

THE BLOG

Living with Hastings' House

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[Beverly Buchanan](#)

[Ruins and Rituals](#)

Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art
Brooklyn Museum

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For the past 26 years, Beverly Buchanan's *Hastings' House* (1989) has stood on a shelf in my loft; nearby, the legend that Beverly wrote for the art work:

Hastings' House

Brunson Earthly Hastings lived by the rules of hard work, no liquor, and one woman. His 10 sons were smart, hardworking farm boys but Anna, the only girl, was his heart. He was blind when she graduated but smiled proudly when he heard them call out DR. HASTINGS, to her.

Illuminated every night by a vintage lamp and protected from the elements by the centennial building's pressed metal ceiling, the wooden sculpture of a shack with its tin roof (19 ½ x 9 x7 inches) is a powerful visual reminder of my visit with Beverly in Athens, Georgia in 1994. Beverly was quite ill when we stayed in her home (she had difficulty breathing and there was some sort of oxygen machine in her home) but that did not stop her from driving me and my husband, Shael Shapiro around in her pickup truck, on the hilly back roads of rural Georgia, to see the folk art of her friend, Reuben Miller. I vividly remember pulling into Miller's driveway, a sea of his metal whirligigs turning in the wind. We bought several of Miller's pieces, a red devil cut out of tin and a bicycle wheel whirligig with fins and a dinosaur cut out of sheet metal, resembling a weather vane, which, ever since has spun ferociously on my windy SoHo roof.

At the time, I was there to interview Beverly for a catalog essay that was to accompany an upcoming exhibit at the Steinbaum-Krauss Gallery in SoHo. The group show was entitled, *Memories of Childhood* and my piece on Beverly Buchanan focused on words and images: "Crossing Over: The Artists as Writer— Which Comes First: Words or Images?" Beverly was clearly a story-teller and I was curious: Were her tales about the inhabitants of the shacks she created, entirely fictional? What experiences had she drawn on to create this work?

The visit to Athens was full of surprises. First, there was her biography, not the one I expected from a female artist who made shacks. Beverly was raised by adoptive parents, her great aunt and uncle Marion and Walter Buchanan, in South Carolina where Walter Buchanan was the Dean of the School of Agriculture at South Carolina State

College at Orangeburg, then the state's only public college for African Americans. It turned out that Beverly most certainly did not grow up in a shack, living instead on campus in a very comfortable home which had two bedrooms, a separate kitchen and dining room, and a long porch that Beverly told me was the place where she used to roller skate.

Her exposure to shacks came through Walter Buchanan who often visited farms in his role as an educator. This was where Beverly saw how farm families actually lived and it made a lasting impression. While she had an indoor toilet in her own home, she was struck by being able to see the sky in between the boards of an outhouse. With her father, she often spent the night in the farmer's modest dwelling.

Although Buchanan sketched and made things all her life, using leftover stuff as she called it, she was at first bent on a career in the sciences. She earned a BS in medical technology from Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina and then successive Masters Degrees from Columbia University in 1968 and 1969 in Parasitology and Public Health. After that she worked as a Medical Technologist for the Veterans Administration in the Bronx and as a health educator for the East Orange, NJ Health Department. During this period, she thought that she would become a doctor and she applied to and was wooed by several medical schools.

I thought about Beverly's aborted medical career when I re-read the legend for *Hastings' House*. Was Anna Hastings' story a foil to Beverly's? Beverly who never did go to medical school and ANNA, the "only girl, Brunson Earthly Hastings' heart," who graduated as DR. HASTINGS. Anna's title in my legend is in all caps, an indication, undoubtedly, of the prestige of her becoming a professional, a reminder that a shack dweller can become a future doctor, professional, artist, or entrepreneur. If a shack somehow reflected the personality of the shack dweller, then, perhaps my shack reflected Beverly's life, too.

What changed the direction of her life was enrolling in The Art Students League in New York where she studied with the painter Norman Lewis. By 1977, Buchanan quit her job in East Orange and declared herself a full-time artist. Three years later, in 1980, she received a Guggenheim fellowship and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship in Sculpture.

Over time, Beverly shifted locations to Macon and Atlanta -spending more of her life closer to her southern roots. She rekindled her love of vernacular architecture, the outbuildings, farm houses, and shacks that she had seen as a child. When I visited her in the 1990s, she was living in a big old house in Athens, not far from the University of Georgia, with her friend Patti Phagan, a curator of prints and drawings at the Georgia Museum of Art.

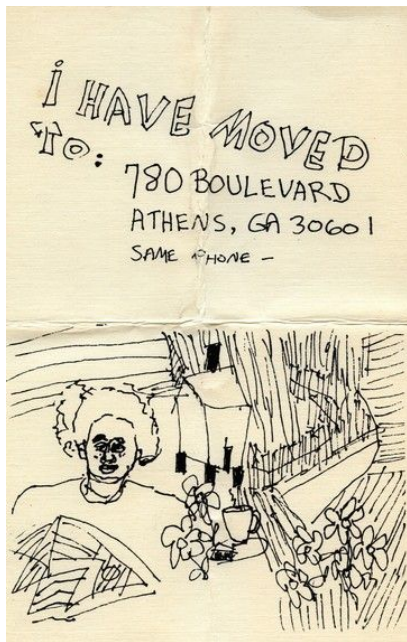
Owning *Hastings' House* has had a strange effect on me. I've spent years imagining the lives of the Hastings family, the story spinning out of control beyond Beverly Buchanan's

legend. Hard work, no liquor and one woman, yes, but it was Anna's mother, who was the real hero in my tale. She stood in the doorway, her apron fluttering in the breeze. She taught herself to read and she saved pennies to send Anna to school, convincing her husband that a girl needed an education more than a boy.

Wonder what Beverly would have thought of this version?



Hastings' House 1989



I Have Moved--Note from Beverly with drawing

The Shack as Art and Social Comment
 By SUZANNE SLESIN
New York Times (1920s current file); Jan 18, 1990; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
 pg. C14

The Shack as Art and Social Comment
 By SUZANNE SLESIN

Large, vibrant drawings, often photographs and sometimes sketches against the stark white walls of a white art gallery, Beverly Buchanan celebrates the tiny shacks of the South in a new show. The 52 pieces by Ms. Buchanan, a 40-year-old artist who lives in Athens, Ga., will be on view through Feb. 4 at the Southern Statesmen Gallery, 117 Greene Street, Chelsea district.

"A celebration of the architecture of the shack in two and three dimensions," which opened Sunday, brings together many points of view: the shack as a place of refuge, as an architectural act, as an artistic expression and as social commentary. The single shacks, which in real life often had newspaper-covered walls and were without the benefit of sanitation, are on the shelves. The tiny art objects with wicker and ceramic furniture and other accessories are on the shelves. "People lived in them, sometimes generations and they had dreams, and sometimes their dreams came true and were realized in the forms of their children," said Ms. Buchanan. For each of the shacks, she offers a sketch and a story, often Dickensian, but all based on real people. "I only just know the little family, but I know a family like them," she said, referring to the Virginia street entrepreneur "The Old Woman," a 13-inch-tall wood shack. "I had a woman in it and her son was in it."

The photographs are more graphic. Two of "My Story Line Pottery House"—one the way it looked when the 45-year-old woman lived in it and the other the way it looked two months after she had been taken to a nursing home—are an evocative statement of the care these houses received from their owners and what happens when they are abandoned.

"These houses are a combination of people who in their poverty chose to make architecture for themselves that reflected their life as best as possible," said Suzanne Slesin, the gallery's curator. "They could be the only they spent their lives or the houses they inherited from their parents."

Beverly is saying that out of adversity, the shack dwellers have created a strong family unit and a sense of a shared community.

Shack living with the other small buildings (1920s to 1970) and seven photographs (1970 to 1980) are 14 of each. Ms. Buchanan's drawings (1980 to 1985) are 28 of each. One depicts a group of houses in Athens, Ga. "If anyone comes in who is from there, they'll probably say, 'Oh, look, I know where that is,'" Ms. Buchanan said.

Although Ms. Buchanan first exhibited her work on the shacks in 1984 and studied at the Art Students League in New York in 1981, she was

and her first career. She received master's degrees in psychology and public health from Columbia University, and during the 60's she worked as a medical technologist for the Veterans Administration in the Bronx and as a health educator for the East Orange (N.J.) health department.

But at 23 because her boss was a long-standing racist, when Ms. Buchanan moved to New York, she was particularly drawn to buildings that were being demolished, and these served as an inspiration for her art.

"I made some one of color, and she explained, 'They looked like rubble. I called them 'City Ruins.'"

In 1970, Ms. Buchanan, who grew up in Kingsburg, S.C., moved back to the South and started making the shacks described as a "different kind of ruin" upon clay mixed with concrete. In 1978, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts to continue this work.

She came here two years ago the second time to North Carolina, where her family came from originally, and looked at the shacks there and houses that had been demolished. Something clicked, and she started making small shacks and houses, first out of brown-ore paper, and the last two years, out of wood and tin.

Some of the most dramatic ones, now in cedar, "but a lot in old Georgia heart pine," she said. "That's what was used to construct the houses in the first place."

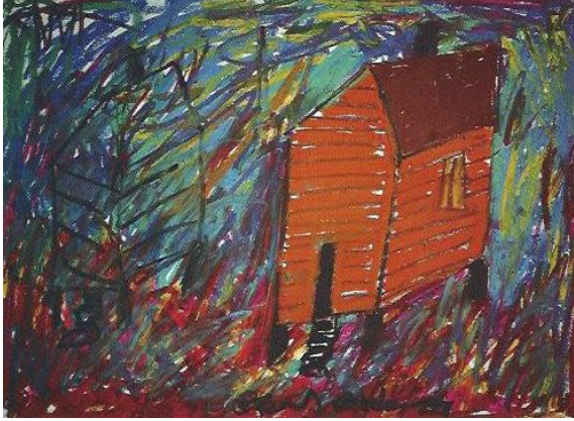
Ms. Buchanan explained that the wood was plentiful and particularly suitable because it was prepared in a certain way. "It's hard, and hard to cut," she said.

Most of the shacks are only about six inches high. "It's not of interest in terms of studio space," said the artist, who has also created several full-size shacks. One is currently on display at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, and another is permanently installed in an Atlanta park.

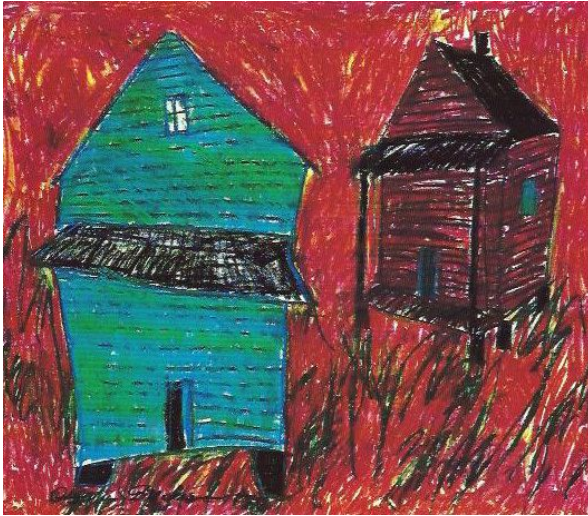
Although small in size, Ms. Buchanan's miniature pieces exhibit strong emotional resonance. "I imagined shacks and tin shacks, but they weren't," she said.

Last week, as the shacks were being set into clear plastic stands, putting them into the gallery stepped to look. A manager pointed to one of the shacks and told Ms. Buchanan, "I've never seen a house just like that and like made in a house just like that in all of New York City."

Beverly Buchanan holding Hastings' House New York Times January 18, 1990
"The Shack as Art and Social Comment," Suzanne Slesin, Photo by Jack Manning



ROAD 23 NORTH, 1991, OIL PASTEL ON PAPER



Santee-Cooper Basin (S.C.), oil pastel on paper, 1990

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