

Home Is Not a Place: An Analysis of Beverly Buchanan's Shacks Series through Recreation

Miranda Barnes
Art 352: Art History III
December 5th, 2022

Where do we get our personalities from? We may assume that they come from within us, that we use our unique traits and abilities to create an identity different from everyone else's. But in reality, no part of us is original. We are all collections of pieces taken from other people and places, who are collections of pieces of others, and so on and so on. This is a beautiful thing about humanity—all of us carrying parts of each other means we are all connected in some way. And like our sense of self, our sense of home is also a collection of pieces. A house may feel like home, but so can a person, an animal, an environment, a song, an activity, a memory, a feeling, or so many other parts of our lives. Home is never just one thing, but there is always a sense of connection. Beverly Buchanan is an artist who expresses this idea of home as a concept: not as a place, but a collection of pieces from those we love. Focusing specifically on the experience of being Black in the South, her shacks series, and specifically the piece *Turned Over House*, are collections of pieces built into the shape of a home—physically as well as conceptually.

Beverly Buchanan was born in North Carolina in 1940, during the Jim Crow era. She went to university and began a career in New York public health before changing course at 31 and devoting her time to art instead, moving back to Georgia in 1977.¹ Her work, specifically her shacks series, which she began in 1985 and continued until she died in 2015, focuses on an exploration of American Southern vernacular architecture and culture as well as her love for her home and the people she met while living in the South. The series included sculptural shacks, none bigger than a dollhouse, as well as oil pastel shack drawings on paper, and a few photographs of people who had built their own real-life shacks by hand. The shacks themselves are endearing, each with a sense of its own personality and story. Many of them did have stories

¹ Andrew Edlin Gallery, "Beverly Buchanan: And You May Find Yourself...," accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.edlingallery.com/exhibitions/beverly-buchanan-and-you-may-find-yourself/installation-views>.

attached, either remembered or created by Buchanan.² As an article by Catherine Fox in ArtsATL says, the sculptures are “lovingly cobbled together from scraps of wood and tin, twigs, buttons, bottles and such, they are simultaneously poignant memorials to the poverty and struggles of their inhabitants and proud testaments to their resilience.”³ And as Chloé Wilcox puts it in her review of Buchanan’s Brooklyn exhibition, *And You May Find Yourself...*,

Built unevenly on stilts, top-heavy and disjointed, with slanted roofs and boards jutting out... they present both a contained image and an array of fragments, slipping and sliding against each other... In some of the sculptures, like “House of Scraps” (2011), the seemingly endless proliferation of material additions invokes an imaginary slew of tiny hands and bodies working vigorously to add and embellish—one more slat here, another pane of glass there, blocks and sheets of wood growing upward and outward, far exceeding the demands of mere functionality, mere shelter.⁴

While none of the shacks are direct representations of real-life buildings, they all take inspiration from real places.⁵ While living in the South, Buchanan met many people who built their own houses, or “shacks.” This was primarily out of necessity, but there is a talent and beauty in it that Buchanan saw clearly. Many of her shacks are colorful or embellished with other objects but *Turned Over House* is a later work (2010), so it focuses on the wood rather than on color. According to the Andrew Edlin Gallery statement for the exhibition *Shacks and Legends*, “Around 1989, she started to eliminate color and chose instead to emphasize the grain and natural hues of recycled Georgia heart pine, which was commonly used in the region. As the pine became increasingly scarce, Buchanan used commercial lumber for many of her later works,

² Andrew Edlin Gallery, “Beverly Buchanan: Shacks and Legends, 1985-2011,” accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.edlingallery.com/exhibitions/beverly-buchanan-shacks-and-legends-1985-2011/press-release>.

³ Catherine Fox, “Art History Rewards the Vanguard: Beverly Buchanan’s ‘Ruins and Rituals,’” *ArtsATL*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.artsatl.org/art-history-rewards-vanguard-beverly-buchanans-ruins-rituals/>.

⁴ Chloé Wilcox, “Beverly Buchanan: And You May Find Yourself...,” *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2015, 54, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=ets&AN=103114660&authtype=shib&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Saim Demircan, “What Beverly Buchanan’s ‘Shacks’ Tell Us About the Black South,” *Frieze*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/beverly-buchanan-shacks-legends-2021-review>.

sometimes burning the wood to mimic the weathered appearances of the local homes.”⁶ In all aspects, Buchanan’s goal was not to perfectly replicate a building from real life, but to capture its spirit—the person who made it, and the community it resides in. Not just the shack itself, but how it creates a sense of home. As she explains, “Remembering the look and feel of structures has been a strong focus in my drawings and sculptures. My vision and interest shifted to the reality of current places and their surrounding landscape. The house and its yard and the road behind and across.”⁷

Various other artists have created work focusing on ideas like Buchanan’s. For example, she and Alice Neel, whose career mainly took place before Buchanan’s but with some overlap, both have a talent for focusing on the importance of individual people and stories, and for celebrating those often overlooked. Buchanan’s work can also be considered counter-monuments, or monuments that intend to go against the imposing and intimidating appearance of typical monuments and memorials by scaling down the form of public art while addressing common concerns, such as the political, social, emotional, or physical needs of the surrounding community. Her shacks are monuments and memorials, both to those who created the real-life shacks and lived in those areas, and to southern Black culture in general. With their diminutive size, fragility, and anonymity, they don’t have the look of a typical monument, but to those who are familiar with the culture Buchanan is representing, they may function as memorials just as well if not better than typical ones would. One reason they work as memorials is because although they are inviting and have a sort of personality, there’s also a sense of absence about them, which casts a shadow over the work. Such homely buildings should have families interacting inside and between them, children playing, sounds of living. Of course, they aren’t

⁶ Andrew Edlin Gallery, “Shacks and Legends.”

⁷ Andrew Edlin Gallery, “And You May Find Yourself...”

lived in, though they feel like they once were, and this feeling of abandonment adds a layer of grief to the work. This grief aspect is reminiscent of the work of Rachel Whiteread, who worked approximately at the same time as Buchanan. She is known for creating the Judenplatz *Holocaust Memorial* in Austria, as well as several concrete casts of forgotten, abandoned, or disregarded spaces, “such as those under tables and chairs, around books arranged on shelves, in staircases, and under floorboards... In doing so, she creates an uncanny experience of absence that once felt seems present.”⁸

Grief seems even more appropriate in the context of Buchanan’s work when considering the racial aspect. Her piece *Three Families (A Memorial Piece with Scars)*, made in 1989, deals with the trauma of racial violence, specifically house burnings, that took place in the South. A label next to the piece reads: “Like burnt clothing, remains carry the smell of danger, past and present. Covering or patching (houses or garments) doesn’t remove the memory. These 3 structures, after being painted, were set on fire, left to burn and extinguished by friends. These shacks are a metaphor for what then, as now, was a tactic for enforced despair.”⁹ The real-life shacks are not only houses, but homes. Not only structures, but an extension of the people who built them and the community they were born of. When they are burned, it destroys more than just an object—it feels like the people themselves are burning. Burning her work is Buchanan’s way to process that trauma, to help her culture and loved ones process it, and to bring others’ awareness to it. “Considering what she must have seen growing up in a small North Carolina town in the 50s and as a participant in Civil Rights demonstrations during the 60s... For her, the South as a psychic space was still seething from the horrors of slavery and its aftermath.”⁹

⁸ Peter Selz and Kristine Stiles, "Installations, Environments, and Sites," from *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (University of California Press, 2012) 599.

⁹ Fox, “Art History Rewards the Vanguard.”

Additionally, poverty itself can be traumatic, even without racial violence thrown into the mix. Buchanan's work is a love letter to her community—though she has multiple university degrees herself, Buchanan sees their value regardless of their economic or educational status. As she puts it, “I want to give people who can neither read nor write but made all the measurements and built their own barns and shacks a different way of looking at themselves.”¹⁰

I chose Buchanan's shacks series to recreate primarily because it's inspiring to me. Being someone who was born in Australia but moved to Gainesville when I was five, as well as someone with a complicated childhood and parents I couldn't always depend on, I've always had a sort of strange relationship with the concept of home and what makes one, so Buchanan's exploration of that concept appealed to me. I was also specifically intrigued by that process of burning her work. As an artist, I keep almost everything I make, so the idea of destroying something you just created felt heartbreaking to me and I wanted to know more about the reasoning behind it. As for why I chose *Turned Over House* in particular, honestly, it was because I knew I could make it from what I had available. I have access to a wood shop, including bins of scraps, but no car to go buy art supplies, so the logical decision was to choose something I already had the materials for. This choice reflects Buchanan's work, since *Turned Over House* is also made from scraps of recycled wood,¹⁰ but it also reflects the real houses she based her shacks on, which were built out of necessity and made from what those people had available.

I thought the process of recreating this artwork would mean going through the bins of wood scraps and finding pieces that looked like the ones in the picture, then gluing them together with hot glue until I had a general house shape. What it actually entailed was estimating the size

¹⁰ Andrew Edlin Gallery, “Shacks and Legends.”

of the walls based on the dimensions of the finished sculpture, looking for pieces that were that size, only finding ones that needed to be cut down, realizing I couldn't use the power tools safely without supervision, finding a hand saw, sawing the pieces for at least 30 minutes straight per side, gluing two pieces together with hot glue, running out of hot glue, finding wood glue, gluing the other walls together while waiting in between for them to dry, looking for smaller pieces that were similar enough to the smaller ones in the photo, more sawing, more gluing, lots of staring at the sculpture trying to figure out what to do next... and about 10 hours later, I was done.

Obviously, the process turned out to be a lot more difficult than I thought. The finished work has slightly different proportions to Buchanan's because once I realized it was too late to change, and many of the smaller pieces look different. However, I feel that details like that aren't so important. Buchanan herself didn't intend to make the shacks a faithful representation of a real-life building, but to express the idea of building a home from smaller pieces. To create the work, I had to use the scraps and bits and pieces that were available to me, and make things work even if it wasn't ideal. When I look at my recreation, I see something that took a lot of pain and effort to create but that now I can be proud of. That's likely the same way the people who built their houses by hand felt about those houses, but it's also exactly the same way I feel about my concept of home.

In the same way that we build ourselves and our sense of home from pieces of those around us, Beverly Buchanan uses scraps of past projects to create her shacks. I did the same in my recreation—all the pieces used were a rejected part of something else. Some scraps I used were even already glued together, left over from some other project. The people who made those pieces and discarded them are a part of my artwork, much like the fingerprints of people who have long since left my life remain a part of me and of my home. Through recreating the work, I

also learned that much like the concept of home, it's not as simple or easy as it looks and involves a lot of effort and making things work even if they're not perfect. I would also imagine that in making it I learned about the process of building an actual house, like the people that Buchanan modeled her shacks after. It is no simple feat to build a house, even a little shack, and it's not worth anything economically. But it's theirs, and they made it with their own two hands, and that alone makes it important and valuable.

Buchanan's work is relatively unseen, but still has some recognition given that there were several gallery shows in New York and Atlanta, so some people do know about it; compared with my recreation, the only people who will know about it are those I tell. Like Buchanan, me making a small house is a scaled down version of those who built their actual house in real life, however mine is not based on a real house or on anyone I know—it's a representation of a representation, so its meaning changes somewhat. Because of that, mine has less of a personal connection to my life than Buchanan's does to her life, but creating the piece made it much more personal. Creating any kind of art is personal—an artist puts a piece of themselves into every work they make, and if they spend enough time with a piece, even if they dislike it at first, often by the end it grows on them, as it did for me. In fact, creating anything at all feels personal, whether it's considered art or not. As mentioned earlier, the houses of the people who built them by hand seem like an extension of that person, hence why it's all the more painful to see the house burned.

Through her shacks series, Beverly Buchanan captures the concept of home and shows us that it isn't a specific place, but rather a feeling; it is various pieces "lovingly cobbled together" from those who have touched our lives. Much like Buchanan herself, important things, such as our connections to those we love, and our sense of home, are often unseen or overlooked,

but this does not diminish their importance. Her work focuses on her experience growing up Black in the South, but it can be applied to anyone's life, as many of us may find that idea of "home" more complicated than it seems. For example, the internet has made collections of small pieces more common than ever and has enabled us to draw from sources all over the world to form our personalities. This can make for more interesting but also more complicated people, and we have yet to fully see where it leads us. No matter who we are, seeing Buchanan's work provokes the viewer to think about her life growing up and her sense of home, but also their own. Hopefully my recreation does the same, as creating it did for me.



Beverly Buchanan,
Turned Over House (2010),
wood and glue sculpture



Miranda Barnes,
Turned Over House (2022),
wood and glue sculpture

Bibliography

- Andrew Edlin Gallery. "Beverly Buchanan: And You May Find Yourself..." Accessed December 5, 2022. <https://www.edlingallery.com/exhibitions/beverly-buchanan-and-you-may-find-yourself/press-release>.
- Andrew Edlin Gallery. "Beverly Buchanan: Shacks and Legends, 1985-2011." Accessed December 5, 2022. <https://www.edlingallery.com/exhibitions/beverly-buchanan-shacks-and-legends-1985-2011/press-release>.
- Demircan, Saim. "What Beverly Buchanan's 'Shacks' Tell Us About the Black South." *Frieze*, April 15, 2021. <https://www.frieze.com/article/beverly-buchanan-shacks-legends-2021-review>.
- Fox, Catherine. "Art history rewards the vanguard: Beverly Buchanan's 'Ruins and Rituals'." *ArtsATL*, October 9, 2017. <https://www.artsatl.org/art-history-rewards-vanguard-beverly-buchanans-ruins-rituals/>.
- Stiles, Kristine, and Peter Selz. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, 2nd ed. London: University of California Press, 2012.
- Wilcox, Chloé. "Beverly Buchanan: And You May Find Yourself..." *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2015, 54. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=ets&AN=103114660&authType=shib&site=eds-live&scope=site>.