

Ghosts of the South Haunt the Brooklyn Museum

BY RACHAEL RAKES

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Beverly Buchanan, *Wall Fragments* (1978), Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York/Frances Mulhall Achilles Library

The title of the Brooklyn Museum show "Beverly Buchanan: Ruins and Rituals" refers to a three-part sculpture, the main piece of which can be found on the grounds of the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Macon, Georgia. Made of concrete footers that were previously components of a railroad bridge, as well as other, more recently fabricated cast-concrete flotsam, the assemblage resembles a memorial or gravesite gone to seed. The other two parts of the work are unseen. According to Buchanan, one was placed in the woods nearby, the other buried in a river by the artist, not meant to be searched for or found. The work is part of a series of commemorative, prefabricated ruins that Buchanan made and placed all over the U.S. South at otherwise neglected sites of violence and resistance from African-American history. Despite appearing here only by way of video documentation, these works hold a central place in this retrospective, the first ever dedicated to Buchanan. As arranged by independent curators Jennifer Burris and Park McCarthur, these works are a prism through which to see Buchanan's body of work.

Buchanan grew up in South Carolina, amid the rubble of the region's racial legacy. Raised in an academic environment, she went to college to study medical technology and in the mid-Sixties moved to New York City to obtain graduate degrees in parasitology and public health from Columbia University. While working in New Jersey as a public health educator in the early Seventies, she took a class at the Art Students League with Norman Lewis, who, along with Romare Bearden, became a supporter of her early work, helping her to get shows in the city. In the latter part of the decade, Buchanan fled New York for Georgia, to become an artist full time.

Fast-forward forty years: Housed in the Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the current exhibition includes a series of concrete slab and block sculptures that, along with a series of black paintings, made up Buchanan's early work in New York in the 1970s. Dubbed "frustulas" by the artist, the sculptures establish Buchanan's preoccupation with ruins and with the nature of the edifices that surround us. Accompanying these is a three-channel video piece, made by the curators with Jason Hirata and titled *June 10–19, 2016*, that consists of several long takes of *Ruins and Rituals* and three other site-specific works. In its observation of these immovable subjects, the video piece serves as both mediation and complementary artwork. It insinuates the gesture of placement as the environment moves and changes around them, and they set a tone of patient investigation.

Burris and McCarthur place the earthworks in the context of the land art movements of the 1970s. But in contrast to some of the better-known pieces from this time — say, *Lightning Field* or *Spiral Jetty* — they are built with decay in mind; in their state of already-crumbling new, they help to welcome a takeover from the earth around them. Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* (1981), made of concrete that has been covered in tabby — a mixed material used to build plantations in the region — is always at least partially submerged, threatening to one day disappear into the brackish waters. The work has been installed in a Georgia marsh adjacent to St. Simons Island, where a group of Igbo sold into slavery collectively drowned themselves. There's no placard addressing the tragedy, just this Ozymandian testament, its oscillating visibility and invisibility suggesting a pessimism even in the corrective commemoration.

These public works join dozens of others that Buchanan placed without ceremony. Together they map out the history of Southern African-American struggle in a personal and idiosyncratic manner. In an opening talk for the exhibition, the curators pointed to Buchanan's abiding interest in moving earth: As a child, she would habitually gather and relocate rocks, an act she continued throughout her life. In Buchanan's words, from 2013, "If I see some rubble, my thought is, 'Let's see, now where in Georgia could that go?' I immediately claim it. Psychologically, it's mine." The results then combine the acknowledgment of the power to move what is movable with an understanding of the slow but inevitable processes of geologic change.

The admixture of power and resignation carries through to the next room, which is dedicated to Buchanan's "Shacks," small reproductions of hand-constructed homes in the impoverished black South. To the degree that Buchanan has garnered any attention from the art world in her lifetime (she died in 2015), it has been for this series and its commemoration of these vernacular buildings, which originated out of tragic necessity. Here, set alongside the notes and photographs Buchanan took in devising them, they are one manifestation of a lifetime of artistic and social

research, microcosms of community and resistance. Along one wall, a series of photos documents Buchanan's performative immolation of one of these sculptures in response to the widespread racial violence of the civil rights era, examples of which she witnessed firsthand as a student protester in South Carolina. In offering such documentation, the show does not deny the shack sculptures' status as folk art, but rather suggests how folk art might be reconsidered as more than diminutive craft.

A third room explores Buchanan's archive, consisting of notes, ephemera, and her work in painting, drawing, mixed-media sculpture, and conceptual jokes (a series of business cards lists her as "locally owned" and a "race car advocate," while a photograph of the artist has "What's an Oprah?" in a thought bubble above her head); much of this material is personal, self-reflexive, and liable to include some figuration of the artist herself. The sum of it all reveals an odd, funny, and continually evolving artist who has been sidelined for far too long. At the front of the room is a plaid shirt Buchanan often wore in her studio, painted over with white crosses and blue and red stars in commemoration of the 145 places of worship, primarily black churches, that were burned from 1995 to 1996 (this became the work *Untitled, Church on Fire*, 1995–96). In literally writing this violence, this simple garment makes an intimate and political gesture in keeping with the moving of the stones, the hiding of the monuments, the burning of Buchanan's painstakingly crafted work. Here is the rare single-artist show that allows these kinds of connections to be drawn without overstating them. And in that attention, it suggests a world of forgotten artists in need of such deft excavation.

‘Beverly Buchanan: Ruins and Rituals’

The Brooklyn Museum of Art

Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 4th Floor

Through March 5