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Beverly Buchanan's Shack Sculptures Feel at Home in Detroit

An exhibition at David Klein Gallery brings together Buchanan's evocative shack constructions and pastel drawings.

By Sarah Rose Sharp



Beverly Buchanan: Low Country, at David Klein Gallery in Detroit, installation view
(all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — Due in part to its protracted economic siege state, for many decades, Detroit sat largely outside the realm of art world conversations. Aside from the Cass Corridor artists of the early 1970s, there has not been a major contemporary art movement to emerge from Detroit. As an outsider place, it has long been a landscape both literally and figuratively shaped by the work of “outsider” artists (this despite being home to Michigan’s only dedicated undergraduate art school, the College for Creative Studies).

Perhaps for this reason, the work of Beverly Buchanan feels like a perfectly natural fit for Detroit. A

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small retrospective of her shack sculptures and drawings, Beverly Buchanan: Low Country, is on view at David Klein Gallery downtown, and the aesthetics feel right at home with those of landmark Detroit artists like Olayami Dabls and Tyree Guyton, painters like Jide Aje and Gilda Snowden, and the wood constructions of artist John Egner. Buchanan's evocative little constructions and childlike pastel drawings are alive with the same kind of color and wabi-sabi principles that inspired a whole category of practicing artists in Detroit.



Beverly Buchanan, “Room Added” (2011), foreground, and “Purple Door” (2001).

I confess, I struggle a bit with the concept of “outsider” artists — it always feels to me like a euphemism. Buchanan is not, in fact, an outsider artist; in addition to pursuing a career in medicine as far as a Master’s Degree in Public Health from Columbia University, she enrolled at the Art Students’ League in New York, where she studied painting under Norman Lewis. Eventually, she came into contact with Romare Bearden, who went on to mentor her, and she became a player within the New York art scene for several decades. But in spite of conscious and formal consideration of the art movements of her time, Buchanan’s work — especially the selection on display at David Klein Gallery — is equally in conversation with the architecture and craft aesthetics of the rural South. Just like Buchanan, Detroit’s majority African-American population can trace bloodlines back to the states below the Mason-Dixon line, and the desire to recreate and reiterate these subjects indicates ways in which the Northern Migration did less to extinguish the poetic memory of place than one might imagine — place as identity, shack as portrait.



Beverly Buchanan, “Spirit of Zora Neale Hurston 08 Neighborhood in Florida” (2008).

The sense of one-to-one identification with these structures is reinforced in works like “Studio Home” (2008), which features a small, embedded self-portrait of Buchanan gazing out at the viewer through a window in the little dimensional rectangle of patchwork foam core and acrylic paint. Much like the fragmented shards of broken mirrors that adorn the outbuildings and fixtures of Olayami Dabl’s ongoing masterwork of installation art, *Iron Teaching Rocks How To Rust*, Buchanan’s shacks look back at you, from windows like winking eyes, or windowless walls like blank faces — more so than through the elided features of the rare figure in her pastel landscapes.

Place never really leaves you, come development or entropy, because it resides within your memory. It stands to reason that one of the painful schisms between “old” Detroit and new comes down to the very question of what the landscape reveals. For someone new to the scene, the empty fields, moldering homes, or abandoned industrial structures might (and do) look rife with potential — one can imagine worlds of possibilities. For someone who grew up on these streets, there is still the echo of a former corner store, a friend’s house, a high school, a whole neighborhood, hardly less real for being stripped from view.



Beverly Buchanan, "Figure in Green" (2004).

Or perhaps it goes deeper than the memory of a single lifetime. Buchanan's work speaks to me, and I have no Southern roots, no direct connection to her subject matter. Perhaps this is the power of ancestry, the way descendants of immigrants (or enslaved people brought across the Atlantic by force) might feel odd stirrings of home upon visiting the forfeited homeland of their predecessors. Buchanan's work taps and presents places that seem to live in the same neighborhood of ur-consciousness. Both simple and astonishing in their complexity, her works manage the rare feat of accessing the universal through the incredibly unique, leaving no one on the outside.

BEVERLY BUCHANAN LOW COUNTRY



Beverly Buchanan, "Figure in Green" (2004).

Beverly Buchanan: *Low Country* remains on view at David Klein Gallery (1520 Washington Boulevard, Detroit, Michigan) through July 29.