

“Beverly Buchanan: Shacks and Legends, 1985-2011” at Andrew Edlin Gallery



*Beverly Buchanan, Saddlebag House Clarke County, Georgia, c. 1995
Color photograph, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery.*

By JONATHAN GOODMAN, April 2021

This show of Beverly Buchanan’s late work, curated by Aurélie Bernard Wortsman, offers photographs, drawings, and small sculptures of the small houses and shacks Buchanan encountered in Georgia, having moved there from New York. Born in the South, Buchanan went north to complete her education, which included two degrees from Columbia University. After a stint working as a health educator, she decided to become an artist and studied at the Art Students League; Norman Lewis was her teacher. Black artist friends included Romare Bearden. But then, in 1977, Buchanan decided to return to the South, where she drew inspiration from the makeshift homes she encountered on her travels throughout the region. This fine show illuminates both Buchanan’s art skill and, more important, her empathy for the folk art locals

made and the way of life they took part in. Interestingly, the raw construction of much of Buchanan's work did not result from an untutored art background but from a well-educated, highly sophisticated African-American woman. So there is a bridge between the life of the artist and the attention she paid to the homes of the poor in semi-rural Georgia. The work is excellent; it conveys an understanding and a sympathy for a visual style she decided to work within.

The photos document the improvised domiciles that were part of her everyday life in Georgia. One, *Saddlebag House Clark County, Georgia* (c. 1995), of a broad blue house with two entrances and two windows breaking up its exterior, is topped by a roof of weathered light wood. A sedan is parked in the front on the right, and the foreground is a bare dirt yard. While the architecture is not sophisticated, the ample sturdiness of the structure, along with the choice of slate blue for its front, give the home the feeling of substantiality. Another image, *Madison, Georgia* (1991), shows three reddish structures, with windows covered with plastic and sloped roofs, placed close to the street before them on the right. Uncut grass occurs in the left foreground, and a bare tree occurs behind the homes. The raw beauty of the houses is allowed to speak without embellishment. At the same time, these images serve as a dictionary for the forms we find in Buchanan's three-dimensional work, which follow the visionary simplicity of the homes.



*Beverly Buchanan, Tilly - Jamison House, 1994 Oil pastel on paper, 20 x 26 inches.
Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery.*

The drawings show a hand leaning in the direction of expressionist abstraction. One beautiful drawing, *Tilly-Jamison House* (1994), rough in character, presents a dark figure wearing suspenders and a bright blue shirt. Directly across from the person is a home made of wooden planks with a chimney, to the left of

which is a tree on a slope angling upwards. The background, drawn in approximate thirds--blue on the left, a grassy green in the middle, and a sky blue in the upper right, serves to distinguish the figure and the house, the two focal areas of interest. Another drawing,

Street Shack (1988), of a single tallish home with light brown and blue and yellow walls, along with hints of other color, is filled with the rough crayon colors we often see in this body of work. A window faces us on one wall, with a door on the wall next to it. A luminous light blue frames the house, and some bushes, scrawled in green, occur at the bottom of the drawing.



*Beverly Buchanan, Turned Over House, 2010 Wood, glue, 13 x 9.5 x 14.5 inches.
Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery.*

The sculptures, small, three-dimensional renderings of the architecture found where Buchanan lived, stand out. They are beautifully crafted, despite their seemingly naive articulation. One, *Turned Over House* (2010), is, like the others, small and seemingly haphazardly made, but a close look reveals real sophistication: the light wood, cut into small pieces, lifts the domicile off its supports with pedestals. An open doorway is found on the front of the home on the left, while a side door on the right presents two windows, framed by small wooden squares and rectangles. Another small structure, *Tiny Aiken's Shack* (1987), articulated with thin strips of differently colored foamcore, is made engaging by the strips that rise beyond the sloped double roof. The wall facing us is embellished with freely drawn streaks of white paint--a counter-offering to the geometry of the strips. Closer to art than to documentation, the work

reminds viewers that Buchanan is an artist and not an art historian. This is important to remember because her efforts exist as a re-envisioning of actual sites. But it is of small matter whether we emphasize the art or the reality of its origins, for Buchanan has transformed her experience into something spiritually alive.

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