

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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Knots Landing

Barbara Chase-Riboud: Quand Un Noeud est Denoué, Un Dieu est Libéré (Every Time a Knot is Undone, A God is Released)

Until 13 January 2025

Musée du Louvre, Musée d'Orsay, Centre Pompidou, Musée Guimet, Musée du Quai Branly, Palais de la Porte Dorée, Palais de Tokyo and Philharmonie de Paris

Barbara Chase-Riboud's impressive career began at the age of seven, when she enrolled in adult art classes at the Philadelphia Museum and the Fleisher Art Memorial, and outstripped her elder peers by winning a prize for her sculpture. This unprecedented achievement was followed by the Museum of Modern Art's decision in 1955 to acquire her woodcut, *Reba*, produced when she was just 15, making her the youngest artist ever to be collected by the institution.

Over the ensuing seven decades, her career has never slowed down. She has excelled not only as a sculptor, but as a poet and novelist, known for gilding heroic figures and recovering hidden histories. Her prolific literary output includes a collection of poems titled *From Memphis & Peking*, edited by Toni Morrison and published in 1974. Her first novel, *Sally Hemings*, arrived five years later, inspired by an enslaved woman who was the mistress of Thomas Jefferson.

Chase-Riboud's artistry is defined by a mastery of materials and techniques, as well as an inventive interpretation of cross-cultural dialogues, one informed by extensive travel (she now shuttles between Paris and Rome). She

is known for carving, folding and fusing thin sheets of wax into geometric, abstract forms, while using other materials, including bronze, rope cords and knotted silk, in a distinctive balance of form, scale and colour, as seen in her steles memorialising Malcolm X. This group of 20 sculptures – produced in the artist's signature palette of black, red and gold – is inspired by funerary slabs she encountered during her travels in China and Cambodia.

Her largest sculpture, *Africa Rising* (1998), stands five metres high and is dedicated to Saartjie (Sara) Baartman, an enslaved African woman who was taken to Europe to be displayed for paying audiences. Baartman's remains were exhibited until 1974 in the Musée de l'Homme

in Paris, before being repatriated to South Africa and buried in ceremonies of state on Women's Day, 2002. It was a landmark moment in the wake of apartheid and for the dignity of Black women globally.

Aside from making epic sculptures, she has also produced works on paper. In the 1990s, she began 'The Monument Drawings' in ink and charcoal, which imagine memorials to literary and historical figures such as Cleopatra, Marquis de Sade, Nelson Mandela and the Queen of Sheba.

Last year, London's Serpentine staged the artist's first solo exhibition in the UK – testifying to a global renown. Now, Paris pays further homage, as, for the first time, eight of the city's major museums simultaneously celebrate a living artist.

Chase-Riboud's sculptures, drawings and poetry are presented in conversation with the institutions' permanent collections and architecture. At the Louvre, for example, two pieces from her 'Cleopatra' series are contextualised among Greek, Etruscan, Roman and Egyptian antiquities, while at the entrance to the Philharmonie, audiences are greeted by her dedication to Josephine Baker. Several of the Malcolm X sculptures are also introduced within the framework of the Centre Pompidou's contemporary holdings.

Such an immense undertaking is a testament to the artist's singular ability to weave threads of memory, history, identity and monumentality across multiple forms of artistic expression, ultimately creating a mesmerising and thought-provoking tapestry. © Jareh Das is an independent curator and scholar who moves between West Africa and the UK



In Verona, in 1973, Barbara Chase-Riboud stands with the Bonvicini brothers alongside her sculpture 'Black Tower'