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BARBARA CHASE RIBOUD

History in the Present Tense: Bronze Sculptures

text by Chennie Huang

"This idea of history and of memory is one of my themes, and very often when my characters are remembering past lives in the present tense."¹
 "Sometimes I combine black silk and black wool together like a duet. I don't think it has much to do with politics. It is what the viewer brings to the piece and his interpretation that makes the difference, although I am not denying the difference."²

Barbara Chase-Riboud has been a prolific artist, novelist, and poet for five decades. Her well-researched narrative history novels emphasize forgotten people and events of cultural significance that often changes the way we understand our past. As a poet, Chase-Riboud is eloquent and spontaneous. Simultaneously, her poems like her drawings inform her artistic practice as a sculptor. Focusing on form and material, her process as a sculptor is altogether different from her writing. To Chase-Riboud, writing is a kind of accumulation of information, and it unravels a narrative through a linear timeline, but making a sculpture, to her, is to present all the information at once. To activate the work, it requires the viewer's interpretation drawing from his understanding of American cultural history and global art history. This essay focuses on Chase-Riboud as a sculptor. Her experimentation with form and material creates majestic and monumental works. The visual tension between solidity and fluidity makes her work complex in form and meaning.

Chase-Riboud is an American who chooses to live abroad in Europe. Born in Philadelphia in 1939, she moved to Paris around 1961. The artist once said in an interview that she prefers to be identified as "une étrangère" not as an expatriate. Evidently, her being an outsider who does not conform to convention allows her the kind of artistic freedom to resist stereotypes. In her early 20s, Chase-Riboud attended the American Academy in Rome before moving to Paris. Between periods of conducting research in the United States for her novels about American history, she writes and produces all her works in Europe. Although she considers her writing and her artistic practice as separate entities, yet, there are some similarities, such as the remembrance of historical figures and the deconstruction of historical myth. In her novels, the characters are often people with American roots living abroad that retrace the past with a present perspective. In artistic practice, the artist reconstructs the aura of iconic and historic Americans whose personal sacrifice forever changed the course of history. In real life and like her narrative characters, she does it from a contemporary perspective but in a different geographic location that is outside of her mother country, America.

The multi-cultural aspect in Chase-Riboud's work is hard to overlook. For instance, her "Malcolm X" (1968-2017) series uses traditional Western wood and bronze materials, but originates from pre-modern Greco-Roman period, then she drapes their materials such as silk, which, originates from pre-modern China along with other more ubiquitous fiber materials such as wool and cotton. At the bottom of her bronze pieces, these strands of fiber are attached in a way such resembling the hanging tassels commonly found on African masks. Her choice of materials and their historic origins of representing iconic individuals and ancient sacred spots indicates the symbolic value of her characters as a form of paying homage to tradition and



spirituality. Prior to the year she spent in Rome, she traveled to Egypt and according to Chase-Riboud, it was the first time she had been exposed to non-Western art. Before this time, all her formative education in art and architecture had a predominant focus on the Greco-Romans as the beginning of an history. Upon the discovery of a non-Christian world, it had compelled her to explore the artistic territories outside of the Western.

Her travels to China and the learning of the excavation of a Han Dynasty (Western 206 B.C.E. – 9 A.D. Eastern, 25 – 220 A.D.) burial in which contained the Emperor's body encased in a jade suit had inspired her to make a series of "Chopart sculptures" (1973-2006). In this series, each of the pieces are draped with tiles of gold seen together by red threads. Like the original intention of encasing the Emperor's body in a jade suit, Chase-Riboud's method of making "Chopart" can be read as idealical, in this, the method of representation elevates her subject's status to a sacred rite.

Chase-Riboud's choice of traditional methods and mediums becomes her way of paying homage to history. They serve as a creative trajectory for her exploration in the ideas of collective memory and iconic figures in the modern history. In this instance, the artist also deconstructs the meaning of an icon in terms of its symbolic value as remembered by the public. In the year following the assassination of African American Muslim Minister and Human Right Activist, Malcolm X in 1965, she began a series of large-scale bronze sculpture that would span nearly five decades. Being physically and geographically removed from the local political struggle, Chase-Riboud started the series of "Malcolm X" (1968-2017) to express her heart-felt condolences to the tragic event. At first, she made them as a personal commemorative gesture, but decades after, this series has been viewed against the contemporary social-political backdrop. Through the "Malcolm X" houses (1968-2017), she conveys the idea of strength and fragility with a combination of hard and soft forms and materials. For instance, in "Malcolm X, #3" (2006) the top portion of the piece is made

of gold-patina bronze in hard geometric shapes, whereas the bottom of the piece is constructed as soft drapes made of rayon and cotton. These fiber materials seemingly fragile but are in fact more resilient than they appear. Visually, the piece presents solidity and monumentality combined with a sense of movement and malleability.

Chase-Riboud has always worked within the realm of abstraction and sometimes refers to her own work as in line with de-constructionism. In this regard, she also allows for a more theoretical explanation of her work. Although the artist has never spoken to her work in direct relation to semantics, yet, the reference to working like a de-constructionist reminds one of Roland Barthes writing on image and mythology. While Barthes concerned himself mainly with semiological analysis and ideological criticism, his demystification theory addressed the specifics of linguistics and signs in language based on the general concepts proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Chase-Riboud embeds signs, symbols and icons whose ideological significance has the propensity for multiple interpretations. Meanwhile, she also talks about the artist's purpose to create beauty. Therefore, she brings in text to consider her formal strategy based a purely visual language. "The evidence is in her recent works of "Malcolm X #10" (2017), and "Malcolm #20" (2017), the pairing of bronze in black patina with silk, wool, cotton and synthetic fibers forms a visual dialogue in the absence of figuration and leaves in final interpretations to the viewer.

Chase-Riboud's work is informed by her life as an American artist living in a foreign country. Furthermore, the knowledge of her country's own history and the knowledge of European pre-modern and modern art history also inform her work. She once described the theme and character of her work as remembering the past life in the present tense. As an abstraction sculptor, she inspires the future generation to be curious about history and to stay connected with tradition. As we find

ourselves rushing through life without questioning where we come from, Chase-Riboud's work reminds us of the necessity to reflect on the past. Through her work, the informs us that history is relevant and it must never be forgotten as we push forward. As to how one should remember and view history, she does not give a straight answer but replies in forms of abstraction. And perhaps, by being "une étrangère" is one of the ways to reconnect oneself with her past and re-invent it in the present tense.

1 Barbara Chase-Riboud and Steve A. Spitzer, "On Her Own Terms: An Interview with Barbara Chase-Riboud," *Culture 24*, vol. 2009, 734.

2 Ibid., 747.

Barbara Chase-Riboud (born 1939) is an American visual artist, bestselling novelist and non-fiction poet. Established as a sculptor, Chase-Riboud initiated international recognition with the publication of her first novel, *Dark Heritage* (1976). The book ranked on the *New York Times* Bestselling Kaffa Plus for the first time written by an American woman. From September 2013 to January 2014, the Philadelphia Museum of Art presented "Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Series," a survey of work created between 1968 and 2004. The artist worked for the Brooklyn Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in February 17, April 20, 2014. She is represented by Michael Bonfield Gallery in New York. Her current exhibition, "Barbara Chase-Riboud - Malcolm X Gampole" is on view at the gallery from September 1, 2017.

Her anthology of poetry from 1974 to 2004 is under press, as are her collected lectures. Chase-Riboud has received numerous honors, including the Goff-Woodson Prize for poetry and the Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1986, she was knighted by the French Government and received the Order des Arts et des Lettres.

Chennie Huang is an artist. Since 2014, she has been writing about modern and contemporary art while working on her artist. Her blog, "CH Renaissance" won an international contest as an online collection of art reviews and interviews. She has collaborated with young artists internationally and published books independently. She is currently practicing her M.A. / Ph.D. in art theory on scholarship from the City University of New York. She holds a B.A. and an M.F.A. from The School of Museum of Fine Arts at Boston and Yale University in Brooklyn, New York. She is currently based in Manhattan, New York.