

basis for the study of Johanson's work. Although the bibliography is far from exhaustive, leaving out seminal authors on contemporary site-specific art such as Miwon Kwon, there are many rich illustrations (over 100 total) to which Wu lends careful analysis. However, much is left unaddressed. Rather than expand upon her previous research on the *House & Garden* commission (a text that included two volumes), Wu would have better served the artist with fuller analyses of her completed commissions, which are also surprising proto-examples of repurposed spaces as well as conceptually astounding fusions of

landscape, art, and architecture. Wu's focus on the artist's creative evolution is admirable, though laborious, but perhaps more impressive was Johanson's prescient attunement to the relationship between art and environment. Upon completion of her 1975 sculpture commission, *Nostoc II*, for the Storm King Art Center in New York, Johanson wrote in a letter to the landscape architect: "I want it to be left exactly as it is: no trees taken out or planted; no landscaping of any kind; no paths, no benches, no signs, no other sculpture.... If the site is tampered with I will no longer consider it my work" (87). Johanson's early

understanding of and dedication to site-specificity and environmental art—a decade before the controversy of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*—are emblematic of the need to unravel her overall exclusion from that canon. •

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Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles

Edited by Carlos Basualdo, with essays by Barbara Chase-Riboud, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, and Ellen Handler Spitz Philadelphia Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2013

Reviewed by Jennifer Wingate

In her essay for this catalogue that accompanied an exhibition of works by Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939), Ellen Handler Spitz calls the artist "pro-tean," an apt characterization of the multi-talented expatriate novelist, poet, and sculptor. The term is equally appropriate when used to describe the art world's framing of Chase-Riboud's visual work. The inconsistencies in the literature highlight problems with the discipline of art history, and how certain label-defying artists slip through the cracks of its tidy narratives. This catalogue does not untangle those contradictions, though the essays make some fresh insights into a productive career and a striking body of work, the Malcolm X steles, which spans almost four decades (1969–2008). It also considers, and lavishly illustrates, examples of Chase-Riboud's drawings, to shed light on the artist's creative process, reconsider the relationship between figuration and abstraction in the Malcolm X series, and help tease out overarching themes of personal and public memory.

The catalogue includes four essays: by the editor Carlos Basualdo (the Keith L. and Katherine Sachs Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art [PMA]), the art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Chase-Riboud herself (a reprint of a lecture given at the PMA), and Ellen Handler Spitz (a philosopher who writes on topics ranging from aesthetics to psychology). In addition to 42 color plates and 32 supporting illustrations, there is an illustrated chronology and checklist of the thirteen sculptures in the series (compiled by John Vick). Chase-Riboud's Malcolm X sculptures, most over six feet tall, have a formidable presence, and the amply sized plates do them justice by capturing their subtle textural and tonal variations.

Shaw's is the most accessible and readable of the three interpretive essays in the catalogue. She acknowledges the art historical pitfalls raised by Chase-Riboud's art and sets out to consider why her body of work has been "so challenging for scholars" (22). She notes that Chase-Riboud "has rarely been examined in the context of larger artistic movements in America" (22), though art historian Kellie Jones has elucidated the sculptor's career in the milieu of black abstraction in the United States (and Basualdo importantly speaks here of the postwar European context).¹ Shaw observes that critics and art historians instead have focused on Chase-Riboud's interest in art through the ages and from

around the world. Jones, too, has stressed that the sculptor herself is "adamant about the fully global inspirations for her work"²—and not just its connections with African art, though these were especially easy to see in the 2014 Brooklyn Museum exhibition, "Witness: Art and Civil Rights of the Sixties," installed in galleries adjacent to Brooklyn's African ones. In her essay for that show, Jones highlights African masquerade arts as an influence for *Malcolm X #2* (1969; Fig. 1).³ It is true that the sculpture's black patina makes its folded bronze forms look like supple leather or malleable wood, something light enough to be carried. The cords and ropes that form a skirt around the bronze also show potential for movement, and transform the work into "no longer a piece of sculpture, but a personage, an object of ritual and magic."⁴

As for the American art with which *Malcolm X #2* shared space in the Brooklyn exhibition, however, Chase-Riboud never expressed much affinity: "I had a violent allergy and negative reaction to Pop Art, Protest Art, and hyper-realism."⁵ Her "focus on the aesthetic and the beautiful," in her bronze, silk, and wool pieces, Jones explains, "can be seen as diametrically opposed" to those non-aesthetic objects.⁶ It is useful nonetheless to acknowledge the influence of the fiber art movement, if only to convey the

fuller significance of the sculptor's friendship with Yale classmate and fiber artist Sheila Hicks (b. 1934). Because Chase-Riboud has lived abroad for over forty years, though, some critics question the relevance of considering her alongside American art at all. "[T]he relationship between me and America is one of confrontation," Chase-Riboud said in 2006, "I tend to, as anybody would... go where I'm loved... which is not the United States in particular."⁷

Instead of arguing for or against American contextualization of the sculptor's work, or rehashing territory covered by Jones, Shaw considers Chase-Riboud's sculpture "on its own terms and engages with the objects on the merits of their thingness and their phenomenological impact on the viewers who stand before them" (22). This decision reveals a commitment to avoid the missteps of a previous generation of critics who pigeonholed African American artists as makers of socially conscious or "primitive" art. The political implications of the series' dedication to the assassinated Civil Rights leader confused earlier writers. They had difficulty reconciling the sculptures' titles with the artist's formalist agenda. In a review of her 1970 exhibition at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer went so far as to say that the elegance of Chase-Riboud's four "Monuments to Malcolm X" (as they were called in this exhibit), "unfortunately suggest the ambiance of high fashion rather more than they suggest the theme of heroic suffering and social conflict."⁸ Chase-Riboud objected to Kramer's misinterpretation. By dedicating the sculptures to Malcolm X, she said, she was "trying to express the ideas of a man who, more than any single individual, has affected the way Black people think of themselves."⁹ Oddly, this catalogue, though specifically focused on the Malcolm X series, fails to mention any of the abstract works by other artists that were dedicated to Malcolm X, including sculptor Melvin Edwards's *The Lifted X* (1965).¹⁰ Some discussion of these might help dispel lingering confusion over the naming of the series.

All of the essayists address what

PMA Director Timothy Rubb calls the "presence of memory" and the "elegiac" mood (8) of Chase-Riboud's work, and they all see in the Malcolm X pieces formal evocations of commemorative or funereal qualities (that the sculptures have been variously called monuments and steles invites these associations). Shaw interprets the simultaneous fragility and durability of the bronze as that which "pushes the element of mortality to the fore" (25). The direct lost wax casting method that Chase-Riboud has used since the sixties results in sculptures that cannot be recast (because she forms the models directly out of manipulated wax sheets). Upon close examination, Shaw notices traces of that process in markings on the surfaces, and also areas of oxidization in the sculptures' unpolished crevices, both of which reveal the material's "slow organic life" (24). The dualities in Chase-Riboud's Malcolm X sculptures cannot be denied, but I do not see mortality—the "testimonies of death, anxiety, and disappearance" that Basualdo identifies (18), or the eviscerated slaughterhouse animals that Shaw sees (24)—to quite the same degree. These evocative sculptures will conjure different associations for different viewers. The important thing, these essays suggest, is to look at them carefully as Shaw has, to experience their presence as Spitz has (99), and also to acknowledge the artist's intent. As Chase-Riboud has said in response to a question about why she uses silk cords for some of the sculptures in the series and wool for others: "I don't think it's about politics. It is what the viewer brings to the piece and his interpretation that makes the difference...."¹¹ And in response to her naming them in tribute to and celebration of Malcolm X:

Some people have read the sculptures as an embodiment of [Malcolm X] himself, perhaps because of the raw power these sculptures emulate, but, for me, they were an expression of remembrance not embodiment and then they just grew in power and significance.¹²



Fig. 1. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Malcolm X #2* (1969), black bronze and wool, 92" x 42 1/2" x 24". Collection of the Newark Museum, New Jersey.

Basualdo locates the historic tension between the sculptures' dedication to Malcolm X and their nonrepresentational quality to the "the problematic relation that exists between modern art and memorials." "How do we speak in tongues," he asks, "while pronouncing that which must be remembered?" (19). Although artists like Claes Oldenburg had begun to experiment with pared-down anti-monuments in the sixties, acceptance of minimalist monuments such as Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* (1982) did not come until over a decade later. Isamu Noguchi's abstract proposal for a Hiroshima memorial had been rejected, in part, for not being accessible enough (27, 86). Fully aware of the discrepancy between public monuments and private tributes, Chase-Riboud intentionally included a figurative element in her African Burial Ground Memorial (*Africa Rising*, 1995) in the Ted Weiss Federal Building in Lower Manhattan (86). Her Malcolm X series may reflect loss or celebration or pride, or elicit those feelings in the view-

er, but they are not monuments in the public sense.¹³ According to the artist, the primary function of all of her art, whether a tribute to or remembrance of a historic figure, is to “produce beautiful objects that amaze, enchant, and induce strong emotions.”¹⁴ As Shaw concludes,

Without the visceral reaction produced by the viewer’s presence in the space of her work, without the viewer’s receptiveness to examining the form, there is nothing. No story. No emotion. No easy take-away with which to placate the busy art critic (31).

Fifteen years after her first Malcolm X sculptures were exhibited, Chase-Riboud created four more works for the series, and in 2007, she began five final Malcolm X sculptures. Has the current culture of public commemoration or “memorial mania,” in forms ranging from figurative to abstract to ephemeral, created a more hospitable environment for the series in the twenty-first century?¹⁵ Do the sculptures serve as a personal leitmotif, connecting the artist with her native country? Or do they signal the artist’s enduring sadness and cynicism with regard to the civil rights Malcolm X fought for “because it’s

obvious we haven’t gone anywhere, that we’re back in the 1950s”?¹⁶ This catalogue does a good job celebrating Chase-Riboud’s remarkable oeuvre, and acknowledging her individualistic and “transglobal” vision (27). Despite the admiration for the artist that it inspires, though, readers still may desire a bit more context to anchor the major ebbs and flows of her Malcolm X series to the tides of art history. •

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Notes

1. Kellie Jones, “To the Max: Energy and Experimentation,” in *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964 to 1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006): 14–34.
2. *Ibid.*, 20.
3. Kellie Jones, “Civil/Rights/Act,” in Teresa Carbone and Kellie Jones, *Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Monacelli Press, 2014), 22.
4. Francois Nora-Cachin, “Dialogue: Another Country,” in *Chase-Riboud* (Paris, 1973) cited in Patton, *African-American Art* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 208.
5. Suzette A. Spencer, “On Her Own Terms: An Interview with Barbara Chase-Riboud,” *Callaloo* 32, no. 3 (2009): 754. The interview took place in 2006 in Paris with follow-ups conducted via email.
6. Jones, “To the Max: Energy and Experimentation,” 30.
7. Spencer, “On Her Own Terms,” 739.
8. Hilton Kramer, “Black Experience and Modernist Art,” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1970, 23.
9. “People—Barbara Chase-Riboud,” *Essence* 1, no. 2 (June 1970): 62, 71; Cited in Jones, “To the Max: Energy and Experimentation,” 30.
10. Jones, “To the Max: Energy and Experimentation,” 24, 29.
11. Spencer, “On her Own Terms,” 747.
12. *Ibid.*, 748.
13. I prefer Sharon Patton’s description of the Malcolm X sculptures as “votive works of art,” rather than either “monuments” or “steles.” Patton, *African-American Art*, 209. Even though Lin’s memorial proved the success of a minimalist commemorative formal vocabulary, there’s an important distinction between a hypothetical Malcolm X memorial, for example, and sculptures dedicated to his memory.
14. Spencer, “On Her Own Terms,” 757.
15. Erika Doss discusses the ubiquity of memorials today in *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010).
16. Spencer, “On Her Own Terms,” 749.

Marisol: Sculptures and Works on Paper

Edited by Marina Pacini
Yale University Press, 2014

Reviewed by Evelyn Kain

Nine years in the making, the catalogue to the exhibition “Marisol: Sculptures and Works on Paper” at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art¹ is an exhaustive labor of love by Marina Pacini, chief curator of American, Modern and Contemporary art, who worked with the generous cooperation of the artist herself. Six insightful, well-illustrated essays, including two by Pacini, emphasize under-appreciated complexities of

Marisol’s art and life over a forty-five-year period.

The catalogue starts off with Pacini’s extensive biographical sketch and overview of Marisol’s work: her international background and variety of influences, media, themes and approaches, all far more diverse than usually associated with the artist. Pacini’s second essay focuses on the theme of family. When Marisol was eleven, her mother committed suicide, a trauma which caused her to stop speaking for years. Decades later, she created *Mi Mama Y Yo* in steel and aluminum. Both dressed in pink, the mother smiles broadly, while the child Marisol makes a petulant face. What the artist may have been thinking remains ambiguous. Similarly, Marisol’s other families, whether famous like the

Kennedys or anonymous like the fatherless Dustbowl family, are left open to interpretation.

Deborah Cullen, director and chief curator of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, illuminates the multi-faceted Latin American aspects of Marisol’s art, from pre-Columbian through Afro-Caribbean, Spanish Colonial, and popular Catholic imagery down to socially critical Latin American modernism. She cites examples such as early Venezuelan ceramic figures, the wood *santos de palo* of Puerto Rico, and Argentine *Otra Figuración* painting of the early 1960s.

Douglas Dreishpoon, chief curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, explores the “Marisol Mystique.” The “Latin Garbo” had a habit of disappearing at