

Seeing America:  
*The Arc of Abstraction*



Simply Beautiful: Barbara Chase-Riboud's  
*Monument to Malcolm X, II*

SOULEO



LEGENDARY soul singer Al Green doesn't say too many words in the lyrics to his classic song "Simply Beautiful." There are a few brief verses in between his moans and groans, as the irresistible hook "simply beautiful . . ." is repeated several times over. It is that hook—oddly enough, from a romantic love tune—that comes to mind when I view Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Monument to Malcolm X, II* (Plate 60).

Buildings are often named after icons such as Malcolm X—and there are several in his honor, including Chicago's Malcolm X College and New York City's Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center, the latter of which was once the site of the Audubon Ballroom, where X was assassinated in 1965.

But it is art—here in abstract sculptural form—that offers one of the most profound and creative monuments to X. Upon an initial viewing, it is the scale that first impresses. Standing about 7½ feet tall, 3½ feet wide, and 2 feet deep, the work refuses to be obscured or denied. You are compelled to serve as witness to its sheer presence and acknowledge its existence.

Once the scale has been taken in, the material aspects call for greater visual inspection. The upper half was created in wax that was then cast in bronze. The black color of the bronze was achieved through a treatment of acid and fire. What remains

are folds, bends, and curves that appear to be in motion, while attached below, a stately and dramatic wool skirt stands motionless.

This juxtaposition of material—soft and hard, feminine and masculine—initially creates tension, but as the eye adjusts to the work, a harmonious balance is realized. Although comprised of different material elements, the work begins to speak a single visual language. The eye becomes attuned to the ways in which the bronze mimics the movement of fabric; and the fabric in this case takes on a firm quality normally associated with bronze. The materials in their reversed natures begin to complement each other and become more in sync than apart.

Yet, the kicker arrives when, after all the visual matter has been taken in, we are left with the title's reference to Malcolm X. And from there the work takes on another dimension.

Chase-Riboud began her first stela honoring Malcolm X in 1969 and completed the series in 2016. Malcolm X was a human rights activist devoted to the advancement of black people, most famously, as he said, "by any means necessary." Never one to pacify, the Muslim leader courageously denounced systemic white supremacy, the criminal injustice system, economic inequities, and all forms of oppression.

Yet, in this work there is no immediate or obvious sense of the message. Sure, we could intellectualize and hypothesize as to

the possibly symbolic meaning of Chase-Riboud's use of the color black (referencing black bodies, perhaps) or her use of wool (referencing a material that was used to clothe enslaved blacks in America, perhaps). But when it comes to art created by black people, this is the most obvious first route to take. So often the work becomes less about its aesthetic value and more about its commentary, especially in today's polarized AmeriKKKa. But Chase-Riboud's work, like many abstract pieces, forces us to initially take in the sculpture purely for its own aesthetics. You don't quite know exactly what it is you're seeing at first—but you know how it makes you feel.

And I feel a sense of majesty each time I view this work. With abstraction, Chase-Riboud has created a sculpture that stands on its own and only grows in significance as its tribute to Malcolm X sinks in. She allows the work to speak for itself, while simultaneously and subtly shining a light on the legacy of one of our most important leaders.

Now, isn't that simply beautiful?

