

Art in America

SPIRITS WELCOME: BEVERLY BUCHANAN AT ANDREW EDLIN

By Wendy Vogel



Beverly Buchanan, *Blue Sky Shack*, 1988, oil pastel on paper, 38 by 50 inches.

During the six years since Beverly Buchanan's first solo show at Andrew Edlin (she died in 2015, just after her debut there), the artist's work has been folded into broader discourses about outsider art and resistance politics, largely thanks to her showing at the Brooklyn Museum and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Her second solo exhibition at the gallery, "Shacks and Legends, 1985–2011," offers an opportunity to revisit her renderings of houses—inspired by those built by rural-dwelling African-Americans. The body of work includes dollhouse-size maquettes and colorful drawings of shacks, photographs of some of the actual homes and their inhabitants, and the titular "legends," stories Buchanan recollected or invented about the residents.

Buchanan is often miscategorized as an "outsider artist," likely because of her interest in folk art aesthetics and her having turned to art as a second career. She was raised in South Carolina, where, as a child, she accompanied her adoptive father—dean of agriculture at South Carolina State College, a historically Black institution—on trips to tenant farms. After working as a public health educator in New Jersey, Buchanan enrolled at the Art Students League of New York in the early 1970s and created Post-Minimal sculptures and drawings that memorialized urban decay. In 1977, she moved to Georgia, where she embarked on a series of public artworks that marked sites of racial injustice with gravestone-like mounds of concrete or tabby, a mixture of materials including lime, sand, and shells that was used in the region until the mid-nineteenth century. Her shack works, begun in the mid-'80s, honor the history of Southern vernacular architecture through a type of field study.

Even if Buchanan didn't fit the profile herself, folk artists were a motivating force of her later work. In this exhibition, the large drawing *Blue Sky Shack* (1988) functions as a manifesto. To the left of an illustration of two buildings, rendered in slashes of oil pastel, Buchanan has penned a statement about the evolution of her work: "As a Southern artist, I found that I was interested in the work of folk artists and . . . discovered that some of my ideas about returning to a 'simple' uncomplicated look in my own work, were shared with them." She cites the artist Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982) as an inspiration, noting that her home "was engulfed in a magic forest of her work. Every surface of her work had a mark from her hand." Buchanan saw her works as "attempts to celebrate the spirit of the shack dwellers," who expressed their creative innovation in their home design, gardens, and everyday rituals.

This selection of Buchanan's shack works reflects an organic evolution in her formal process. In the mid-1980s, she favored expressionistically painted rectangular forms reminiscent of the tobacco barns of her native North Carolina. Her structures from the later '80s and '90s faithfully emulate details such as broken windows, tin roofs, and burned wood. In a series from 2008, responding to a hurricane that damaged homes in Florida, Buchanan adopted a neon palette, rendering light and shade in broad, bright strokes. While the sculptural details suggest serious reflection on specific sociopolitical conditions, Buchanan's trademark sense of humor and awe comes through in the legends. A 1991 legend for Miss Mary's House, not on view but accessible through a QR code, ends on a mystical note. After visiting Mary's "imposing fortress," Buchanan "left with the understanding of silenced secrets and a prophecy: 'You'll be famous long before you die.' When is that, went unanswered."



Beverly Buchanan, *Orangeburg County Family House*, 1993, paint, sharpie, garland, necklace, wood chips, bark, buttons, bottle caps, license plate, film canister, thumbtacks, clay pot, glass bottle, thread and glue on wood, 14 ¼ by 14 ¾ by 10 ½ inches.

Buchanan's architectural homages are conceptually linked with her "spirit jars"—an interpretation of the folk art form of "memory jugs" usually left on graves. Six of these compressed assemblages, which often include figurines, shells, and home decor, are exhibited in an adjoining gallery with work by Abigail DeVille. Only one shack on view shares the jars' bric-a-brac aesthetic: *Orangeburg County Family House* (1993). The miniature wooden building is adorned with buttons, bottle caps, a wooden figure of a Black woman raising her fist, and a 1969 South Carolina license plate. On the surface, Buchanan has scribbled the names of people from her hometown. Like the artist's public artworks of the early '80s, and in light of her participation in lunch-counter protests in the early '60s, this piece suggests a hidden subtext: civil rights activism. Some of the names displayed here as if on a memorial—Davis, Hildebrand, Thomas—match those of people injured in the Orangeburg Massacre of 1968, in which police shot anti-segregation protesters on the South Carolina State College campus. A small spirit jar sits inside the structure. One can barely make out two words scrawled on it: "not magic."