

Beverly Buchanan: Northern Walls and Southern Yards

March 25 – May 13, 2023

Gallery 1: Early Abstraction, 1971-1982

Gallery 2: Return to Southern Roots, 1982-2012

Curated by Aurélie Bernard Wortsman

Andrew Edlin Gallery is proud to present an exhibition of rarely seen works by **Beverly Buchanan** (1940-2015) from two distinct periods in her life – her early years as an abstract expressionist painter in New York City and her later return to her roots in art inspired by her complex views on the rural South. The first section of the show features the artist’s abstract paintings and works on paper from the 1970s, alongside post-minimalist sculpture from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The second section introduces a later, more personal side of Buchanan’s oeuvre, her colorful depictions of flowers and small folk-inspired assemblages created during the same period as her well-known “shacks.” A number of the works in the show, many of which were part of the artist’s private collection, have never been shown.

Though Buchanan wrote about her love of “making things” from an early age, it wasn’t until 1971, when she began taking evening classes taught by African-American painter Norman Lewis (1909-1979) at the Art Students League in New York, that her career as an artist took off. Abstract still-lives that she made in Lewis’s class in 1972 are displayed here for the first time. That same year, her paintings were included in a group show at Cinque Gallery, a nonprofit space co-founded by Lewis and Romare Bearden (1911-1988), which showcased the art of emerging minority artists.

Having witnessed demolition sites in Harlem and SoHo, Buchanan evoked the visual erosion of architectural facades through what she dubbed her “Wall” paintings. In 1976 she presented a selection that she called “Torn Walls” in a two-person show titled *City Walls* at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey. In his New York Times review, David Shirey described the show as “indisputably a tinderbox of a display that will cause sparks to fly” and “the kind ...one sees more regularly at the Whitney Museum and at some of New York’s avantgarde galleries.” Three of these paintings are being shown for the first time since that exhibition, forty-seven years ago. The show also includes a monotype, small studies, and a large painting from a series she titled “Black Walls.” The latter was originally featured in *Shackworks*, a seminal exhibition that opened at the Montclair Art Museum in 1994 and traveled to nine other institutions from 1994-1996.

By the late 1970s, Buchanan was further exploring the aesthetics of architectural decay through sculpture, i.e., cast concrete assemblages, made from pieces of stone, brick debris, clay, and cement mixtures. She arranged these works in clusters on the floor, documenting them with photographs, and exhibited them, notably at Truman Gallery in New York in 1978, and at the feminist artist cooperative A.I.R. Gallery in 1980 in its groundbreaking show *Dialectics of Isolation*, curated by Ana Mendieta. Some of the small black terracotta works on display may be considered as studies for these larger assemblages.

After moving to Georgia in 1977, Buchanan became increasingly interested in making what she referred to as “environmental sculpture,” artworks that mimicked exterior surfaces and were also site-specific installations that were allowed to decay over time and become part of the surroundings. Most notably, in 1979 she completed *Ruins and Rituals* (also the title of the Brooklyn Museum retrospective from 2016-2017), and in 1980 *Marsh Ruins*, with funding from a Guggenheim Fellowship. To construct the three mounds that comprise *Marsh Ruins*, Buchanan produced her own tabby cement. Composed of the lime from burned oyster shells mixed with sand, water, ash, and other shells, tabby is what colonial settlers used to build structures in coastal Georgia, the location of *Marsh Ruins*. In her zine “Making Tabby for Brick Sculptures,” Buchanan documented the labor-intensive process of making tabby, a task that in the eighteenth century was typically delegated to enslaved workers. Two smaller iterations of these structures, with bits of oyster shell showing in the concrete, are laid out in the show alongside four other examples of her cast concrete assemblages. Though little is known about their exhibition history, we do know that the artist placed these cast concrete works in her garden in Athens, Georgia. They retain stripes of the green, blue, black and earth-toned paint with which Buchanan initially covered them. The faint outline of her signature “B.B.” is also visible.

Buchanan’s later work is intimately linked to her natural surroundings and folk art. As a native Southerner, she drew on memories from her childhood as well as the lush Georgian landscape and yard art of local self-taught artists. A passionate gardener, Buchanan produced vivid oil pastel flower drawings and small assemblage works. She loved to rummage through thrift stores collecting marbles, wedding toppers, and beads, to create what she referred to as her “Christmas trees,” and “spirit jars,” her take on memory jugs, a prized Southern Folk Art form. Buchanan was particularly moved by a visit to folk artist Nellie Mae Rowe’s home in Fayette County, Georgia, and reminisced: “Being at Nellie Mae Rowe’s home was like being engulfed in a magic forest of her work because every surface had a mark from her hand and the simple chewing gum works made you never take gum as just chewing gum again.” A distinctive chewing gum jug and pin are also included in the show.

Beverly Buchanan’s art is held in the permanent collections of the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, the Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA, The Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and the Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, among others. A posthumous solo retrospective, *Ruins and Rituals*, curated by Jennifer Burris and Park McArthur, was held at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2016-17.

The gallery is indebted to Jane Bridges and Prudence Lopp for their insights into Buchanan’s art and life, and to Elizabeth and Andrew White, and Rachel Simon.