



Outside In and Inside Out

By Roslyn Bernstein

April 13, 2021

Beverly Buchanan: Shacks and Legends, 1985 - 2011

Abigail DeVille: Homebody

Andrew Edlin Gallery (212 Bowery)

March 20 - May 8, 2021

I first met Beverly Buchanan in January 1990 at her solo exhibit, “A Celebration of the Architecture of the Shack in Two and Three Dimensions,” in the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery on Greene Street, just a few blocks away from my SoHo loft. I had done some background research on Buchanan (1940–2015), who grew up in Orangeburg, S.C. and was raised by her parents Walter and Marion Buchanan in a big house on the campus of South Carolina State College where Walter (who was technically her great uncle) was the dean of the School of Agriculture. Beverly spent much of her childhood accompanying her father on site visits to local farmers where he taught them about crop rotation. She played with discarded glass vials from the college’s chemistry lab, filling them with sand and she honed her woodworking skills building little houses in the college’s carpentry shop. Most of her early artwork, she told reporters over the years, was typical of southern children of the time: drawing pictures with sticks in the earth or sand.

Encouraged by Marion Buchanan to pursue a career in science, she earned a bachelor’s degree in medical technology at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina before moving north to New York City where she earned two master’s degrees, in parasitology and public health from Columbia University. It seemed that her path was set and she began working as a health educator, first for the Veterans Administration in the Bronx and later for the East Orange (N.J.) Health Department. Always, though, in the back of her mind was the dream of becoming a doctor.

At the age of 37, Beverly began to rethink her career path, turning her back on science for life as a full-time artist. It was a BIG decision. At the time, she worried that dropping out might damage the careers of other black women who might have followed in her footsteps. She worried that shifting to art might make her seem a less serious person and she feared that the decision not to become a doctor would disappoint all of the people who had written recommendation letters on her behalf. But the impulse to create art was hard to put aside. When she received a letter officially placing her on the waitlist as an alternate for the Mt. Sinai Medical School, the crisis came to a head. It was a *brave* moment. After years of self-doubt and internal debating, she finally decided that she wanted to live her life as an artist and not as a doctor who painted during her spare time.

The art that followed over the next decades was passionate and powerful — an evolving collage of Beverly the scientist, Beverly the sociologist, and Beverly the historian. It reflected every person she had ever met and every building (she loved architecture) that she ever saw — transformed always by her loving vision—concrete pieces (“City Ruins”) to honor urban buildings that were demolished and simple wooden shacks that she saw and remembered from her childhood and the honest folk who lived in them.

There were 30 pieces in the first show that I saw in 1990—14 drawings, seven photographs and nine small buildings, many with legends that she had written about their real or imagined residents. I was drawn to Beverly’s wooden houses, each with a name and a history. Painted on foamcore, painted on wood, unpainted, nailed, glued, covered by metal roofs — simple materials that you could find anywhere, held together by her wit and whimsy, by chance and choice, and by her love of the simple life, one devoid of amenities. They were rough and unpolished but nevertheless stood upright, sturdy, and dignified. Surely, the cold wind blew through their walls but these shacks were homes, not just houses, places where people ate and slept, loved and wept, places where people grew their own patch of vegetables, and chopped their own firewood. I stood for over an hour before one shack in particular, *Hastings’ House* (1989) — held by its unpainted Georgia pine and its tin roof, sharp in one corner and curled in another, reading its legend over and over again:



Hastings House by Beverly Buchanan

“Brunson Earthly Hastings lived by the rules of hard work, no liquor, and one woman. His 10 sons were smart, hardworking farm boys but Anna, the only girl, was his heart. He was blind when she graduated but smiled proudly when he heard them call out DR. HASTINGS, to her. One year later in 1991, still thinking about Hastings’ House, I bought the piece from Steinbaum, installing it on a shelf near a stairway in my Wooster Street loft where it has greeted me every morning for more than three decades; a reminder about my decision to become a writer after having been accepted to several New York area medical schools. I had chosen words; Beverly had chosen images over medicine. We shared that BIG decision. Only Anna Hastings had become an MD.

Owning *Hastings’ House* for over three decades has meant that I have shared my home with the Hastings family. Thinking often of Dr. Anna, the only girl. So, in 1994 when Bernice Steinbaum asked me to write a catalogue essay on Buchanan for a group show entitled “Memories of Childhood,”

I wrote a piece that focused on words and images: “Crossing Over: The Artist as Writer

— Which Comes First: Words or Images?” After receiving a little hand-drawn moving card from Beverly, my husband Shael Shapiro and I drove down to Athens, Georgia to spend a few days with Beverly. At the time, she was living in a large Victorian home in the college town. She drove us around the countryside, taking us to see the yard art of a local folk artist, Reuben A. Miller, one of her close friends. Miller’s front yard was filled with his art: devils and sharks cut from sheet metal; whirligigs with dinosaurs flying off of wheels. For nearly three decades, one of his whirligigs (which we bought for \$50) has been spinning on our SoHo roof. Beverly took great joy in Miller’s “Blow Oskar” cutouts



Blow Oskar by
Reuben A. Miller

Maybe it is because of its powerful feminist legend, or its austere natural Georgia Pine, *Hastings’ House* has been often been requested by curators. I have loaned it to three exhibits since I purchased it in 1991. The first was in 1992 at The Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, VA for *Parameters*, curated by Trinkett Clark. In a mini catalogue for the exhibit, Clark included a quote from Beverly that she described as an important clarification: “These shacks are not just about black people. They are based on people that I knew growing up who were black. Once I became an adult I saw other people living in similar conditions. I could write legends, and have written legends, that include the lives of people I met when I lived in Ohio, in New Jersey, etc. — not all of them were black people. These are not necessarily black or white structures.”

In 2019, I loaned *Hastings’ House* to the Phillips Collection in Washington DC for “The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement.” I found my shack installed in a group of Buchanan shacks on a table in a third floor gallery, in front of half of Jacob Lawrence’s *The Migration Series* (the other half is owned by MoMA).

And in March, 2021 Curator Aurélie Bernard Wortsman installed *Hastings’ House* right by the front desk in a new exhibit *Beverly Buchanan: Shacks and Legends, 1985–2011*, (up until May 8th) in the Andrew Edlin Gallery on the Bowery. Wortsman first became interested in Buchanan after she saw *ShackWorks, A 16 Year Survey* (1994) hosted by the Montclair Museum of Art. She was intrigued by Beverly’s candid interviews and impressed not only by her wooden shacks but also by her pastel drawings and photographs. To understand her opus, Wortsman began digging into Buchanan’s art, uncovering things chronologically. The exhibit currently on view at Edlin hues to that timeline.

We walk over to the earliest shack in the exhibit, *House* (1985), acrylic on cardboard, which is painted in shades of pink, reflecting the abstract expressionist mode in which she was trained. Many of her early shacks were painted on foamcore. Over time, however, Buchanan began to eliminate color and began making her shacks from Georgia heart pine. During the 1980s and 1990s, Buchanan often attached stories or

“legends” to her shacks, either handwritten or typed. Wortsman includes a selection of the legends in the exhibit. Whether the people were real or imagined, their stories were powerful and Buchanan’s spelling was impeccable, a reflection she once said of her Catholic school education.



House by Beverly Buchanan

A gifted storyteller, Buchanan knows how to spin a yarn. In *Leon and His Dogs* (1994), a color photograph, she is always moving to some larger, universal truth. The legend for *Leon and His Dogs* opens with the following sentence: “Some men who have dogs, for hunting, protection, companionship, or for all of these reasons, seem to have an understanding with family and friends, that is closer to the, Love me, love my dogs, rule. This says, basically, “If you MUST leave, — GO but the dogs, STAY!” She relates a little story about a man in a sinking boat who decides to save his dog instead of his wife because his wife was a pretty good swimmer. And then, clear-eyed, always seeing through to the truth of things, Buchanan adds, “I don’t think that quiet, gentle, Leon would let me drown, if he could help it, but I’d not want to be responsible for having him even THINK about GO OR STAY and HIS DOGS.”(1990).



Mary Lou Furcron House With Lady #31 by Beverly Buchanan

An essay by Buchanan illuminates another color photograph, *Mary Lou Furcron House with Lady #32 (Lady With A Stick* (1994). “The first sight of the house made me feel like a bolt of lightning had hit me. I could only sit and stare.” Then, Buchanan noticed an old lady in her garden. “She wasn’t hostile, but reserved — I am familiar with the reserve of old black women who live alone with no visible means of

protection. I was scared to death. Before I could ask anything about the house, she said, “Help me with this!” The words and wisdom flow.

On the back wall of the gallery, installed dead center is the shack that Wortsman says was Buchanan's favorite: *Orangeburg County Family House* (1993). Unlike the other shacks, where names are often invented or concealed, in *Tilly-Jamison House* (1994) she combines the name of her best friend Tilly and the last name of her cousin Jamison, here Buchanan lists the names of people she actually knew: friends from college and from her church. Decorated with paint, sharpie, garland, necklace, wood chips, bark, buttons, bottle caps, a license plate, film canister, thumbtacks, clay pot, a glass bottle and thread and glue on wood, the work illuminates Buchanan the collector, the scavenger, the flea market goer, always incorporating objects that others had discarded into her art.



Orangeburg County Family House by Beverly Buchanan



Spirit Jar Untitled (Wedding cake figures, red roses) by Beverly Buchanan

The work is a perfect segue to Buchanan's spirit jars that are grouped on one wall of the next gallery where there is an installation by the artist Abigail DeVille. Buchanan's spirit jars sit on a shelf at the entry of this gallery. Influenced by memory jugs, which were usually left on unmarked African American graves — often with a watch or a piece of fabric from a person who passed away, Buchanan's spirit jars burst with stuff that she undoubtedly discovered in thrift stores, all sorts of *tchotchkes*: toy cars, a pin with an apple on it, referencing a favorite teacher, and shells from trips to Florida. Many are glued on top of tin cans, painted bottles, or heart-shaped boxes. "When you enter this second gallery," Wortsman explained, "you do not

know whose work the jars are but the decision to place Buchanan's work in the DeVille gallery was a way of heightening the resonance, the dialogue between the two artists' work. DeVille approved of the placement. "I looked through the window of Beverly's painted *South Florida (Hurricane House Series)* — the one that Aurélie placed closest to my room and the only one with furniture inside and I saw my grandmother's apartment. Through the inventive, expressive color application, the cramped quarters, and the inherent darkness despite the joy so evident. I intend to connect to the home's interior, where Beverly's shacks take on the body's exterior. So that the shacks stand in proxy to a body, a life lived, and the genius of the builder."



South Florida (Hurricane House Series) by Beverly Buchanan

It was gallery owner Andrew Edlin's idea to include Abigail DeVille in the Buchanan show. "I was familiar with Abigail's work as we had met years ago when I was exhibiting Thornton Dial. I felt a little self-conscious about doing another exhibition of Beverly's work without someone else's perspective being brought in. That's when I thought about Abigail, who had a viewpoint that was not available to me. It turned out she was a huge admirer of Beverly's and was excited to participate. "Homebody" is a very personal response to Beverly's shacks and their inhabitants," Edlin said. DeVille immediately connected to "the nomadic nature of Beverly's journey." She was "inspired by Beverly's search for shacks in the southern landscapes and the relationships she developed along the way. [Beverly's] centering the builders' voices through

her meditative process is a practice steeped in honor. Honor is central to my practice and how I conceive of works."

"Beverly created an alternative history, built through each shack and drawing — the canonizing of these folk and a testament to their existence," DeVille said. "I found common ground in Beverly's love for painting. The basis of our shared concerns embedded in a discipline historically held aloof from Black women artists."

Like Buchanan, DeVille uses salvaged materials to transform her art. "Homebody" reflects on her family's history; their move during the great migration from Richmond, Virginia, to Harlem, to government owned housing in the Bronx where DeVille's grandmother lived in the same apartment from the 1970s until 2012 and where she was a volunteer gardener. On one wall *Bronx Floors (Project Hoe)* 2021 DeVille focuses on what was *inside*, creating her installation out of pieces of the Bronx apartment. DeVille has installed floor tiles that she actually removed from the apartment, many scuffed and stained by tobacco smoke on the nearly 12-foot long wall. Leaning against the wall is a NYCHA gardening hoe, topped by a plaster cast of the artist's face. It is a powerful juxtaposition of inside and outside. Nearby is *Archive Wakes (Number Tree)* (2021) an

assemblage that includes a television, an axe, mannequins, an iron Christmas tree, and lotto tickets which her grandmother purchased religiously. On the other side of the wall is *outside* — where DeVille references sky, wheel yard art, and specific treasures from her grandmother’s apartment –records, a shoe, and a round hat case. We peer into the life of her grandmother who was a domestic servant for one family in the Bronx for most of her life.



Bronx Floors (Project Hoe) by Abigail DeVille



Archive Wakes (Number Tree) by Abigail DeVille

Juxtaposed with Beverly’s shacks and legends, the DeVille installation raises questions about the meaning of home, and about how people manage to live their lives. Her grandmother’s home is not a shack but rather a public housing project apartment in the Bronx but like Buchanan’s shacks her artwork illuminates how people, however marginalized, create their own history.

DeVille is clearly a bold thinker, out to challenge what the textbooks, especially the history textbooks have told us. This is apparent in another current exhibit, “Brand New Heavies,” a three-artist show up until June 8th at Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn. This time we are not inside her grandmother’s Bronx apartment but rather in the U.S. Capitol dome, in “The Observatory,” an artwork constructed of chicken wire and metal, some 20-feet high. Inside are screens which reveal “embattled sites in American history.” Images flash by. For a moment, we see the Fresh Pond area in lower Manhattan (south of SoHo), home to free Black residents.



The Observatory by Abigail DeVille

Following the January 6th riot at the U.S. Capitol and the violence and the death that ensued, we are riveted to this piece. Don't be taken in by false narratives or by grandiose descriptions of American architecture, DeVille tells us. Don't be fooled by politicians, she says.

Dig deeper. Look harder.

It is clearly a message that these two artists, Beverly Buchanan and Abigail DeVille share.