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# “I BUILD MY MONUMENT”

Courtney J. Martin

For many years, predating my own entry to Yale University as a graduate student in the early aughts, I was captivated by the lore of Barbara Chase-Riboud’s school days. Despite the thinness of the (art) history of her long and accomplished (across a number of fields) artistic career, the stories that I heard about her time there rose to the level of myth. She seemed to have emerged from nowhere specific to successfully conquer that overdetermined place (Yale) before bursting out to captivate the world. When I returned to New Haven to take up the directorship of the Yale Center for British Art, she gave me a copy of her Cleopatra-inspired melologue, *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra* (1987). While reading it I was reminded of all that she represented to me and the ways in which her reimagining found the Egyptian queen ready to actively construct a life rather than passively existing. “I build my monument,” ends the first verse, as if Cleopatra’s ancient journey can only be fully understood in architectural allusion. Perhaps we should expect no less from Chase-Riboud, whose own journey to the present began with the pursuit of building.

When Barbara Chase arrived in New Haven in the fall of 1958 to study architecture, she was among a handful of women on the urban campus. Though women had been a part of the School of Fine Arts since 1869, when two daughters of a professor were admitted into its first class—thus making the university’s graduate and professional schools coeducational—the first female undergraduates did not matriculate until 1969, a full twenty years after the first woman graduated with an architecture degree in 1949. The years 1869, 1949, and 1969 plot points on a graph to suggest one aspect of the singularity of Chase-Riboud’s experiences at Yale between 1958 and 1960. The other aspect, of course, is race.

She entered as a burgeoning architect, following the thwarted trajectory of her father, who had hoped to join the profession but had been denied access to education, and mentors who, perhaps, mistook her



Barbara Chase-Riboud as a student at Yale University, 1960

facility in drafting, proportion, and scale to be indicative of a future architect. Whatever the reason, by her second year, she had, for herself and to herself, transitioned from the pursuit of designing buildings to making structures, avowedly declaring herself not generically an artist but specifically a sculptor.

As she changed, so did the program. In 1959, her second year, the School of Art and Architecture emerged from the School of Fine Arts as a professional school in its own right. Throughout the years, she has noted the influence of a number of eminent professors that speaks to the ways in which her heterogeneity would have been acknowledged, encouraged, and, if not fully nurtured, then at least modeled at Yale. These include Josef Albers, the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College theorist-painter who brought design to the fore and on par with painting and sculpture; Philip Johnson, a practicing architect and the founder of the Museum of

Modern Art's Department of Architecture, who established the museum, writ large, as a place of conceptual exploration for the built environment; the architect Louis Kahn, whose drawings of places and spaces demonstrate his equal access to the technical and the artistic; and Paul Rand, the famed commercial artist whose dominance in American consumer visuality transported to generations of graphic design students the ability to work in and between the fields of art and design. Even the school's dean, Gibson Danes (they both arrived in 1958), was an art historian, trained initially in an art school.

The absence of women from this list reflects the patriarchal administrative structure of both the school and the field of architecture at the time, but Chase-Riboud had a close friend in fellow student Sheila Hicks, the textile artist. Another peer, Eva Hesse (Yale College 1959), engaged with the same teachers and critics, and would, like Chase-Riboud, define the contours and expanses of post-Minimalism as a direct material and conceptual restructuring of three-dimensional art-making. Situated among this trio and against the backdrop of their training at Yale, sculpture is materially experimental, large and radical in form.

Chase-Riboud's time at Yale came just a few years after the reopening of Kahn's first major commission, the concrete, glass, and steel addition to the Yale University Art Gallery. The semitransparent building included studio and exhibition spaces that seemed to invite students, like Chase-Riboud, to undertake the fluidity of the overlap between the disciplines. Seen in this light, her shift from one discipline to another while at the university is less a replacement of one for another and more a refinement of her craft by deftly using the variety of resources available to and provided for her. Almost immediately she put the intricate knowledge of structure and materials required of an architect to good use as a sculptor, frequently of large-scale works. Upon graduation in the spring of 1960, she had already produced her first public commission.

My office in the final Louis Kahn structure has a large, rectilinear window from which I can look out and across to the buildings in which Chase-Riboud once took classes, viewed art, and began to build the life that she would someday inhabit. This exhibition and its catalogue will go some way toward making those successes known and furthering an exploration of her incomparable practice.











