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Transcript of Episode 8: In Memory of Malcolm

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[Ambient/electronic style theme music plays, then fades out]

I want you to think of a public monument. Maybe the first thing your brain goes to is Mt. Rushmore, or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, or the recently unveiled Tower of Voices dedicated to the victims of United Flight 93. What, for you, makes up the ideal memorial? The issue of what constitutes a memorial has been a major theme of the work of Barbara Chase-Riboud since the late 1960s. A sculptor, draughtsperson, novelist, and poet, Chase-Riboud is primarily known for two things. The first is her novel *Sally Hemings*, which was arguably the first high-profile exploration of Hemings's relationship to Thomas Jefferson, and which ultimately became a bestseller. The second is a series of sculptures dedicated to civil rights leader Malcolm X. The *Malcolm* series was recently declared complete, putting the span of the series at 48 years. There are twenty Malcolm sculptures in all, beginning with *Malcolm X #1* in 1969 and ending with *Malcolm X #20* in 2017. In this episode, we're going to focus on *Malcolm X #3*, which is generally recognized as the point at which the series matured and took the form that it would maintain for the next forty-odd years.

But, although Chase-Riboud purposefully titled the series in honor of Malcolm X, she insists to this day that the sculptures are unrelated to Malcolm X the person. An interview with Chase-Riboud in a catalogue commemorating the completion of the Malcolm series features her repeated insistence that the sculptures "have nothing to do" with Malcolm X.^[1] This seems pretty counterintuitive: how can something be a memorial in honor of someone, and yet also be unrelated to that which it memorializes? How does *Malcolm X #3* actually function as a memorial? And how much weight should we give to an artist's conception of what a work means, especially when, like Chase-Riboud, that artist is still living? Let's talk about all things commemorative in this episode, and maybe take on some art historical theory while we're at it.

[Musical break]

A description of Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Malcolm X #3*, 1969. Polished bronze, rayon, and cotton.

Malcolm X #3 is an abstract work measuring around eight-and-a-half feet high by three feet wide. It is placed against a wall. The upper half of the sculpture is made from polished cast bronze, and it looks like a series of multiple, uneven rectangular pieces that have been squished together. Some of the pieces are rippling, some crumpled, some relatively smooth. A greenish patina has begun to accumulate in the crevices between the gold-toned, polished pieces. The lower half of the sculpture is entirely made from knotted, braided, and looped pieces of rayon and cotton fiber in a gold tone similar to the polished bronze. The fibers are relatively shiny, and hang all the way down to the floor, pooling a bit at the bottom. The fibers seem to emerge from underneath the bronze and support it, despite the fact that that is physically impossible.

[Musical break]

Before we get to any of the conceptual stuff, I think it's pretty crucial, this being the first sculpture we've discussed on *Art History for All*, to talk a little bit about the process by which *Malcolm X #3* was made. Like many bronze sculptures, Chase-Riboud made the bronze portion of #3 using a process called "lost wax," but she used a very specific variation of the technique. Lost-wax casting essentially involves first making a version of the finished sculpture in a malleable material like wax or clay, then creating a mold of that version, then filling the mold with wax to create a wax model.^[2] The wax is then coated in a kind of ceramic, which is then fired in a kiln, allowing the wax to melt and run out while the ceramic hardens. Molten metal is then poured into the hardened shell, and when the metal cools, the shell is broken away to reveal the metal version of the sculpture, which is refined and polished as necessary. Lost-wax casting has been used in numerous cultures throughout history. Chase-Riboud's variation on this technique, called direct wax casting, involves skipping the first couple of steps, and instead immediately going to the "lost wax" portion of the process, taking thin, malleable sheets of wax and forming them into a model, which is covered in clay to create the final shell.^[3] The risky thing about this particular version of the process is there's no original model to fall back on once the metal sculpture is finished—the wax melts out of the ceramic shell and the shell itself is broken away from the finished object. So each resulting piece is 100% unique, but there's no do-overs. If something explodes while being heated, there's no way to make a copy of what the artist originally conceived. Chase-Riboud mentions that she's thankfully never lost a piece, but the risk and the improvisatory nature of the wax sculpting do hang like a shadow over the creative process, lending a sense of the fleeting and temporary to a final object made of extremely durable material.^[4]

The unusual pairing of cast bronze with fibers in the *Malcolm* series is, according to Chase-Riboud, the result of practical problem-solving. Early versions of her bronze sculptures had "legs" of sorts holding them up, which Chase-Riboud was not happy with. When she asked fiber artist and friend Sheila Hicks if she had any ideas to deal with the legs, Hicks proposed covering them with a sort of "skirt" made of fiber.^[5] Both Chase-Riboud herself and art historians who study her have linked this use of fibers with African and Oceanic

traditions of mask-making, in which raffia or other fibers hang down from the bottom of masks in order to conceal the person wearing them and give the illusion that the mask is an independent entity. The way that Chase-Riboud attaches the fibers to the bronze element, the way she knots, braids, and loops them, makes it look as though the fibers themselves are holding up the bronze, and amplifies the contrast between the two materials. Art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw uses some particularly vivid language to describe qualities of these materials. The bronze, she says, appears "as though the metal has crumpled and folded in upon itself, gathering energy into its center before being fixed forever in time and space," while the fibers, the upper ends of which go underneath the bronze, are "like snakes entering burrows or intravenous lines making subcutaneous entries," or even like "the innards of an animal hung for slaughter."

[Musical break]

How you perceive the materials used in #3 is a big part of how you perceive the sculpture as a whole, but equally as important is the title. As she takes pains to point out, Chase-Riboud chose to dedicate the sculpture series to Malcolm X *after* the first two sculptures were completed, implying that the sculpture can and should be understood as a totally aesthetic experience that is not connected to Malcolm X.^[6] I'll talk about the problems with Chase-Riboud's insistence on this a little later, but for now, I want to explore how the artist characterizes and limits the ways in which *Malcolm X #3*, and the larger *Malcolm* series, should be understood. In an interview with Philadelphia Museum of Art curator Carlos Basualdo, Chase-Riboud discusses the *Malcolm* series in the following way:

"Nothing led to the *Malcolms*; they just happened...The sculptures came before the name. The name came only after the assassination. They were all done as monuments to the historical person that was Malcolm X...I named the first *Malcolm* after I had done the sculptures, and then I dedicated them to Malcolm's memory because he was already dead. And so, you go back to all the Egyptian monuments, tombs, *et cetera, et cetera*; the Chinese steles...They are funerary steles... The name didn't change the form of the sculptures at all. But the form of the sculpture changed the name of Malcolm X... People think—or assume—that there is some kind of personification in the sculptures. The sculptures themselves have nothing to do with Malcolm X! They're not meant to represent him; they're not meant to represent civil rights or radicalism or black power or any of those things. They were executed on an aesthetic basic [sic] and then dedicated to a historical person."^[7]

Throughout the interview, Basualdo continues to test the boundaries of meaning that Chase-Riboud has established—the suggestion that the fiber element could be viewed as hair elicits the following exclamation: quote, "Not on your life. There's no connection to hair whatsoever! Period!"^[8] End quote. Chase-Riboud eventually confirms that the forms of the *Malcolm* steles are "not to be assigned meaning," no matter what forms they appear to evoke.^[9] Rather, the references and meanings associated with the steles are supposed to remain fluid; as Chase-Riboud says, quote, "nothing is permanent; nothing is a definite form; everything is in flux and everything moves in its own way."^[10] End quote.

There are some things, however, that Chase-Riboud consistently acknowledges when discussing the meanings and associations of the *Malcolm* series. One is the idea of the stele, a type of ancient monument, usually funerary, and usually inscribed with information regarding that which is commemorated. In particular, Chase-Riboud mentions Chinese and Egyptian steles, which are usually vertical slabs of stone. In a talk given on the occasion of an exhibition of the *Malcolm* steles at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2013, Chase-Riboud links the tradition of funerary steles with minimalist public monuments like Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is a simple wall of black stone inscribed with the names of American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War.^[11] She also links steles to an unrealized monument designed by Isamu Noguchi that was intended to commemorate those who died as a result of U.S. forces dropping a nuclear bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima during World War II. Noguchi's proposed monument was a

fat, heavy, black arch that was ultimately rejected by government officials. Though both the Noguchi and the Lin monuments were heavily criticized, they are also incredibly powerful, with the Lin monument in particular becoming one of the most visited sites on the National Mall.^[12] They approach remembrance, and in particular mourning, in a unique way that simply cannot be achieved with monuments containing figures, an approach that the *Malcolm* series also makes use of. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw puts it excellently when she says that the series, quote, "requires viewers to submit to the experience and to embrace the act of contemplating form, texture, and presence only."^[13] End quote. It's not about "reading" the sculpture or comprehending an explicit representation of that which the sculpture honors: the aesthetic experience of the sculpture, and the thought it provokes, is itself an act of commemoration.^[14]

[Musical break]

Barbara Chase-Riboud is extremely firm in how she believes people should understand her work. But no artist can really control how people understand their work, and the ways in which we understand and interpret creative work shouldn't necessarily be limited to what the creator dictates. This idea was made much more highfalutin', and also more fully formed, by French literary theorist Roland Barthes, who wrote an essay in 1967 called "The Death of the Author," in which he deconstructs the idea of the creator as the final arbiter of meaning. In the final lines of the essay, which focuses mainly on literature, Barthes gives a punch in the gut to the old way of looking at creative works and how we understand them:

"Thus is revealed the total existence of writing; a text is made from multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.... Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."^[15]

Barthes focuses on modern Western literature here, but his essay has been applied to writing, art, and music across time and space. The notion that we can understand a creative work by looking only to its creator is deeply flawed—works of art are not produced in a vacuum, and creators are not necessarily aware of the network of influences they bring to bear on their creations. There is not one single meaning in any given work, but many, and it is only the audience receiving the work that can truly access those multiple meanings. To rephrase Barthes's mic-drop ending in a less morbid way: we have to set the conceptions of the creator aside so that those of the audience can flourish.

Having learned this, you're sort of forced to think about what artists say about their work in a different way. No, Barbara Chase-Riboud did not *intend* for the *Malcolm* series to be representative of Malcolm X, but it's easy to come to that conclusion when all the steles are titled *Malcolm X*. No, Chase-Riboud categorically states that the fiber elements of the steles are not representative of hair, but what other loose fibers do you commonly see being braided and knotted? I've taken care to mention in previous episodes that unconventional or funny or seemingly too-easy interpretations of artworks are valid, and this is a great case study for why. Chase-Riboud may have a very specific, aesthetically-oriented vision of her own work, but not everyone is going to arrive at that interpretation when presented with only the sculpture, and not the conceptual background behind it. To return to that Barthes excerpt, quote, "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost." End quote. The reader, or in this case, viewer, is the puzzle-solver who has all the pieces. The viewer has knowledge that the creator does not. Understanding this gives us, the viewers, the power to note what a creator has said

about their work, set it aside, and bring it back in if it's relevant. So, setting aside Chase-Riboud's understanding of the work, let's look at *Malcolm X #3* in a different way.

The first point to address, is, of course, the man Malcolm X himself. Clearly, none of the steles are explicit representations of him, but there are aspects of his life and philosophies to which we can link the steles, specifically #3. Much of Malcolm X's life was marked by resistance and conflict, beginning with his childhood, in which he and his family directly experienced the terrorism of the KKK.^[16] As a young adult, he was incarcerated for burglary, and converted to Islam while in prison. Advocating for fellow Nation of Islam prisoners eventually prompted him to lead a nonviolent protest against prison conditions, and with the oratory and ministerial skills he developed while incarcerated he quickly became the Nation of Islam's National Representative after his release.^[17] Despite success within the NOI, his engagement with the Civil Rights Movement and concern that the NOI was not doing enough to advocate for all African-Americans, not just Muslim ones, eventually put him at odds not only with governmental agencies but also with NOI leaders. He left the NOI in 1964, at which point he began engaging more closely with ideologies like Black Nationalism.^[18] In February 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated while preparing to give a speech, shot in the chest multiple times. Three Nation of Islam members were ultimately convicted of his murder.^[19]

The conflicts in which Malcolm was engaged, and his advocacy for black resistance against white supremacy, resonates with the tensions contained in *Malcolm X #3*. The jaggedness and hardness of the bronze upper portion opposes the soft, mobile fibers beneath it. The materials can also be viewed as representative of two different craft traditions, with the bronze linkable to European traditions of armory and metallurgy, and the fibers alluding to the African masks from which Chase-Riboud says she drew inspiration. Soft collides with hard, African with European, and one can see a quality of uncanny strength in the fibers and uncanny fluidity in the metal.

The European-African opposition in particular can also be linked to Malcolm X, and in particular, his international approach to black liberation. In January 1965, he said, quote: "In my opinion, the greatest accomplishment that was made in the struggle of the Black man in America in 1964 toward some kind of real progress was the successful linking together of our problem with the African problem, or making our problem a world problem."^[20] End quote. Malcolm X emphasized that liberation movements around the world were interconnected, and the African-American struggle for civil rights and social equality was inextricably linked with the continental African struggle against colonialism—indeed, the struggle of *all* colonized peoples against their colonizers. During his life, Malcolm X traveled around and spoke in Africa and the Middle East, as well as France, Britain, and Switzerland.^[21] The simultaneous convergence and opposition of European and African traditions in *Malcolm X #3* speaks to both Malcolm X's dedication to resistance against white supremacy and his emphasis on uniting continental Africans with people of African descent in America and Europe, commonly called the diaspora.

And, of course, we have to talk about how a funereal monument relates to the phenomenon of death and the body of the deceased. The early *Malcolm* steles, particularly #3, were fixed to the wall and could really only be viewed from the front. Though Chase-Riboud states that the steles are an aesthetic enterprise separate from the person of Malcolm X, it is particularly chilling to note that Malcolm X was shot in the chest, a largely frontal assault.^[22] Here, again, we can bring back the idea of the bronze element evoking armor—if we read the sculpture as analogous to a human body, the bronze element becomes a breastplate, protecting the torso. Shaw goes further, and likens the combination of the bronze and the fiber skirt to the cuirass and skirt of the Classical world, an interpretation which lends heroic connotations to the gleaming, gold-toned stele.^[23] Thus, there's a sense that this monument gives the deceased Malcolm X the protection he did not have in life, and glorifies his body as though it were that of a Classical hero.

[Musical break]

Of course, even beyond Malcolm X himself, #3 and its companions in the *Malcolm* series have further significance, especially in terms of questions of race and gender. Upon the initial exhibition of the first four *Malcolms* at Bertha Schaeffer Gallery in New York in 1970, *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer wrote a racist and condescending review of the show. Lumping Chase-Riboud's work together with collages by Romare Bearden—because two black artists can't exhibit at the same time and *not* be connected—both artists are characterized as not talented enough for the subject matter they tackle. Bearden's work is, according to Kramer, "too decorative," and it "seems to call for a stronger form and a more robust expression," while Chase-Riboud's work has "an overrefinement" and her *Malcolm* monuments "unfortunately suggest the ambiance of high fashion rather more than they suggest the theme of heroic suffering and social conflict."²⁴ One almost wonders whether he actually looked at the works at all or if he just popped his head into the galleries and then wrote a review entirely on the basis that these two were both black artists, one of whom was a woman.

The same year that Kramer wrote his review, African-American artist Benny Andrews responded to Kramer in the context of an account of his trip to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to see the exhibition "Afro-American Artists; Boston and New York."²⁵ One of the key points Andrews emphasizes in his article is the lack of any firm definition of quote-unquote "Black Art" beyond the fact that it is made by black people—he also provides a seven-point list of things white art critics should stop doing if they don't want their criticism to be racist, a list that most of us white people in the art world today really need to be following. Andrews emphasizes that what Kramer failed to understand in his joint review of Bearden and Chase-Riboud is these two artists are not obligated to infuse their work with their blackness in a specific way. Chase-Riboud, in particular, Kramer criticized for essentially being too aesthetically oriented and not socially motivated enough, but in a quote from a different review that Andrews critiques, Kramer is just as dissatisfied with quote, "crudely conceived social realism."²⁶ End quote. For Kramer—and probably for many other white critics and viewers in the decades since 1970—art by black people is either too black or not black enough.

Kramer looks at Chase-Riboud's work through a very murky and narrow racial lens—but we can consider how *Malcolm X #3* deals with race in a much broader way. The European-African opposition of bronze and fiber, the conflation of the sculpture with Malcolm X's person and body, and the connection between the knotted fibers and traditions of black hairstyling make it clear that blackness and the relationship between black and white are a key component of the sculpture. We can also look at the stele through the lens of gender, primarily, again, in terms of materials. The hard bronze is consistently characterized by scholars as masculine, while the so-called "skirt" is invariably feminine. Even the processes by which the two parts are made can be viewed as masculine and feminine, with the physically demanding and dangerous process of casting bronze falling into the first category, and the more meditative project of knotting, weaving, and braiding falling into the second. This observation doesn't necessarily gel with the historical reading of the steles as representative of Malcolm X, but it does fit with a larger theme of Chase-Riboud's artistic and literary body of work, in which questions of race and gender frequently intersect. Chase-Riboud's novels about Sally Hemings and Sara Baartman, an African woman forcibly paraded around Europe in the early 19th century as an anatomical curiosity, deal not just in violence and injustices committed against black people, but black women in particular. The very act of conquering and colonizing is often compared to sexual conquest or rape: there is a particularly gendered element to the violence of white colonialism and supremacy. The incorporation of a visibly feminine element to #3 and the other *Malcolm* steles is not only another example of the theme of opposites coming together, but also a reminder that women of color are just as subject to violence, and just as deserving of memorialization, as are men of color. A good deal of Malcolm X and other civil rights' leaders' rhetoric framed the struggle for equality as the plight of the black *man* against the white *man*. Barbara Chase-Riboud's broader body of work engages with the particular struggle of the black woman, and we see a dimension of that in *Malcolm X #3*.

To some degree, to think about the many different meanings held within *Malcolm X #3* is to think about the rhetoric of race and gender now, long after Barbara Chase-Riboud first began the series. Whether you decide to adhere to Chase-Riboud's vision of the limits of the sculpture's meaning, or to push against it, or to find some middle ground, *Malcolm X #3* and its sibling sculptures prompt viewers to engage with intense subject matter: life, death, memory, race, gender, violence, and more. Perhaps the secret to the monument to Malcolm X that is not supposed to be *about* Malcolm X is that it prompts us to think about the very things that were embodied in Malcolm X's work and have developed because of it. It is the starting point of a thought process, a challenging of assumptions, a questioning of core beliefs. To return to Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw once again, when we submit to, quote, "contemplating form, texture, and presence only...we can experience the act of viewing as a significant form of commemoration."^[27] End quote. The memorial is not necessarily the sculpture itself: the memorial manifests when we engage with the object and the multiplicity of meanings attached to it.

[Opening theme reprises, fades down]

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This podcast was produced and narrated by me, Allyson Healey. The theme was composed by Bruce Healey. Credits for other background and interstitial music can be found in the podcast description or at the end of the transcript. Stay tuned for the next episode at the end of October, and remember to look closely: you never know what you might see.

[Theme music fades up, then fades out]

^[1] Barbara Chase-Riboud and Carlos Basualdo, "Taken To Its Extreme: The Malcolm X Steles: Barbara Chase-Riboud in conversation with Carlos Basualdo, Rome, 2017," in *Barbara Chase-Riboud: Malcolm X: Complete*, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery exh. cat. (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2017): 11.

^[2] Wikipedia contributors, "Lost-wax casting," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed 12 September 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost-wax_casting

^[3] Chase-Riboud and Basualdo, "Taken to Its Extreme," 14.

^[4] Barbara Chase-Riboud, "The *Malcolm* Steles and the Silenced X," in *Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles*, ed. Carlos Basualdo, Philadelphia Museum of Art exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013): 83

^[5] Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "Malcolm X Rising: Barbara Chase-Riboud's Phenomenological Art," in *Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles*, ed. Carlos Basualdo, Philadelphia Museum of Art exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013): 23.

^[6] Suzette A. Spencer, "On Her Own Terms: An Interview with Barbara Chase-Riboud," *Callaloo* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 748.

[7] Chase-Riboud and Basualdo, "Taken to Its Extreme," 11.

[8] Chase-Riboud and Basualdo, "Taken to Its Extreme," 13.

[9] Chase-Riboud and Basualdo, "Taken to Its Extreme, 13."

[10] Chase-Riboud and Basualdo, "Taken to Its Extreme, 13."

[11] Barbara Chase-Riboud, "The *Malcolm* Steles and the Silenced X," in *Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles*, ed. Carlos Basualdo, Philadelphia Museum of Art exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013): 86.

[12] Shaw, 28.

[13] Shaw, 28.

[14] Shaw, 28.

[15] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," trans. Stephen Heath, in *Image, Object, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath* (London: Fontana Press, 1977): 148.

[16] Victor O. Okafor, "Malcolm X: An Apostle of Violence or an Advocate for Black Human Rights?" in *Malcolm X: A Historical Reader*, eds. James L. Conyers, Jr., and Andrew P. Smallwood (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2008): 215-16.

[17] Andrew P. Smallwood, "The Legacy of Malcolm X's Leadership: In the Tradition of Africana Social Movements," in *Malcolm X: A Historical Reader*, eds. Smallwood and James L. Conyers, Jr. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2008): 5.

[18] Smallwood, 7-8.

[19] Wikipedia contributors, "Malcolm X," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed 15 September 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malcolm_X

[20] Smallwood, 10.

[21] Paul Easterling, "Malcolm X and Pan-Africanism," in *Malcolm X: A Historical Reader*, eds. James L. Conyers, Jr. and Andrew P. Smallwood (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2008): 154.

[22] "Malcolm X," *Wikipedia*.

[23] Shaw, 24.

[24] Hilton Kramer, "Black Experience and Modernist Art," *The New York Times*, February 14, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/02/14/archives/black-experience-and-modernist-art-romare-bearden-uses-photos-in.html>