hired black men. And that had never happened before and I wanted something to commemorate that without having a big giant sign that said "We finally hired some black people!" So I took the stones I had in my car and made a little pile there. But I didn't put a sign.

Unexplained by the exhibition literature is Buchanan's shift, in the mid-1980s, from work like that to the smaller, more materially conventional, and presumably less physically demanding shack sculptures and drawings for which, prior to this show, she has been known. The wall text that accompanies "Medicine Woman" (c. 1993), a six-foot-high figure in a face-hiding hat and a smock hung with empty pill bottles, mentions Buchanan's "chronic illness," hinting at bodily limitations.

Beverly Buchanan, "Medicine Woman" (ca. 1993), found object assemblage

Does the Buchanan show, for all of its insight and excellence, succeed in "expanding the canon," as the Brooklyn Museum claims for its *A Year of Yes* exhibitions? That's hard to say, but my guess is: not yet. The work is formally too reticent, and conceptually too dependent on exegesis, to incite a riot of general interest along the lines of the traveling Frida Kahlo retrospective, for example, back in the early 1980s. (Peter Wollen, who co-curated that show with Laura Mulvey, has written about the resulting phenomenon of Fridamania, or "the elevation of Kahlo to cult status.")



Beverly Buchanan, “Untitled Slab Works on Floorboards” (c 1978-88), gelatin silver prints

And yet … that reticence is powerful. The show includes a series of vitrines displaying a wealth of Buchanan ephemera: printed announcements, sketchbooks, handwritten statements, Polaroid photographs of houses, and other field research. These documents give a sense of Buchanan’s professional life, self-deprecating humor, and working methods, as well as her interest in the affective value of materials, methods, and means. Placed beneath a glossy color photo of a pair of flat, ovoid stones — evidently, a close-up view of a chimney — is an index card from the archive of Buchanan’s personal research bearing a frustulum of typewritten text:

> LEON’S CHIMNEY–Part 2
> Interview Question: Would you say knowing that SLAVE hands built this chimney has a special meaning or says something about SURVIVAL?
> Answer: (Direct, unblinking, eye contact)

We don’t know whether Buchanan’s interviewee was stumped by the question, or maybe considered the answer too obvious for words. In any case, that the artist recorded the exchange bespeaks her concern with history as form’s ubiquitous backstory. Because the curators respect the spirit of understatement, the exhibition is no more didactic than Buchanan’s restrained and

elliptical work. For that reason it might offer a model to young artists looking for a way to align abstraction in opposition to a culture of historical amnesia.

Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals *continues at the Brooklyn Museum (200 Eastern Parkway, Prospect Heights, Brooklyn) through March 5, 2017.*