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Barbara Chase-Riboud brings Malcolm X sculptures home

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Barbara Chase-Riboud appears with a sculpture, Malcolm X #3, on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through Jan. 4. / Gannett/(Cherry Hill, N.J.) Courier-Post

by Fred B. Adelson, (Cherry Hill, N.J.) Courier-Post

Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles is a well-deserved homecoming for an accomplished and gifted native daughter.

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In this striking exhibition, which will be on view until Jan. 4 before traveling to the West Coast, the Philadelphia Museum of Art is celebrating Barbara Chase-Riboud, 74, the acclaimed artist and author.

The intimate exhibit focuses on an impressive series of three-



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dimensional, mixed-media compositions dedicated to Malcolm X that were created between 1969 and 2008 by Chase-Riboud.

The show presents 10 singular sculptures (five are from this historically significant group honoring Malcolm X) along with 32 works on paper.

Carlos Basualdo, the curator of contemporary art at the museum and organizer of the show, wrote in the catalog: "It was always our goal to present the

Malcolm X Steles in context with other sculptures and drawings to show the depth of Barbara Chase-Riboud's artistic practice."

A stele is an upright monument inscribed to commemorate a special event or mark a gravesite; it comes out of a tradition dating back to the ancient Near East.

From the outside, in

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Chase-Riboud began her formal art training at Temple University's Tyler School of Art.

In 1957 after her college graduation, she received a prestigious fellowship to study at the American Academy in Rome. A year later, she returned to the United States to begin graduate studies, receiving an MFA degree from Yale University in 1960.

Chase-Riboud soon moved to Paris where she established a studio in 1962 and has continued to live and work there, realizing international recognition in both fine arts and literature.

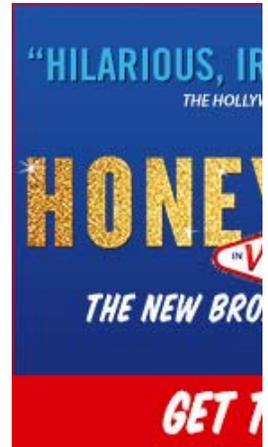
Physically removed from racial unrest in the U.S. during much of the 1960s, Chase-Riboud was thoroughly aware of the tensions back in her homeland.

Just four days after Malcolm X was assassinated in New York, Chase-Riboud wrote to her mother in Philadelphia, saying that she was "very upset over the death."

Her vertical bronze and fiber steles are poetic metaphors, not representational portraits, yet they memorialize the murdered civil rights leader who had been shot multiple times at close range while speaking in Manhattan on Feb. 21, 1965.

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Her steles are free-standing vertical sculptures that possess a commanding formal presence. At nearly 10-feet in height with a cast bronze body above a "skirt" of dyed silk and wool cords that have been wrapped, knotted, and braided by hand, each conveys an uplifting image. The sculptures are not done in an edition but are uniquely individual objects related by theme and design.

'Grown children'

As a mother of two adult sons, Chase-Riboud acknowledged at the press preview: "Seeing my old sculptures is like seeing grown children. They have their own histories, their own personas."

"It is like an international convention," she added with considerable pride as her eyes scanned the gallery looking at works loaned from many public and private collections.

Chase-Riboud's sculptures, seen from a frontal point of view, are studies of contrasts. Horizontality and verticality. Hardness and softness, masculinity and femininity, smoothness and roughness. Each has a heroic presentation that seems to defy gravity: The cascading fibers conceal the support of the upper metal section.

The show is introduced by a small group of charcoal drawings that depict an anonymous couple under wrinkled sheets.

*Dating from 1966, the five drawings titled *Le Lit* (The Bed) reveal how the artist goes from naturalism to abstraction. These early works on paper are prophetic and seminal, as they directly relate to the sculptures. Here are the undulations and crevices of abstract forms that she would soon realize in the wax models of her cast metal torsos.*

It is obvious the artist has been inspired and influenced by her extensive travels to many remote places in Africa and Asia. In 1965 she was the first American to be invited to visit the People's Republic of China after the Political Revolution. Chase-Riboud admitted: "A good artist steals. I have taken from all kinds of cultures. I have been indiscriminate in my taking."

*Directly related to the show's context is her series called the *Monument Drawings*, a group of 20 etched drawings with charcoal that bear inscriptions paying tribute to a diverse range of individuals from Queen Hatshepsut of New Kingdom Egypt to Oscar Wilde, the late 19th-century Irish writer and poet.*

Each imagined memorial presents tied masonry masses and rich tonal contrasts. Like her sculpture, they are not portrait images yet do indicate a strong admiration for heroic figures from history and literature.

The writing life

A decade after the first "skirt sculptures" were created, Chase-Riboud re-invented herself and initiated a successful and award-winning career writing several historical novels and poetry.

While visiting Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis on the Greek island of Skorpios and receiving strong encouragement from her to pursue plans for a proposed book about Thomas Jefferson's relationship with an enslaved woman at Monticello, Chase-Riboud wrote Sally Hemings, which was published in 1979. It became an international best-seller.

The artist's suggestion that Thomas Jefferson had fathered children with Hemings was then very controversial. Many years later, DNA testing proved that he did, indeed, have several children with Hemings. Then, in 1989, her novel titled Echo of Lions told the dramatic story of the African slave revolt aboard the Amistad, the 19th-century ship. In a later copyright infringement lawsuit, she maintained that Amistad, Steven Spielberg's film, was based on her book. An out-of-court settlement was ultimately reached.

In some circles, Chase-Riboud is better known as a prolific writer than a visual artist. She recently completed the publication of a collection of letters she had written to her mother from Paris.

In an essay that appears in the show's catalog, the artist wondered: "Am I a sculptor who writes or a writer who sculpts?"

This exhibit reveals that Chase-Riboud is a truly gifted and multifaceted talent, who has used traditional skills of craftsmanship and studio practice to produce art with powerful appeal.

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