

Barbara Chase-Riboud:  
*Malcolm X* #3, 1969,  
polished bronze,  
rayon and cotton,  
102½ by 37 by 32  
inches. Courtesy  
Philadelphia  
Museum of Art.

# FACING HISTORY

**Exploring historical memory through abstraction, Barbara Chase-Riboud pays homage to Malcolm X in a series of sculptures that unite fiber and bronze.**

**by Judith E. Stein**

**CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW**  
"Barbara  
Chase-Riboud:  
The *Malcolm X*  
Steles," Berkeley  
Art Museum  
and Pacific  
Film Archive,  
through Apr. 27.  
Chase-Riboud's  
work appears in  
"Witness: Art  
and Civil Rights  
in the Sixties,"  
Brooklyn Museum,  
Mar. 7–July 6.

**JUDITH E.  
STEIN** is a writer  
and independent  
curator. Her  
biography of art  
dealer Richard  
Bellamy is  
forthcoming from  
Farrar, Straus and  
Giroux.

THE 1960S WERE BARELY slipping into history when the African-American sculptor Barbara Chase-Riboud made her New York solo debut at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery on East 57th Street in 1970. A Philadelphian trained at her city's Tyler School of Art (1956) and at Yale University (1960), Chase-Riboud had been living in France during the tumultuous '60s, disengaged from the Pop ironies and Minimalist concerns of her contemporaries. She had raised a family and traveled internationally with photographer Marc Riboud, her husband at the time. In the course of those 10 years, she stepped away from the figure toward an expressive vocabulary of crimps and crevices. A two-stage breakthrough led to what would become her signature style.

Several metal casting techniques yield multiple originals, but the lost-wax method produces an edition of one. Chase-Riboud mastered both approaches as a student. Her cast bronze *Victory of a Bullfighter* (1958) was installed alongside sculptures by Georges Braque, Alexander Calder and Anthony Caro, among others, in the 1958 Pittsburgh International, at the Carnegie Institute (as it was then known). In Europe a decade later, she devised an entirely new sculptural practice,

modifying large stacked sheets of thin wax that she folded, slashed or fused before casting. Process in general was in the air—Lynda Benglis was smearing, pouring and knotting her materials; Richard Serra folding, coiling and flinging his.

Every sculptor faces the challenge of presentation. Serra experimented with wall-mounted groupings of tangled, loopy straps, and Robert Morris variously configured slices of felt. Mark di Suvero, Eva Hesse and Carl Andre eliminated the need for bases by placing their sculptures on the ground. Chase-Riboud skirted this issue. Inspired in part by the constructions of her good friend, fiber artist Sheila Hicks, who also lived in France, Chase-Riboud shielded her vertical steel supports with cascading hanks of yarn. Fiber/bronze hybrids, her sculptures of the late '60s called to mind African dancing masks with mantles of trailing raffia.

If an ocean separated Chase-Riboud from her cohorts in the United States, there was no distance between the sculptor and the bloody, global struggle for human rights. She cheered the ascendance of Malcolm X, not then the iconic public figure he is today. The single letter of his surname was a chosen stand-in for the lost names of his enslaved fore-













View of Chase-Riboud's exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, showing *All That Rises Must Converge/Gold*, 1973 (foreground), *Malcolm X #13*, 2008 (background), and, on wall, *Chevalier de Saint-George Monument*, Paris, 1996 (left) and *Pushkin Monument*, St. Petersburg, 1996 (right). Photo Constance Mensh.

bears. His assassination in 1965 deeply saddened the artist, who four years later created four abstract monuments in his memory. Two were towering presences backed to the wall. Skeins of charcoal-colored, Afro-textured wool emerge from a leathery landscape of black bronze in *Malcolm X #2*, absorbing light like a black hole. In contrast, *Malcolm X #3* seems to radiate light. Chase-Riboud matched its highly polished surfaces with knobby lengths of shiny rayon and cotton, which she looped, bound or braided.

THE MONUMENTS FOR Malcolm were shown in the 1970 show at Bertha Schaefer, along with 15 other of Chase-Riboud's cast-metal abstractions, all made in the previous year. In conjunction with the show, Schaefer published a small catalogue, a detail of *Malcolm X #3* on its cover. The publication telegraphed the sculptor's political sympathies—the texts she chose and many of her titles expressed her interest in Africa and her solidarity with political radicals.<sup>1</sup> Among the works listed were the wittily named *Les demoiselles d'Abidjan* and *Lumumba*, honoring the first democratically elected prime minister of the Republic of Congo, an independence leader deposed after 12 weeks in office, and executed in 1961.

One double-page spread paired a photo of *Malcolm X #2* with an anguished passage by French poet Arthur Rimbaud, in which he embraces the outcast status of blacks in bourgeois society.<sup>2</sup> An excerpt from the writer and activist

Eldridge Cleaver's book of essays *Soul on Ice* (1968) sat opposite a photograph of the artist's aluminum roundel, *The Ultimate Sound*, its name taken from a passage by the writer addressed to "Black Beauty." Cleaver describes listening "in impotent silence" to "the ultimate sound, the sound of death." The sculpture sat on the floor, a keening, inverted triangle in relief levering up from its circular ground.

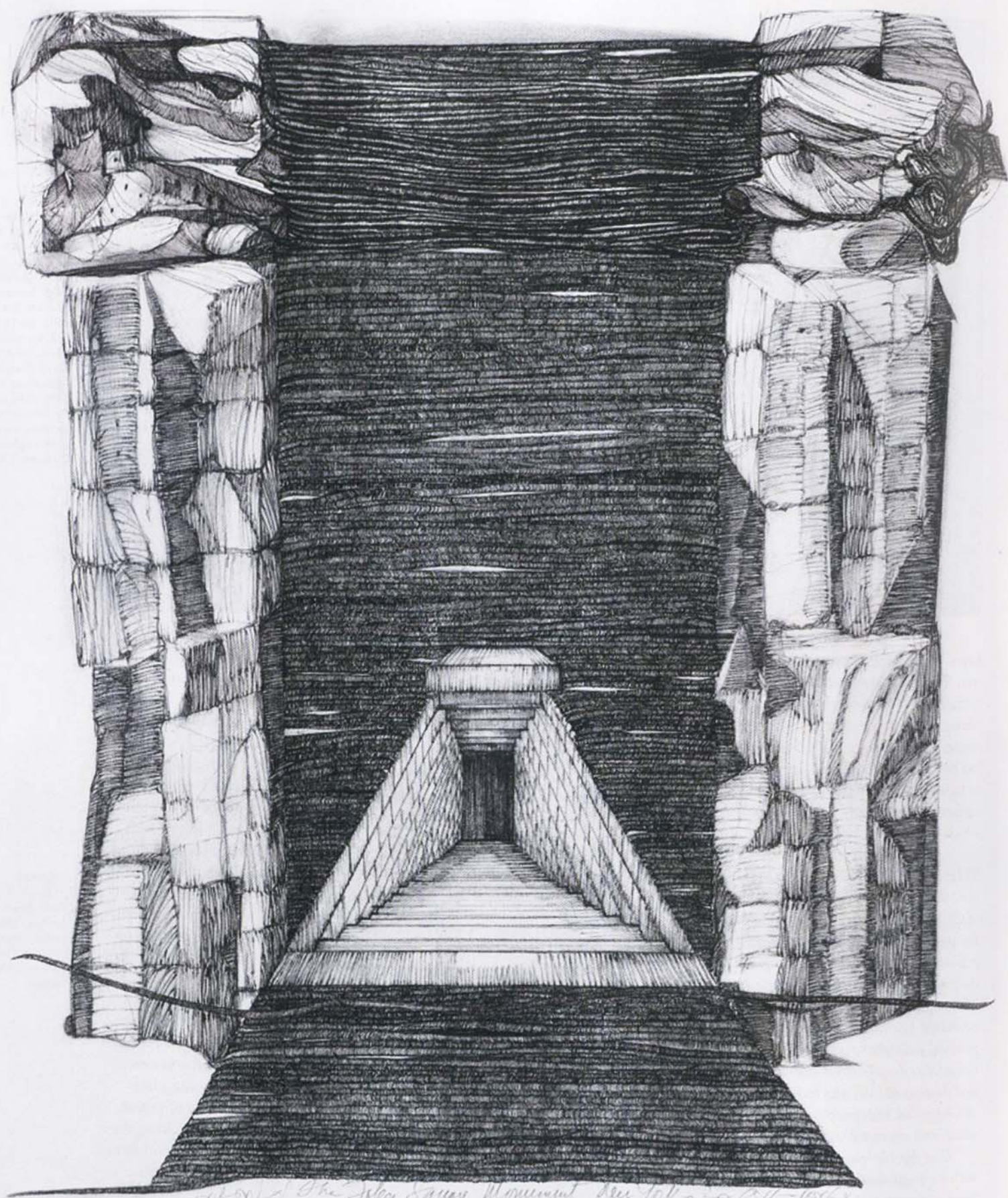
Chase-Riboud's exhibition attracted the interest of Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times*, who reviewed it jointly with an exhibition of collages by the well-established artist Romare Bearden in a piece headlined "Black Experience and Modernist Art."<sup>3</sup> Surely the catalogue's contents put the politically conservative critic on guard before he even stepped into Schaefer's gallery. He would lump together the two dissimilar artists on the basis of their shared heritage, concluding that neither body of work was "robust" enough to address racial injustice.<sup>4</sup>

Kramer faulted Chase-Riboud's form for failing to live up to her content: the artist's "difficult themes would have defeated greater artists than herself." He found the restraint of her abstractions "emotionally at odds with the provocative themes announced in the catalogue." Damning her boundary-crossing use of fiber with the faintest of praise, he dismissed her "very French refinement" for evoking the "ambiance of high fashion," rather than the "theme of heroic suffering and social conflict."<sup>5</sup>

In the years that followed Chase-Riboud's debut, she continued to marry fiber and metal. The dark, spectral

Opposite, *Malcolm X #10*, 2007, black bronze, silk, wool, rayon, cotton and synthetic fibers, 78¼ by 34 by 21 inches.

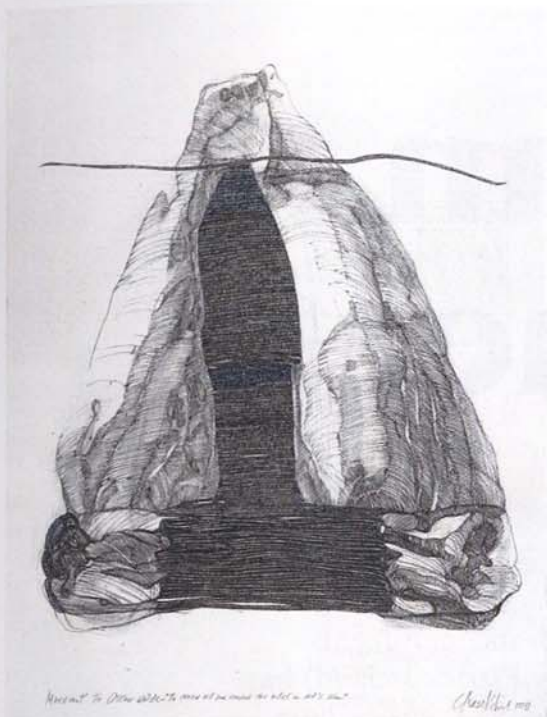




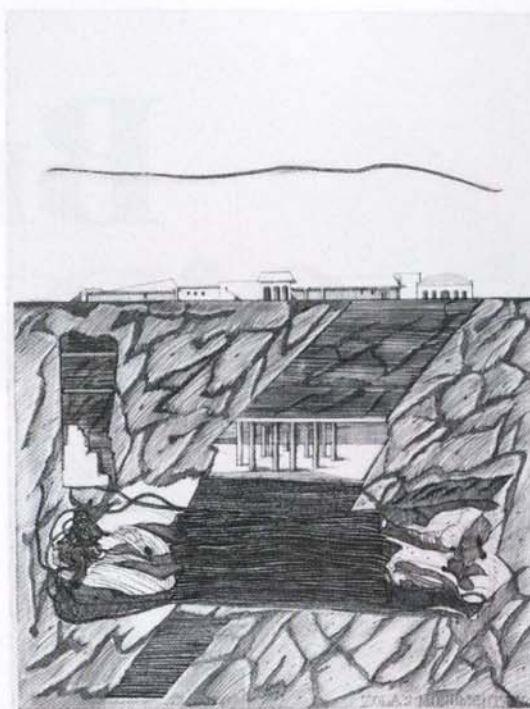
View of the West Square Monument New York City - 1875

Chubb





Far left, *Monument to Oscar Wilde*, 2011, etching on paper with charcoal, charcoal pencil, pen and ink, 30% by 23¾ inches.



Left, *Zola's Monument, Paris*, 1997, etching on paper with charcoal, charcoal pencil, pen and ink, 31½ by 23¾ inches.

*Confessions for Myself* (1972) tapers as it rises, its pliable spine and skirt seemingly holding up the solid bronze. As the '70s progressed, the multi-gifted artist channeled her meditations on black history into a prizewinning volume of poetry, *From Memphis & Peking* (1974), and three historical novels. *Sally Hemings* (1979), a novel about Thomas Jefferson's slave mistress, became an international bestseller.

CHASE-RIBOUD'S STUDIO practice returned to the subject of historical memory in the '90s.<sup>6</sup> The "Monument Drawings," begun in 1996, is a series of 25 fictive structures commemorating places and people, real and imagined. Each of these exquisite ink-and-charcoal works begins with the same etching of a bone or barbell, and a length of sinuous cable, a pairing that reiterates the hard/soft duality of the artist's sculptures. In *Middle Passage Monument, Washington* (1997), she transforms the cord into a guardrail in front of a blank, stand-alone doorway<sup>7</sup>; the bone is subsumed within its lintel, lashed to the supports with dreadlocklike coils. "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" reads the inscription below the tomblike *Monument to Oscar Wilde* (2011), and this might serve as Chase-Riboud's credo.

The Newark Museum presciently purchased *Malcolm X* #2 in 1971; and in 2001 the Philadelphia Museum of Art's late director Anne d'Harnoncourt acquired *Malcolm X* #3 for her institution. In 2003, after a gap of 34 years, Chase-Riboud began to add to the "Malcolm" series, today numbering 13 pieces. She now refers to them as "Malcolm steles (with the X silent)," the better to align them with ancient commemorative tablets and to reach for a universal significance, beyond the particular reference to one inspirational civil rights leader.

Hilton Kramer's wrong-headed critique in the newspaper of record continues to influence Chase-Riboud scholarship. Critics and curators either rightly refute it head-on or diligently sidestep it. The latter was the tack taken by Philadelphia Museum curator Carlos Basualdo, who organized the current retrospective exhibition of more than 40 of Chase-Riboud's sculptures and drawings and edited its comprehensive catalogue. It's been nearly 50 years since Malcolm X died, time enough to acknowledge the power and originality of Chase-Riboud's sculptural monuments that bear his name. ○

1. The artist first encountered African art at the Barnes Foundation near Philadelphia; telephone conversation with the author, Dec. 9, 2013. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Barbara Chase-Riboud and Philadelphia Museum of Art curator John Vick in the preparation of this article.
2. Chase-Riboud's book of engraved illustrations for Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* fulfilled her MFA thesis at Yale in 1960. See John Vick, "Chronology," in Carlos Basualdo, ed., *Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles*, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013, pp. 110-11.
3. Hilton Kramer, "Black Experience and Modernist Art," *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1970, p. 23. For contemporary rejoinders see letters to the editor from Henri Ghent and Alvin Smith, "Art Mailbag," *New York Times*, Apr. 19, 1970, p. 110.
4. Kramer criticized Bearden's work as "a little too decorative" and "a little too pat, for the emotions that are not so much stated as implied in his imagery [which] seems to call for a stronger form and a more robust expression."
5. That Chase-Riboud exhibited 15 small "jewels in silver," as listed in the catalogue, along with her sculpture, may have added to Kramer's impression that her work was trivial.
6. One of the first works was *Africa Rising* (1995-98), a commission from the U.S. General Services Administration for the lobby of the Ted Weiss Federal Building in Manhattan's Foley Square, which stands on the site of the African Burial Ground discovered during its construction.
7. The sculptor first conceived of a monument to the Middle Passage in 1991; it is as yet unrealized. Barbara Chase-Riboud, "The Malcolm Steles and the Silenced X," *Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles*, p. 88.
8. Barbara Chase-Riboud, "The Malcolm Steles and the Silenced X," p. 84.

"Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles" appeared at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Sept. 14, 2013-Jan. 20, 2014.

Opposite, *The Foley Square Monument, New York*, 1996, etching on paper with charcoal, charcoal pencil, pen and ink, 31½ by 24 inches.