ArtReview

Beverly Buchanan’s Anti-Monuments

Chris Fite-Wassilak Features 30 April 2026 ArtReview

The eroded assemblages and crumbling structures of Beverly Buchanan were ahead of their time, but worthy of ours

A few rocky lumps sit beside a highway running along the coast in southeast Georgia. Set just off the road, next to a small picnic spot you might pull into in order to view the islands and surrounding inlet, is an uneven trio of large mounds of tabby and concrete that peek up out of the reeds and grass. They could be natural, but their speckled surfaces crumble in a way that seems constructed, as if they were building foundations that have laxed and sagged, let themselves go, eroding unevenly as the tides enter and exit, the seawater at times covering them completely. In the brush, slightly apart from these fake

rocks, is a messy slip of concrete sticking up from the ground like an improvised grave, with writing that has been scored into it with a stick: *Marsh Ruin, Beverly Buchanan, 7/81*.

Beverly Buchanan was a painter and sculptor, active during the 1970s until her death in 2015. *Marsh Ruins* was part of a series of cryptic, solemn nonmonuments that the artist placed outdoors across Georgia, Florida and North Carolina during the late 1970s and 80s. Determinedly mute, indifferent to the passing cars, the Ruins still manage to draw in around them the layers of the surrounding landscape. Shell middens, ancient piles of shells that evidence the lives that came before European settlers, dot the nearby coastline in similar mounds. Just across the bay, the *Ruins* face towards St Simons Island, where other ruins sit, also made from tabby – a labour-intensive basic concrete formed from oyster shells and sand – as the remaining foundations of the plantation houses and slave quarters that used to cover the island. It was on the island in 1803 that a boat of enslaved West Africans revolted, choosing to walk into the marshes and drown over slavery. The Glynn marshes where Buchanan's silent sentinels are placed was designated a park during the 1920s only because of a rambling Romantic poem that hymned the landscape by Sidney Lanier. It was decades after Lanier died, in 1881, that the revisionist advocacy group the Daughters of the Confederacy elevated him as 'the poet of the Confederacy' and 'The Marshes of Glynn' (1878) became regular school-recital fodder across the American South. In the poem, Lanier asks whimsically, 'Oh, what is abroad in the marsh and the terminal sea?' Buchanan's slowly disintegrating gesture is a grim, knowing response, a reminder of all that underwrites and supports the selective and amnesiac idealism that Lanier came to represent.

In another marshland, across the Atlantic in Europe, Buchanan's work will feature, starting this spring, as part of the Venice Biennale, showing documentation of her outdoor works alongside a selection of paintings and small-scale sculptures. In addition, a touring retrospective is currently at the Frac Lorraine, in Metz. Indeed, there's been growing awareness of her work outside of the US, particularly since a posthumous retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2016–17. This seems, in part, due to pieces like *Marsh Ruins* and her parallel outdoor works: Land art without the monumental heroism or vast scarring of a landscape, which manages to feel both ancient and manufactured, reflecting a quieter sensibility that pulses with unease. The way these

works attune to the layers of their settings, their repressed memories and overwritten histories, asks us to look out for such tremors in our present. Her outdoor sculpture *Unity Stones* (1983) is an unassuming assembly of squat stones that sits on a patch of grass in front of a beige brick community centre in Macon, Georgia. It's easily overlooked, to the point that I drove past it twice without realising; up close, two low, upright rectangles of worn concrete preside over half a dozen lumps of granite and concrete gathered around them, all patched with brown and yellowing lichen. It's a silent parliament that also offers a place simply to sit, a rare public amenity among the low-income area of the city's underused, cracked sidewalks, across the street from a shuttered, crumbling performing-arts centre. The community centre itself – named after Booker T. Washington, the Black activist who promoted temperance and notions of elitism as the means to slowly elevate African-American rights – had been closed for years when I visited (it has since reopened), adding to the sense of forlorn hope promised by the work's title.

Unity Stones, 1983, cast concrete and black granite. Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York

Some of Buchanan's belated renown is also down to recognising the unique efforts and trajectory of the artist herself: a Black, queer Southerner who trained in parasitology and public health, who in her attention and care for that sense of 'public' began making artwork. As a largely self-taught artist, hers is not a typical artworld success story of art school to commercial galleries, nor one of folk-art fringes, but of someone who knowingly drew on both those disparate contexts while maintaining a sense of independence; who began working with galleries in New York, then moved down to Macon to teach and focus on her art, the context shaping her work to come. There's a sense in her work that its anonymity is part of the point.

Underwriting the earthen outdoor works was Buchanan's longterm engagement with the contingencies and material traces of living in a place: the structures that people inhabited, and what was left when they, or the building, were gone. There were similar sculptures that had been exhibited indoors: gnomic slabs of concrete at times arranged in slight stacks on the floor, sometimes leaning on each other, as if somewhere between a ritualistic cairn and a heavyset scale architectural model. In the sculpture *Mid Line Fault* (1981), two angular sets of concrete, looking as if quickly cast within a concrete box and a plastic bag and painted a brick red, prop up a long, slim slab that leads out over a metre, as if they were the initial steps of a foundation or a shaky start to an improvised wall, the stoney aggregate seemingly ready to crumble off. The *Frustula* series (1978–80) comprises works that suggest the remnant bricks and corners of a demolished building, the occasional imprint resembling a design from a fragment of a column facade on some of the chunks.

These gatherings of granite and concrete, studies of lives and structures left behind, fed into Buchanan's work of looking at what was still standing: she began photographing the informal housing and piecemeal living arrangements she saw while growing up in and working across the South. Tobacco-farm barns, shotgun houses, single-room cabins cobbled together from found wood and metal sheeting by roadsides and railway tracks, on the edges of properties that were, most often, where Black tenant farmers were able to live. In 1985 she began what became a series that would continue throughout her life, creating drawings, paintings and sculptures of these shacks, structures that inhabited what she would later call a 'middle southern coastal world'. Some, such as *Tribute to Juanita* (2011), are like small maquettes, cobbled together from splintering bits of

unpainted wood to make up a square abode, with one door at the front and a chimney sticking out the top. Others, like *Shot Gun House* (c. 1992), are more ornate: a similarly small, fragile model of single-room houses but covered in a patchwork of buttons and trinkets, one side of its roof made up from an old rusting license plate bearing the Georgia epithet – 'the peach state'. In her many colourful, scratchy drawings and paintings in the series, the shacks are depicted in vibrant blues and reds, imbued with a restless energy, a tribute to where Buchanan located what she saw as culture and creativity. Interestingly the more widely exhibited shack works only ever informed one outdoor piece, a commission titled *Hard Days Work Shack* (1988), a small house structure tucked off a residential road on another blank bit of grass in the east side of Atlanta. It's about the size of a kids' playhouse, black windows and a door painted on, with loose yellow squiggles painted onto its red siding. It is, at first, playful and flippant, but among the patioed, multistorey houses and an adjacent apartment complex blazoned with the branding 'Studioplex', it feels increasingly out of place as it sits there, silent, closed off, semi-abandoned.

Shot Gun House, c. 1992, mixed media, 36 × 26 × 39 cm. Courtesy Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens

As Buchanan's works continue to age, it's her view of the long term that becomes increasingly poignant, as if with her works she had a sense of how they might be seen decades from the moment of their creation. With much of her work, Buchanan actively sought to create ruins, markers to quiet histories and what was unnoticed, wary of the distortions and impositions that come with the conventional modes of elevation and monumentalising. Buchanan knew the shacks she captured would soon be gone, temporary architectures obliterated in cycles of building and destruction; while with her seemingly more-enduring works she ensured that a sense of impermanence was built in from the start. In considering Buchanan's decision to make erosion and disintegration an active part of her outdoor works, critic Andy Campell wrote, 'Ruination occurs because of a *consistent and collective forgetting*. Ruination demands an absence of care – neither

an iconoclastic drive to destroy, nor a caregiver’s promise to keep. Ruination is an effect of thoughtlessness and inattention.’ Buchanan’s works cultivate embodiments of this forgetting, markers of what hasn’t been made known that would give way in the same disintegrating, careless arc. It’s an approach that bears thinking about alongside calls for monuments and memorials of imperialist and racist histories to be removed: let them go to ruin, where ruination becomes an act of repair, a way of eroding out to a wider sense of what is silent, what is lost.

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