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Barbara Chase-Riboud

10.24.17



View of "Barbara Chase-Riboud: Malcolm X: Complete," 2017.

In addition to her work as an artist, Barbara Chase-Riboud is an acclaimed poet and novelist, recognized for her historical novel *Sally Hemings* (1979), which challenged official American history. In 1969, Chase-Riboud began her series of twenty "Malcolm X" stelae, monumental sculptures made up of metal and fibers such as silk, rayon, and cotton. She completed the series in 2016. Fourteen of those works are currently on view in her solo show at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York through November 4, 2017.

BY THE TIME I began the first four "Malcolm X" stelae in 1969, I was already past my Giacometti stage. I was living in Paris and looking for a way to get rid of a sculpture's legs and anything that had to do with naturalism. I remember telling my friend and fellow artist Sheila Hicks, "I'm trying to get the legs off of these sculptures and the sculptures off the base." Finally, we came up with the idea of covering up the legs so that the sculptures seemed to be hovering. She said, "OK Barbara, I'll show you one knot, and then you're on your own." So that's what she did: she showed me one knot, and I found the material that seemed to work.

I began using silk like you would use clay, sculpting it, which is exactly the opposite of what Sheila does. From that, the other skirts of the works evolved. Sometimes they're more baroque than others. I had decided that the first ones would be silk because silk is such a strong material and it's practically indestructible, like bronze is indestructible.

When I finished those first skirts I realized something extraordinary had happened between the metal and the fiber. I hadn't planned it that way. The fiber became the heavy, strong element, and the bronze became the liquid, flowing, moving material. It was a miracle, and then it began to happen over and over again. I thought, "This is an accident. This is never going to happen again," but it did. You have motion with the bronze, and you have stability with the silk, but it's really the silk that's moving—the threads move all the time no matter what you do. They're powerful. Yet, it's the combination of the two textures that makes works even more imposing than if they had been all bronze. The light also transforms the metal. There is a metamorphosis that takes place; this is the magic of these objects.

I was going in my own direction toward abstraction, and I decided to dedicate these stelae to Malcolm X because he was dead. It was a matter of memory, of doing a monument—not to his philosophy, but in the Latin sense of *memoria*. The work is pure abstraction, pure beauty—that's the only thing I'm really interested in. Most activism sacrifices the aesthetic part of making art for the message. I never do that. For me, the message is the message.

Maybe people have caught up with me. I think that's the case. I don't use the word *expatriate*—I think it's absolutely insane to use *expatriate* in the twenty-first century. I've never used it, and I don't answer to that label. That's just one more label added onto all the other labels that are slapped on me. I reject labels; creative artists don't deserve them. It's the last thing that we need, and since art has absolutely nothing to do with most labels it's insane to talk about us in terms of movements, politics, aesthetics, race, age, beauty, or whatever. But I've been out here for a long time. This isn't something I discovered the day before yesterday. It's only because of the suppression of our history of America that we have arrived at a boiling point. It's like an ulcer; it just exploded. We have to deal with something that should have been dealt with in 1865.

— As told to Grant Johnson