

BEVERLY BUCHANAN

Ruins and Rituals

by Jared Quinton

THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM | OCTOBER 21, 2016 – MARCH 5, 2017

Beverly Buchanan isn't exactly an art world unknown. In 1981, the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta included three of Buchanan's cast concrete sculptures in *Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States* at the all-female cooperative A.I.R. Gallery. Featuring Zarina, Senga Nengudi, Howardena Pindell, and others, the show leveled an indictment of mainstream feminism's failure to fight for racial equity, both within its ranks and in the world at large. "American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle-class movement," Mendieta wrote in the catalogue.



Beverly Buchanan (American, 1940-2015). *Untitled (Slab Works 1)*, circa 1978 – 80. Black-and-white photograph of cast concrete sculptures with acrylic paint in artist studio, 8 1/2 × 11 inches. Private collection. © Estate of Beverly Buchanan, courtesy of Jane Bridges.

Mendieta's affinity for Buchanan's visually minimalist, conceptually and emotionally dense work speaks volumes. Much like Mendieta, Buchanan found ways to commune with ancestors and access forgotten histories through subtle, poetic interventions in the landscape. She experimented with diverse mediums and trends in art making, creating a genre-bending body of work that eludes easy categorization and went largely uncanonized and underappreciated during her lifetime. The artist's first-ever retrospective, which opened last month at the Brooklyn Museum, proves a timely corrective just one year after her death in 2015.

Organized by guest curators Park McArthur and Jennifer Burris, *Beverly Buchanan: Ruins and Rituals* inaugurates the Museum's "Year of Yes," a programming series timed to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. At once tightly curated and spaciouly meditative, the exhibition gives Buchanan ample room to manifest the complicated figure she was and is. Though largely excluded from the major movements of her day—thanks in part to conspiring forces of sexist and racist exclusion—Buchanan, a singular, often solitary artist, remained in constant dialogue with them.

Born in 1940 in North Carolina, Buchanan spent much of her life in the American South. In her youth she often accompanied her father Walter, a professor of agriculture, on his surveys of rural farming communities, becoming fascinated with African-American practices of subsistence and self-determination. Always attuned to the relationships between geography, memory, and identity, the artist would later take to researching obscure sites of forgotten slavery-era brutalities. Along with the stuff of the earth itself, these stories became the raw materials for Buchanan's oeuvre, which spanned post-minimal sculpture, land art, photography, writing, and the miniature shacks for which she'd become best known—sculptures that have led the art establishment to call Buchanan an "outsider artist," though the exhibition argues convincingly against this classification.

Buchanan's work is reticent and understated, demanding slowness and sustained attention from its viewers. In the late 1970s she began to make her signature *Frustula*, small concrete castings from bricks and milk cartons, whose earthy and subtly architectural forms she displayed in deceptively complex arrangements on the floor. Buchanan described these sculptures as a response to the remnants of destroyed buildings in New York and New Jersey, where she

worked for a decade as a public administrator while taking art classes on the side. They command a remarkable amount of space, suffused with a totemic power in step with the visceral materiality of their worn, textured concrete.

These small objects would establish the visual language for Buchanan's earthworks, the pseudo-monuments she made in the American Southeast (1979–86) and left to weather in the elements. Four of these have been translated to the museum in a three-channel video installation, which immerses visitors in marshy, muggy southern landscapes. Unlike the major land artists of the time (think Smithson and Heizer) who generally avoided referential content in their work, Buchanan chose sites for their particular relevance to histories of racial violence and resistance. *Marsh Ruins* (1981), a cluster of concrete and tabby mounds in coastal Georgia, sits near the titular subject of poet Sidney Lanier's elegy to the fallen Confederacy, "Marshes of Glynn." Across the bay to the east is Saint Simons Island, where a group of Igbo people sold into slavery committed mass suicide by drowning in 1803—a tragedy that had no marker before Buchanan's unofficial monument. In the ruminative video installation, we watch and listen to the tide waters lapping at the rocky outcrop, which resists but will inevitably give way to the encroaching forces of nature.

McArthur and Burress's curatorial strategy is carefully attuned to the manner in which the embedded politics of Buchanan's work emerges—through slow processes of time, sustained attention, and deliberate movement. Though more familiar than the fragments, her shack sculptures operate no differently. Combining a documentary impulse with improvisational, evocative construction, these miniature houses are the result of Buchanan's sustained research into southern vernacular architecture. Categorized according to their particular styles, the sculptures are often paired with "legends" cobbled together by Buchanan, which serve to mythologize and commemorate the inhabitants of the original homes. Lest we view the objects with too much preciousness, photographs document a performance in which the artist set several of the shacks on fire in her backyard—a reference to the widespread racial violence of the Civil Rights era.

The densest and most illuminating element of *Ruins and Rituals* is its bountiful cases of material from Buchanan's personal archive. From humorous business cards, correspondence, and expressive, scraggly drawings, to photographs of

Buchanan's process in the studio and in nature, the ephemera reveal an artist for whom relentless experimentation suffused every aspect of life. A handful of black-and-white snapshots of improvisational *Frustula* arrangements stand as some of the most affecting works in the exhibition. The mysterious, improbably haunting images testify to the subtle brilliance of Buchanan's practice as a whole, highlighting her resolute interdisciplinarity, mastery of form and space, and belief in the ability of simple materials and interventions to activate processes of contemplation, memory, and even critique.

Nearby, in a marvelously deadpan fragment of typewritten conversation from one of her research trips, Buchanan asks: "Would you say knowing that SLAVE hands built this chimney has a special meaning or says something about SURVIVAL?" The answer: "(Direct, unblinking, eye contact)."

That the divide between a racial political consciousness and practices like post-minimalism, conceptualism, and land art was only ever an arbitrary one is the crucial argument of the exhibition. No doubt there are perils in the understatement Buchanan embraced, but as *Ruins and Rituals* makes abundantly clear, the potential rewards it can bear in the right context are all the richer. In the manner that Ana Mendieta and her eclectic oeuvre have become icons of intersectional feminism, this important exhibition sets Buchanan on the path to a wider posthumous canonization. There is no questioning that she deserves it.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jared Quinton