



## MEMORY IS EVERYTHING

Barbara Chase-Riboud is an outstanding figure in contemporary art, narrative, and poetry. In this conversation, she gives us an overview of a career spanning five decades: from her early adventures in sculpture as a seven-year-old girl in Philadelphia to her iconic series of work dedicated to Malcolm X, through a formative period spent in Italy.



BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD IN CONVERSATION  
WITH HANS ULRICH OBRIST

**HANS ULRICH OBRIST**

How did you come to art? Was there an initial epiphany? Tell me how it all started.

**BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD**

When I was seven years old I went to the Fletcher Academy in Philadelphia. I won a sculpture prize in the adult evening classes—a beautiful small Greek vase—and I figured that was terrific. I also attended classes at the Philadelphia Museum when I was seven. When I was sixteen, I was one of the first, if not the first, woman to enter the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Certainly the youngest ever.

**HUO**  
Sixteen!

**BCR**

One of my woodcuts had won a *Seventeen* magazine art contest, and the prize was an exhibition at ACA Gallery in New York. Bill Lieberman came in and bought the woodcut. He didn't know who I was or how old I was.

**HUO**

Very often an artist does student work, and then transitions into a more or less mature stage. Where would you say your catalogue raisonné begins? Very early, like sixteen? Or even earlier? What was your first work that you consider valid—not a student work?

**BCR**

I'll show you. Then you can decide whether you consider it valid or not. For me it is valid.

**HUO**

No, what matters is *your* view, what *you* felt in the beginning.

**BCR**

But I didn't really think of it as being valid until a few years ago.

**HUO**

It's beautiful. *Reba*.

**BCR**

Thank you. It's very nice.

**HUO**

Who were your heroes and heroines in the 1950s?

**BCR**

Well, in 1957, at the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds, one of my heroes, Ben Shahn, bought my first bronze sculpture, which was on exhibit there at an Italian gallery. It didn't really impact what I did until I got out of high school and went to the Tyler School of Fine Arts, and then got the Whitney fellowship to Rome to attend the American Academy. That's when everything began, really. It began with Egypt, as a matter of fact.

**HUO**

With Egypt?

**BCR**

Yes, because when I was in Rome on New Year's Eve, I joined a famous couple who were at the Academy but leaving for Alexandria. They said to me, "Why are you stuck in the American Academy when there is the whole world out there? There is Egypt, and there is this, and there is that." I ran up the stairs and packed a bag in fifteen minutes and got on the boat with them. And then at the end of the trip, which took five days, they suddenly abandoned me on the dock in Alexandria.

**HUO**

Wow!

**BCR**

All alone with my little stipend. I wasn't broke, but I had no idea what to do. So I went up to the nearest policeman and he asked, "Where are you going?" and I said, "I don't know." He took one look at me and said: "the Hilton hotel." So, I went to the Hilton hotel. In the lobby there was a very handsome and distinguished gentleman, all in white with a white Panama, who wanted to know what I was doing wandering around Egypt without a chaperone. When I told him that my friends had abandoned me, he said, "Look, I'm giving you a ticket to Cairo. You go straight to the embassy. When I told him that my friends had abandoned me, he said, "Look, I'm giving you a ticket to Cairo. You go straight to the embassy. I'm going to call them and tell them you're on your way. And don't do anything, don't talk to anybody. Go straight there." He turned out to be the president of Coca-Cola in Egypt.

**HUO**

What prompted you to go to Egypt at such a young age?

**BCR**

It was a challenge. The couple dared me to do it. That's all. When I got to the embassy, the cultural attaché was a black guy. And he said, "What are you doing, wandering around Egypt by your-

Above - *Reba*, 1954 ca. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Woodcut, composition: 17 3/16 x 16 1/16" (43.7 x 40.8cm); sheet: 23 7/16 x 17 3/8" (59.5 x 44.1cm). Publisher: unpublished. Printer: the artist, Philadelphia. © 2017. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York / Scala, Florence  
Opposite - *Wheaton Plaza Fountain* (detail), 1960. Courtesy: the artist and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York



Barbara Chase-Riboud with *Confessions for Myself* at her foundry, Fonderia Bonvicini, Verona, 1972.  
Courtesy: the artist and Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York. Photo: Massimo Vitali

self? You're going to end up in a harem." He took me home to his wife and daughters. I stayed in Egypt for more than a month, during which time I traveled up the Nile by train and boat to the Valley of the Kings and as far as Khartoum. When I left Egypt, I went to Athens, Delphi, and finally Istanbul.

**HUO**  
So, it was a proper grand tour.

**BCR**  
I didn't know what I was doing, but everybody sort of took care of me, so I managed to get back to the Academy in one piece. No harems, no kidnapping.

**HUO**  
The first person who told me about you was my friend, the late photographer René Burri. I worked with him on a book just before he passed away. He had great photos of you. How did you meet?

**BCR**  
I met him in the Valley of the Kings. We and another German photographer who was also there had this big argument about who should take the last boat across the Nile. Finally we just burst out laughing, thinking that here we are, these three stupid people arguing in the middle of nowhere, with the pyramids looking down on us thinking, "Who are these people and what are they doing?" So, we became friends. I saw him again in Cairo and again in New York, and then in Paris, where he introduced me to Marc Riboud, my first husband.

**HUO**  
So that's how you connected!

**BCR**  
And we stayed very, very close friends. I was also close friends with his wife and children.

**HUO**  
Let's talk about the beginnings of your sculpture.

**BCR**  
I started when I was seven years old. I never really drew or painted. It was always sculpture from the very beginning. Naturalistic, of course. People thought that I was some kind of prodigy, so I got all these prizes. Then I went to the American Academy, which is where the photograph for the *Ebony* magazine cover was taken. I am the only artist who has ever been on the cover of *Ebony*. Nobody else, not even Romare Bearden.

**HUO**  
It was an incredible moment in Rome in the late 1950s. Robert Rauschenberg went there, Cy Twombly went there. There was a whole circle around Mimmo Rotella and Domenico Gnoli.

**BCR**  
I knew Domenico Gnoli very well. He was an old boyfriend of mine. I met him in that magical year, 1957 to 1958, during the first Spoleto Festival.

**HUO**  
What was so special about that year?

**BCR**  
It was the first Spoleto Festival, and my first solo show in Spoleto. So it was a big deal for me. I was this little girl from Philadelphia who was suddenly in the center of it all in Europe, meeting people I never dreamed I would meet.

**HUO**  
You also worked in Cinecittà, I read.

**BCR**  
That's how I got the money to make the trips! Because I was an American, the movie studios had to pay me union rates—something like ten times more than whatever they paid Italians. I had to have a contract and an agent. I was an extra in *Ben Hur*, of all things. And then other Italian historical films. I made a lot of money, which paid for my sculptures and the foundry. How else was I going to pay for the foundry? Throughout my entire career, one way or another, I always managed financially, although usually through literature, not through sculpture. In the 1970s, when I wasn't selling much and things were tough, my books brought in money so I could still make sculptures and cast.

**HUO**  
When did you start writing? You're a very accomplished novelist and poet.

**BCR**  
It started in 1978, when I discovered the story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, and I begged every writer I knew to write their story, but everybody was too busy with their own projects. Finally, Toni Morrison, who was my poetry editor at Random House, said, "You have been talking about this woman for a year. Why don't you just write it yourself? How long could it take you? Three months?" It took me three years. Of course we had no idea that it was going to be so controversial, or so successful. It was translated into eleven or twelve languages, and it won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize as the best novel by an American woman in 1979. It sold more than three million copies worldwide.

**HUO**  
How did you come across the extraordinary story of Hemings and Jefferson?

**BCR**  
I read a biography of Jefferson in which there was one chapter on the possibility of this woman's relationship with him, and the historian said that it was still speculation, even though it was very well known in the black community. I went back, looked at all the documents, and decided it was true, and that it was a story that I wanted to write. I wanted to write it as a kind of epic poem of a young slave girl in Paris during the Revolution and Toni said, "Look, Barbara, they don't want it unless it's a big historical novel."

**HUO**  
You unearthed a buried history. I mean, in a way, it's a protest against forgetting.

**BCR**  
That's what I do with my sculpture, as a matter of fact.

**HUO**  
So, memory is important?

**BCR**  
Memory is everything. If the Jeffersonians had just simply not said anything, not started screaming, calling me names, and all kinds of things, nothing would have happened. It was my first novel—it would have come and gone, probably. But they attacked memory, denied, covered up the facts, tried to destroy me writing books and articles. If they hadn't attacked me and memory, they might have succeeded in suppressing the truth. As it turned out, Monticello has just announced that "they have found the room of Sally Hemings" after insisting that she never existed and having battled until Dr. Foster's DNA evidence was published. And everybody scrambled to get on the bandwagon, forgetting that I was still standing. None of my attackers have ever apologized to me with the exception of the late great Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

**HUO**  
So, what was the next book?

**BCR**  
*Valide*, which is about slavery in the harem in the Turkish sultanate. It's very complicated: a kidnapped American creole's dramatic rise from harem slave to the pinnacle of power as Validé, empress of the Ottoman empire, mother of the sultan. There is a whole story about the rivalry of Catherine the Great and the Validé's son, Mahmud II. It's an epic about the Muslim world, but also a story about slavery.

**HUO**  
And the third book?

**BCR**  
Then came *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*, which won the Carl Sandburg Poetry Prize in 1988. Then *Echo of Lions*, my *Amistad* book.

**HUO**  
Why is *Echo of Lions* so important for you?

**BCR**  
It's not so important for me, but it was important for the world because Steven Spielberg's screenwriter plagiarized it in his film on the *Amistad* slave ship. It's very long, but you can't put it down if you start to read it.

**HUO**  
What prompted you to write it?

**BCR**  
It's the story of the first successful slave revolt in America.

I felt that it was urgent to write, and then who did I take it to? Steven Spielberg.

**HUO**  
To get it further out into the world?

**BCR**  
I wanted somebody to make it into a fantastic big blockbuster movie. And who better than Steven Spielberg? He said, "Oh, it's a terrific book, but it's too long and too complicated for a movie. It should be a television series." And left it at that. Three years later, I sold the rights to Dustin Hoffman, who wanted to play John Quincy Adams. Three years later, Spielberg announced that he was doing a movie on the *Amistad*. When we finally got hold of the script we realized that there were 142 striking similarities. Anyway, it ended in an undisclosed settlement. But it took more than a year.

**HUO**  
And the fifth book?

**BCR**  
*The President's Daughter*, which is the prequel to *Sally Hemings*, the story of Jefferson and Hemings through the eyes of their daughter, Harriet Hemings. It goes from the American Revolution through the French Revolution to the Civil War in Gettysburg, where we find Harriet in the middle of the battle with Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address juxtaposed, running through her head.

Then I wrote a book about the so-called Hottentot Venus, a South African woman who was exhibited in Paris in the nineteenth century as a kind of phenomenon, and whom I had seen. She was actually in the Musée de l'homme in a kind of glass cage. Finally in 2002 they took her down and returned her skeleton to South Africa at the request of Nelson Mandela, at which point I decided to write the book.

**HUO**  
Let's talk about your poetry. I'm interested that you began by illustrating Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. Who are your heroes or heroines in poetry?

**BCR**  
Anna Akhmatova.

**HUO**  
Of the Russian avant-garde?

**BCR**  
Yes, I love all of the Russian avant-garde, but particularly her. I will send you a poem that I recently wrote that's really for a movie. It's about Anna Akhmatova and Amedeo Modigliani. I am certain that the Modigliani at MoMA is a portrait of Anna. All you have to do is look at it and then look at photographs of her to know that when she had just gotten married and returned to Paris briefly, they had a brief affair. She always denied it, but it's in her poetry. You can find it if you know where to look.

**HUO**  
I feel like that story connects to Sally Hemings—meaning, the unacknowledged affair—though from a very different angle.

**BCR**  
I've never thought of it like that. As a matter of fact, I still don't know why, up until the end of her life, Akhmatova said that she and Modigliani were just friends.

**HUO**  
What about James Baldwin? When did he become important for you?

**BCR**  
I met James through my first husband. We went to Formentor, Spain, for their literary prize ceremony that Marc had to photograph. Everybody was there, including Henry Miller and James Baldwin. We had this crazy drunken lunch at the Hotel Pont Royal. It was the same year that the conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein received the same honors. There were jokes about "a Jew and a Negro" being in the Élysée without being the waiters.

**HUO**  
What inspired you about Baldwin?

**BCR**  
He was an adorable man. A very sweet man. Unhappy in his skin, both as a gay person and a black man. There was something very touching, very moving, about him. You always wanted to hug him and say, "It is not as bad as all this. You'll get through."

**HUO**  
When you were at Yale, a lot of architects were also there: my friend Norman Foster spent time at Yale, and Richard Rogers. Did you meet them?

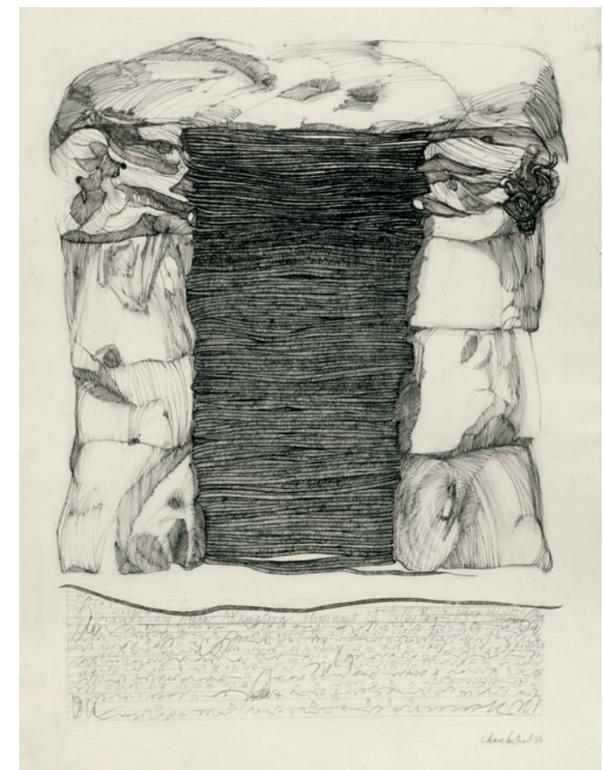
**BCR**  
Yes, I met them. I was also close to Kenneth Frampton, and I met James Stirling.

**HUO**  
You almost married him!

**BCR**  
Yes, but I was a runaway bride at the end. He was the one who convinced me that I would never be an architect because I didn't have a mathematical mind, which is true.

**HUO**  
But at the same time, you do connect to architecture through your public works.

**BCR**  
Yes, definitely. *Africa Rising* is the biggest one. That's eighteen feet, at 290 Broadway, the FBI and the IRS building. In order to see the sculpture you have to get through security. There is somebody standing there with guns while you walk around it. The only hope is that they take it out of the lobby of the building and put it on the street on the Reade side.



Anna Akhmatova Monument, St. Petersburg, 1996. Courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

**HUO**  
That is, of course, part of your bigger *Africa Rising* story, no? There is a poem that goes with it.

**BCR**  
The poem was written before the sculpture was made, as a matter of fact. The poem was in my first collection.

**HUO**  
There are lots smaller sculptures also related to *Africa Rising*, I understand?

**BCR**  
Yes, and lot of the sculptures are also, as far as I'm concerned, related to architecture. If you look carefully at them, they are big buildings in one way or another.

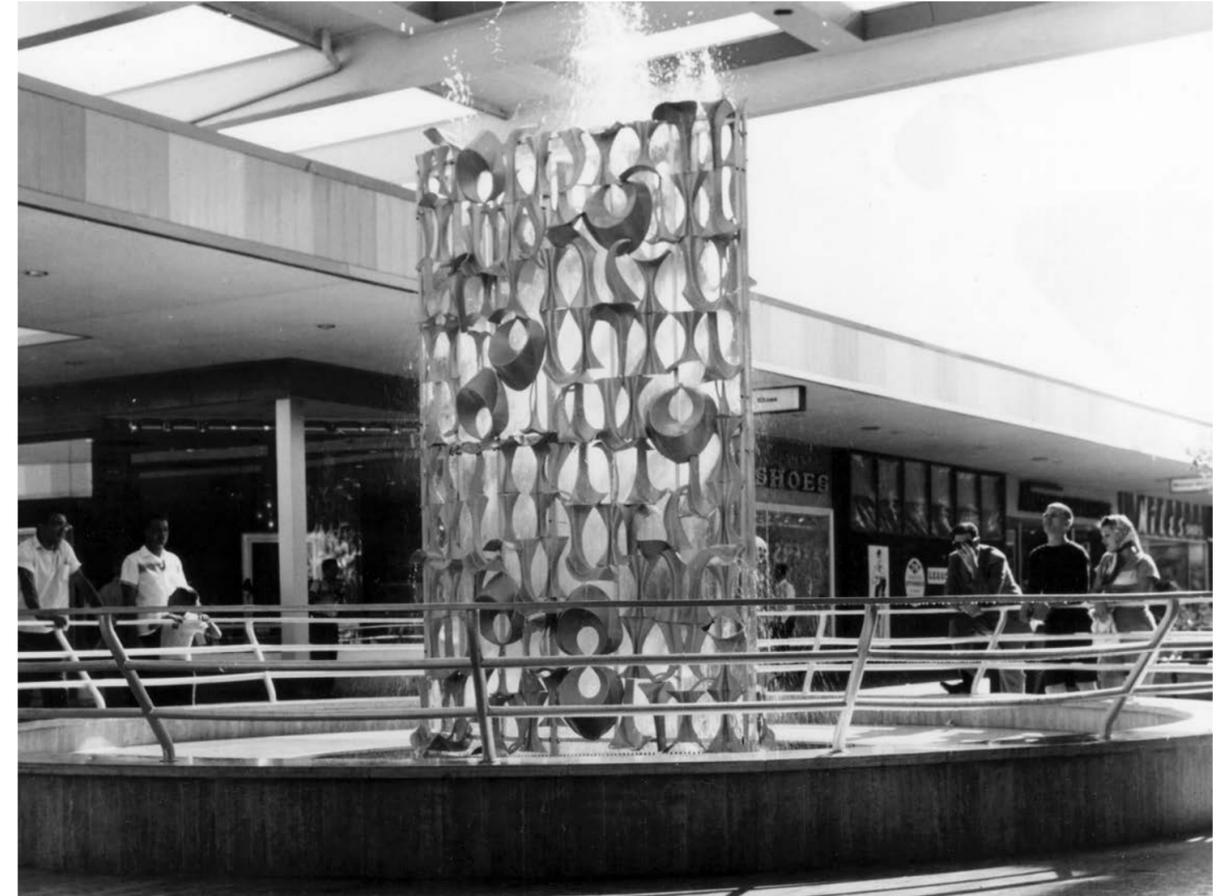
**HUO**  
It's like a hybrid reality, because you also added ropes and textile elements to the bronze. When did you begin the hybridization using organic materials?

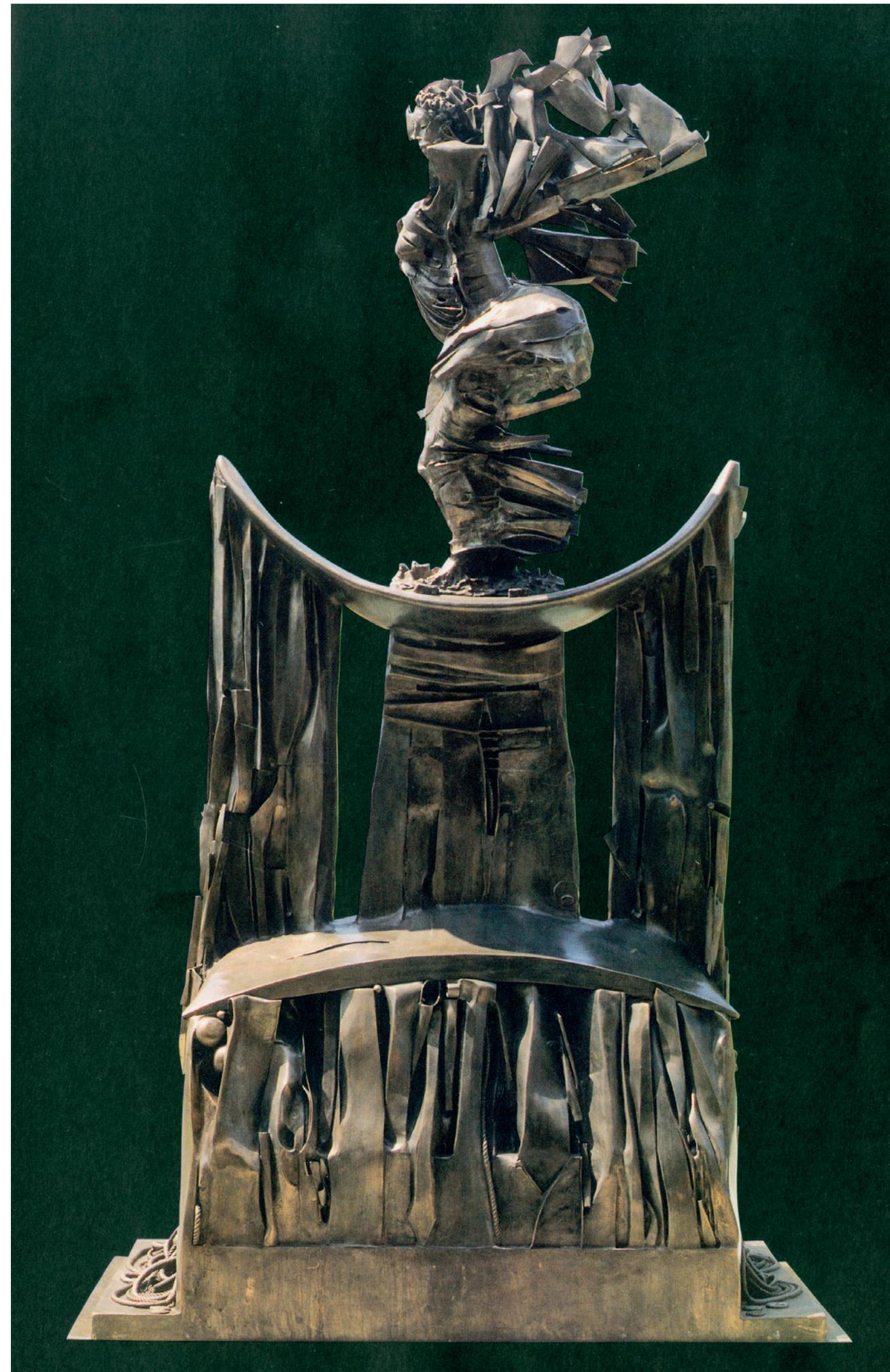
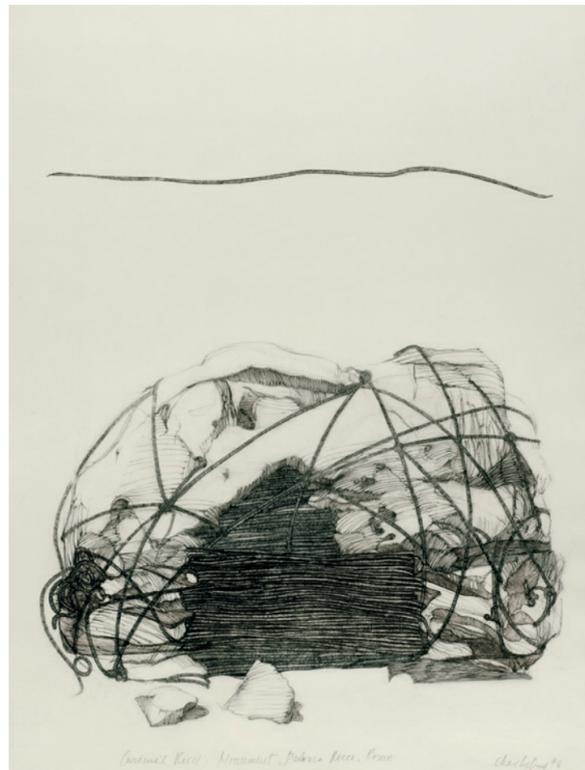
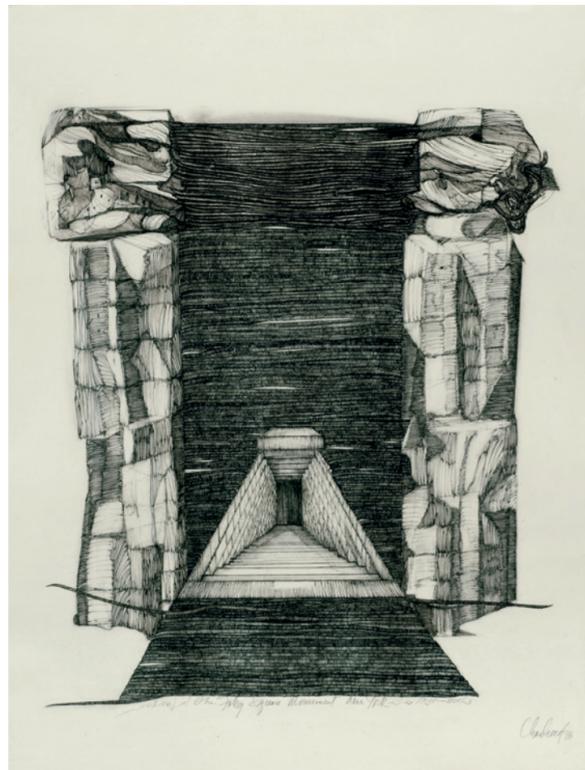
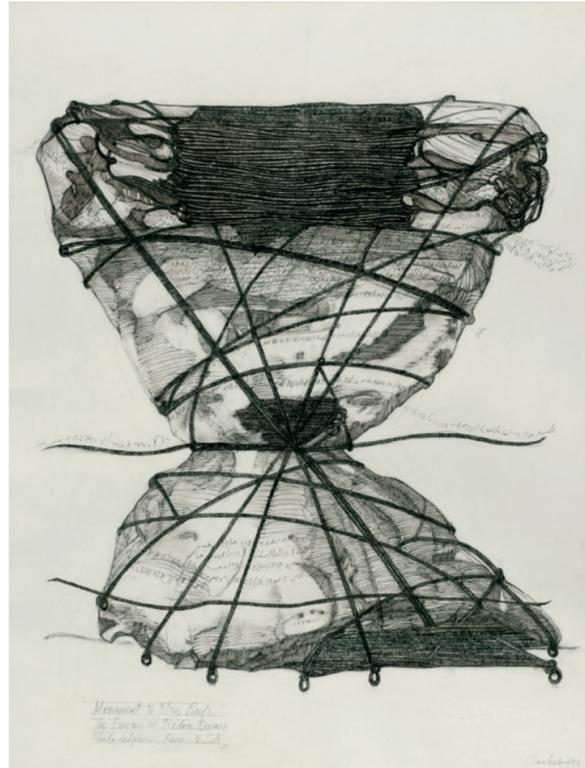


Above - *The Albino* (aka *All That Rises Must Converge/Black*), 1972. Courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York  
Opposite - *Sarah Bartmann/Africa Rising*, 1996. Courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

A critically-acclaimed sculptor and author, **Barbara Chase-Riboud** creates abstract art with a deep understanding of history, identity, and a sense of place. Currently on view, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery presents *Barbara Chase-Riboud—Malcolm X: Complete*, an exhibition celebrating her now complete series of monumental bronze and fiber sculptures, created over the last half-century in honor of the slain human rights leader. Born in Philadelphia, Chase-Riboud settled in Paris soon after earning her MFA degree from Yale University in 1960, the first African American woman to do so. She has been recognized with numerous awards, including the Alain Locke International Award and the James Van Der Zee Award. Chase-Riboud is equally renowned for her literary success, publishing over fourteen novels and books of poetry, and is the recipient of the prestigious Carl Sandburg Poetry prize. A dual citizen of France and the United States, the French government knighted Chase-Riboud in 1996 as *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. Major institutions with work by Chase-Riboud in their permanent collections include The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York); Ministry of Culture, France; The Museum of Modern Art (New York); the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia); and the Smithsonian African American Museum (Washington, DC).

**Hans Ulrich Obrist** (1968, Zurich, Switzerland) is Artistic Director of the Serpentine Galleries, London. Prior to this, he was the Curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Since his first show *World Soup (The Kitchen Show)* in 1991, he has curated more than 300 shows.





Above, from top clockwise - *Chevalier de Saint-George Monument Paris, 1996*; *Monument to Man Ray's The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse Philadelphia, Penn. U.S.A., 1996*; *Cardinal Ricci's Monument, Palazzo Ricci, Rome, 1996-1997*; *The Foley Square Monument New York, 1996-1997*. Courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

Opposite - *Africa Rising, 1998*. Commissioned for the United States by the General Services Administration to memorialize the African Burial Ground in New York City at 290 Broadway. From *Barbara Chase-Riboud: Sculptor* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999)



*Malcolm X #2, 1969.* Collection of Newark Museum, Newark.  
Courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

**BCR**  
When the sculptures themselves became abstracted. They still had legs, and the ropes would cover the legs to eliminate the base and the legs, which made them naturalistic, even surrealistic, but nevertheless—I needed to get rid of the legs. I either had to do that or change my style. I wanted to go completely into abstraction, so I did a whole series of sculptures with bones, which turned out to be totally abstract, but they still had the legs.

**HUO**  
In the mid-1960s you asked Sheila Hicks, whom you went to school with, how to hide the legs and move beyond the tyranny of the base. Hicks told you about this card-like wool, and you began to use black wool and a knot that she taught you to do.

**BCR**  
She said, “Barbara, I’m going to show you one knot, okay? You take it from there, but this is enough for you to make a skirt to hide the bottom of the sculpture.”

**HUO**  
In *Malcolm X* of 1969 you incorporated fiber and black bronze.

**BCR**  
It’s an amazing sculpture. The other black bronze that suddenly took on a life of its own is *Confessions for Myself*. It is even bigger, with the same looming black wool that sort of covers everything up.

**HUO**  
Did you meet Malcolm X?

**BCR**  
No, never. It was only after he was assassinated that it suddenly dawned on me that he was an important man and that this epic event should be commemorated in some way, so that’s what I decided to do.

**HUO**  
So, you made the decision in the late 1960s to make a whole series of steles about Malcolm X?

**BCR**  
Dedicated to Malcolm X—they were not *about* Malcolm X, because there was a big argument about the fact that they were too sophisticated to have anything to do with Malcolm X. They were too well crafted, but that was my style. That had nothing to do with the title of the steles, which were dedicated to his memory, to what happened to him, to his influence as a world figure. That’s how I got the title of being radical.

**HUO**  
The first one, *Artist Walking on the Via Appia*, is the product of a specific technique: wax modeling. You made these sheets of thin wax and then used them for the casting process. Can you tell me a little about this? They all have these sheets. The sheets are very present.

**BCR**  
I’m very present in everything because, of course, all of these sculptures are unique. There is only one, and it cannot be reproduced. The delicacy and the thinness of the wax allowed me to make huge undercuts that I would never have been able to achieve in plaster or clay or anything else, and that’s how my style evolved. If it hadn’t been for those wax sheets, I wouldn’t have a style.

**HUO**  
So, that was the invention of your language?

**BCR**  
Yes.

**HUO**  
Do you have sculptures outdoors? Steles for public spaces?

**BCR**  
They are all indoors at the moment. They can be outdoors if the steles are made out of something that is waterproof, as in the case of the *Africa Rising*, or *Black Dream Column* in the New York State Office Building, where what would normally be the ropes and the fibers are cast in bronze, which is very easy to do. I also did a project for the Yale campus called *Woman’s Monument*, for the courtyard of what is now Grace Murray Hopper College, and one for the Philadelphia Parkway. That last has no cords, as I hadn’t yet come to the issue of cords and fiber. It was water and bronze, or water and aluminum, used in the same way.

**HUO**  
You’ve done so many works and have so much experience in literature and the arts. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a book of advice to a young poet. What would be your advice to a young poet in 2017?

**BCR**  
To travel, to open your eyes and see as much as you possibly can. That’s getting harder and harder to do. Imagine, I was in Egypt and there was a war going on, the Suez Canal crisis. The English had left Egypt. I was on planes and trains with nobody on them except me because everybody had left. Now, you can’t go to the Middle East without thinking about the fact that somebody may blow you up at any moment.

**HUO**  
You have a lot of amazing drawings here in your book about unrealized monuments. I wanted to ask you about all these unrealized monuments. There is Man Ray’s *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*. There is Peter Paul Rubens’s *Mother’s Monument* in Antwerp, a Cardinal Ricci monument in Rome, Chevalier de Saint Georges in Paris, a Foley Square monument.

**BCR**  
Anybody that strikes my fancy. A lot of them have poems connected to them, or some other connection to something I’ve written or am going to write. Or something I’ve read.

**HUO**  
Is there an unrealized project that you haven’t been able to do, but would like to?

**BCR**  
I just thought of one this morning. It’s called *Meta-Mondrian*, with steles of polished aluminum and between the steles—well, the scale model has silk, but my idea was to do it outside, so it would use water, as in Wheaton Plaza, where it went between the two screens. On top of everything else, it makes music

**HUO**  
Wow!

**BCR**  
It’s fantastic. It makes beautiful music. As if at last I would become an architect and make a big building instead of a sculpture.

**HUO**  
I must ask you about handwriting. I started a movement to save handwriting because it is endangered in our digital age. And I know you likewise have a handwriting obsession. I’ve seen your amazing pieces of the 1970s in which the handwriting is in silk and paper.

**BCR**  
They are parts of drawings. I mean, they are handwriting and they are drawings done with fiber, but also as a kind of repetition of the kind of handwriting I used as embellishment for the charcoal drawings. The drawings and the poetry are one. They are almost inseparable. I never know where one begins and where one ends.

**HUO**  
Do you draw every day? Is drawing a daily practice?

**BCR**  
No, I do binge drawings. I did twenty-five drawings in three weeks in Milan.

**HUO**  
In Paris, you don’t really draw?

**BCR**  
I can draw anywhere.