

Ruins of the Old South

By John Haber in New York City

Beverly Buchanan and Rashid Johnson

For Beverly Buchanan, taking stock means assessing what black communities far from New York have won and lost. She uses Minimalism as a marker, to picture how much or how little of a community endures. She uses folk art, too, to bring the remains to life.

Buchanan's slabs and **her shacks** may seem to belong to two very different traditions. One is all about objects in the space of a museum, the other about objects in the lives of ordinary people. One is hard gray, the other in vivid color on soft wood and paper. Both, though, are about materials and memories. Turning from one to the other is like night and day, but only because black Americans have lived through some long days and nights. As a postscript, **Rashid Johnson** seeks a place to call home for himself and his father.

Minimalism as marker

The Brooklyn Museum does not lie in ruins, but its Sackler Center for Feminist Art does. It seems only right in a year of fear and uncertainty for feminism and the arts. They are ruins of the old South at that. They could be speaking directly to a racist president, with a dignity far indeed from shrill voices, ignorant threats, and **gold toilets**. If they seem to have been here forever, Beverly Buchanan took her time rounding them up. As a black woman, she had her own personal **Great Migration**.



As ruins go, they are not particularly stately or painful to behold. They offer neither monuments nor devastation. They are their best at their very quietest—in the wing's outer hall, where one may pass on the way to something else. A few lie about, as if left over from a construction site or a graveyard. More appear in wall projections, set on college campuses where people really do pass with hardly a glance. Their stillness alone asks museum visitors to stop and to give them time.

Buchanan thrives on the ambiguity between construction materials and signs of destruction, not to mention art and life. She did not even call the works ruins. She preferred *slabs* or *frustula*, meaning fragments, and she cast them in concrete in the late 1970s from found objects such as bricks. She thought of them more as survivors—or testimony to survivors. "Here I am," she spoke of them as saying. "I'm still here."

"Ruins and Rituals" continues in the alcoves to either side of *The Dinner Party*, by Judy Chicago. Maybe Chicago supplies the rituals. The two rooms fill out a career with other fragments of the South, including notes from her Guggenheim Fellowship in the Georgia marshlands and postcards after an uncle's photographs. Assemblages of used clothing and pills stand in for their wearers and users. Small model homes, churches, and schools catch up with Buchanan after 2000. They amount to full buildings, but also still to scraps, this time of painted wood.

Those works bring her closer to folk art, and her oil pastel drawings recall *Art Brut*. Yet she was never simply an outsider. Born in 1940, she grew up in Georgia (like another black artist of nearly the same age, *Jake McCord*), where her father was the dean of a black college. She studied with *Norman Lewis* at the Art Students League in New York, back when oil colors meant something. She befriended *Romare Bearden*, who knew something about the black community, painting, and collage. Her concrete plinths have obvious ties to Minimalism.

Still, she returned to Georgia and drew away from New York, where she rarely exhibited up to her death in 2015. Even now, her work remains modest enough that many will walk quickly past. The curators, Jennifer Burris and Park McArthur, include too few works on paper and too much memorabilia as well. Like *Rachel Whiteread*, Buchanan made casting into a kind of reversal—not just of mass and space, but also of neglect and recovery. Even after Donald J. Trump, maybe the rest of us will still be here. In a follow-up show of her shacks, just weeks after he left office, there are already signs of hope.

Twin histories

Buchanan had just driven past an abandoned building when something ominous caught her friend's eye, a sign for the Klan. For a New Yorker in the passenger seat, it must have held the twin terrors of the foreign and the familiar. As African Americans, they must have known, too, that the threat was meant for them. She could only offer the reassurance that her relatives lay not far off, and they would be home soon. She knew as well that she had seen what she came for, that sad one-family dwelling, and could turn it into art. Like her wood model, it had a story all its own about people and places in the South.

A show follows more than twenty years of her stories, starting in the 1980s, as "Shacks and Legends." The title points to a dual focus, but then so in a different way does her remembrance, in wall text beside the work. Coming from up north, Buchanan was searching for other people's histories, but also hers, and they remain elusive for all the vivid reality of her art. Is the model's crude construction a testimony to the original or to her trust in the handmade? She had studied with Lewis, the **black Abstract Expressionist**, and each scrap of wood is a gesture, too. The shed sure looks boarded up, as the home must have been, but then so does a work right next to it, a tribute to those who had occupied a building like it for decades.

Works on paper have much the same dual concerns. Their bright colors and slashing gestures take her back to painting, and the first one sees is a black woman—looking at a shack in the middle distance, as if unsure of its closeness to her or its absence apart from memory. Other sketches and models stick to shacks, with a variety that attests to Buchanan's artistry and their histories. She may throw in tin along with wood, further emulating her subject matter, but her media infect each other as

well, with more oil pastel decorating the houses and tobacco sheds. The show also includes her obsessive photographs and documentation. After the opening wall text, one must catch the occasional typescript or scan a bar code to read more, with one notable exception.

One sketch holds plenty of text, as again a personal history. Buchanan, who grew up in North Carolina, had recently settled down in Georgia, and the text does not say so, but it does say why. After New York, she wanted to reclaim the popular imagination as hers, and her style also suggests **folk art**, in a gallery that specializes in just that. After Lewis, she must have wanted to get back to her stories, and she found a friend in Bearden, the ultimate **African American storyteller**. One can see his sense of longing in that opening sketch of a woman—and his collage in the flat colors of her profile as well. Still, Bearden was an urban storyteller, and Buchanan's stories ended closer to home.

The Brooklyn Museum gave her more space in 2017 for those *Slab Works*. Like the shacks, their casts of actual architecture suggest half-remembered fragments or ruins. At the same time, they attest to her sophistication in their resemblance to monuments and Minimalism. Both series anticipate Whiteread's cast of a on a hill on **Governor's Island**. Was Buchanan the southerner who made it big in New York or the New Yorker who left to find her roots? As curated by Aurélie Bernard Wortsman, how about both?

Abigail DeVille had her start in Virginia, and she remains a "Homebody," with a show of that name in the gallery's back room. One could mistake her for Buchanan working big. What looks like the side of a life-size shack is only that, though, one side. She has tiled it with flooring, but its back is the back of a canvas—facing a wall for what the shack might contain. It thrusts that much more into three dimensions, with the tools of a rural woodshed, but she has in mind her grandmother's apartment in the Bronx. DeVille, who recently installed the torch of the Liberty Bell in Madison Square Park, found freedom in uprooting a Bronx floor.

Watermelon men

Rashid Johnson calls his installation *Anxious Men*, but why worry? It exudes confidence at every step, and that can easily rub off onto you. The air of confidence starts with its sheer existence, filling the back room of the Drawing Center from wall to wall. It could be his most ambitious work ever, sharing the floor with **Richard Pousette-Dart**, for an artist with no shortage of opportunities and ambition. Johnson has claimed the entirety of African American history and culture as his own, while remaking it as an act of his imagination, with what a past work called the "New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club." Welcome to the club.



Here confidence extends to the very comforts of home. Wallpaper gives the illusion of a wood-lined interior in white and a warm, dark red. A potted cactus in the corner adds to the signs of creature comforts, especially since the artist made his mark not in the southwest but in Chicago. The wallpaper serves as backdrop for half a dozen large faces, scrawled or rather incised into his characteristic mix of wax and black soap. They have a loopy

presence, the white of pristine wall tile shining through the spattering and smears of black. Johnson knows how to get his hands dirty, but also how and when to clean up.

Step closer, and that wallpaper comes down to a repeated photo of a single man. Young and confident himself, he holds his own in a white robe meant for martial arts in an interior as personal as the one at the museum. The bookshelves behind him hold his favorites, including a volume on Malcolm X and a stereo receiver that might be supplying the actual room's soundtrack—Melvin Van Peebles's "Love, That's America," from *Watermelon Man*. The music could boost your confidence, too. Shelves have been a motif for Johnson as well in his mix of photography, family and cultural history, and painterly blackness. He used them for *The Ritual* in the Guggenheim's summer show of recent acquisitions, "[Storylines](#)."

Where, then, is the anxiety, and where the men, in the plural? One might locate both in the incisions. The faces have something of [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#), but without the air of [street art and self-expression](#), and something of [Nicole Eisenman](#), but without the preening or the insightful [gender politics](#). Stare long enough at the repeated circles of those black eyes, and anxiety may set in after all. Could the man in the photograph also be staring you down, and could the music, too, insist on a confrontation, at least with white audiences? Or could they be reaching out to a political community across races, just as some at Occupy Wall Street adopted the same song.

[Zanele Muholi](#) reaches for community and diversity, too, in the LGBT population of South Africa. Yet the [portrait photos](#) in her "Isibonelo/Evidence," at the Brooklyn Museum and in Chelsea would not look out of place on Instagram, even in black and white. A second installation, of gay wedding photos, is even blander. Were there gay pet photos, she might have included them, too, as well as on Facebook. Her video of a gay wedding adds little as well. Johnson's wallpaper may look by comparison a polite fiction, but it cuts teasingly close to the truth.

Johnson stood out in "[Freestyle](#)," the first of several shows of emerging artists at the Studio Museum. Now he gets personal, and his multiplicity of faces extends to multiple points in time. The man in is his father, right around the time of his birth. The work exists then, now, and in the act of creation in between. If Johnson's father looks at home, the work leaves his future unwritten, and the books behind him could just as well signal what another past work called *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Art's displacements and multiplicity can create confidence or anxiety, maybe even both at once.

Beverly Buchanan ran at [The Brooklyn Museum](#) through March 5, 2017. Buchanan's shacks ran at [Andrew Edlin](#) through April 15, 2017, in an inspired pairing with photographs by William Christenberry, and through May 1, 2021, with Abigail DeVille. Rashid Johnson ran at the [Drawing Center](#) through December 20, 2016, Zanele Muholi at [The Brooklyn Museum](#) through November 8 and at [Yancey Richardson](#) through December 5. A related review looks at other shows by [Rashid Johnson](#).