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Modernist Antagonisms and Material Reciprocities: Chase-Riboud's *Albino*

Elyse Speaks

Department of Art, Art History, and Design, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA;
espeaks@nd.edu

Abstract: This paper considers the material exchange initiated in the early sculptural practice of Barbara Chase-Riboud when she began to incorporate fiber into her bronze sculptures by looking closely at her 1972 work, *The Albino*. I suggest that Chase-Riboud staked a claim for sculpture as a symbolic site at which material knowledge might be transferred across time and space. The work's negotiations open western sculptural practice to a hybridized form located within transhistorical associations that rework the alleged specificities of both craft and bronze into sites for the exchange of ideas and practices.

Keywords: sculpture; materiality; race; fiber art; process

The African American artist and writer Barbara Chase-Riboud likely garnered the art world's attention first by way of her words: those of her acclaimed historical novel *Sally Hemmings* (1977), as well as her interview appearing two years later in art historian Eleanor Munro's 1979 *Originals: American Women Artists*. Situated directly after Munro's chapter on fiber artist Sheila Hicks, and just before sculptor Lee Bontecou, Chase-Riboud stood as a crucial link between the various material processes percolating so persistently through the sculptures of women artists at the time. Having graduated as the first African American woman with an MFA from the architecture program at Yale in 1960, she moved to London, then Paris shortly thereafter, and by the mid-sixties had revised her approach to sculpture by integrating the historical, lost-wax process of casting bronze with the contemporary and experimental use of raw, loose fiber skeins and ropes. That unique approach persists today and places her directly at the forefront of the inventive processes increasingly undertaken by artists, and more particularly women and minority artists, both then and now.

In some ways, prior to the last several years, Chase-Riboud might have appeared as the consummate outsider as a Black woman abstract sculptor. And to date there is little in the scholarship that draws out the connections that Chase-Riboud has to female sculptors or other contemporaries of the 1960s and 70s (Weissberg 2022).¹ This, too, might relate to the works' abstraction, which distances it from the more explicit racial politics of the art of her Black U.S. peers (English 2016).² While Chase-Riboud's import has long been acknowledged within African American art historical narratives, only recently has she begun to achieve widespread institutional and critical visibility: in 2018, one could finally view her imposing bronze and fiber work, *The Albino* (1972, Figure 1), newly installed at The Museum of Modern Art as part of the larger rehang of its collection. In an overdue gesture that affirmed the significant position that women held in revising the parameters of sculpture, *The Albino* stood in a grand, airy room of sculptures that honored the works' experimental innovation. Encompassing a large swath of wall, Chase-Riboud's sculpture seemed poised to hold court over a latex, hanging sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, a poured floor work by Lynda Benglis and a hemp bundle situated directly on the ground by Jackie Winsor (Figure 2).



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Figure 1. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *The Albino*, 1972 (reinstalled in 1994 by the artist as *All That Rises Must Converge/Black*). Bronze with black patina, wool and other fibers; 180 × 126 × 30" (457.2 × 320 × 76.2 cm). Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and gift of Mrs. Elie Nadelman (by exchange). © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 2. Installation at The Museum of Modern Art including (clockwise from top left) work by Chase-Riboud, Jackie Winsor, Louise Bourgeois and Lynda Benglis.

Each artist in the room challenged the boundaries of sculpture through their unprecedented use of materials, but Chase-Riboud underscored that contest by juxtaposing the imposing fiber arms of her work with a humble, squat bronze form. *The Albino's* overt conceptual stakes manifest a disposition toward examination and analysis. Standing over 12 feet and spanning a width of over 9 feet, the sculpture was produced in 1972 as part of a group that initiated Chase-Riboud's formal integration of fiber and metal; in her previous works, the artist had often deployed separate material elements that were assembled upon exhibition, the fiber acting as an accent to the dominant metals.

The 2018 acquisition of *The Albino* by the Museum of Modern Art came sixty years after the institution was gifted the woodcut (*Reba*, 1955) that Chase-Riboud made as a teen, the first work of its kind by an African American woman to enter the collection. First displayed at a major exhibition of Chase-Riboud's work organized by Peter Selz for the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley Museum in January, 1973, *The Albino* was part of the first solo show by an African American woman at that museum. Also the name of a poem written by Chase-Riboud at the same time that is today displayed next to the sculpture, *The Albino* is a title that immediately evokes the rhetoric of identity politics *avant-la-lettre* by raising the issue of skin color and its association with identity, an issue taken up in the poem. Furthermore, the sculpture is capable of being arranged in two configurations; when installed with its arms draped vertically and overlapping, its title shifts to *All That Rises Must Converge* (conferred in 1994). As *The Albino* (the more common configuration), the work's imposing fiber arms appear to dominate and usurp the bronze; they dwarf the inert, stone-like form in their reach toward the ceiling. A second register of fiber—rope-like and coiled below the bronze—obscures any suggestion of a solid metal base and imparts a sense of lightness or levitation that upends expectations about the relationship among the materials.

By rewriting the history of bronze through its juxtaposition with soft materials, Chase-Riboud stakes a claim for sculpture as a symbolic site at which material knowledge might be transferred across time and space. In a June, 1969 letter to her mother from her home in Paris, Chase-Riboud conveyed a rare, direct remark about her sculpture and working process: "I have found an underlying theme for a new series of sculptures which is quite

tremendous and is going to make, I think, a lot of controversy, combining what I know of architecture with what I know of design with what I think I know about North Africa and Africa itself" (Chase-Riboud 2022).³ The new series, in which she works with fiber as well as metal, became permanent. Textiles indicated those processes and materials that she associated with design, a term that also stands in for all that she sees as anti-sculptural (in a western sense), whereas the process of bronze casting was to become a fundamentally architectural practice for her. The use of soft materials also aligns with Chase-Riboud's burgeoning feminism; her experimental methods, which refuse the technical apparatus of the loom, parallel those mounted at the same time by female textile artists challenging the accepted hierarchies of art and craft (Auther 2009).⁴ By using these distinctive materials, Chase-Riboud incorporated something of the art forms, history and theoretical ideals that she witnessed outside of Europe, dynamically juxtaposing varied materials and techniques in ways that set up a dialogue complementary to the one that she saw herself having with history. In the commitment to sculpture that combines contrasting materials and technical processes is a manifest partnership through reciprocal exchange. The materials appear to learn from one another and demonstrate a give-and-take in their enactment of simultaneities.

Through an examination of *The Albino*, this paper proposes that such acts of processual exchange initiate methods of learning that speak to the capacity for art to testify to and offer its viewers new forms of material intelligence. That is, *The Albino* reveals how material evidence conveys the capacity to reshape cultural orders and structures. By undertaking what art historian Kellie Jones refers to as "projects [that] ponder sites all over the globe", Chase-Riboud conflates distinct times and spaces through material means (Jones 2006, p. 32). Amateur methods of making inform skilled casting techniques just as bronze offers a source of stylistic and categorical liberation and freedom to fiber. Similarly, physical proximity and tactility reduce the apparent distance that separates and bounds distinct traditions and cultural associations. The new, hybrid track the sculptures offer combine global, historical forms of sculptural metalwork with inventive and uncharted (i.e., contemporary) uses of soft materials such as wool and silk that seemed to stand outside of sculpture's western history. In the imaginary of Chase-Riboud's work, sculpture's reinvented past issues a proposition regarding the future—one that places traditions and approaches held to be distinct and in some opposition into systematic and generative negotiation. What this type of learning looks like is distinct from the 20th-century ethos of modernist moral didacticism associated with vision and distance. Working against the colonial logics that produced and naturalized divisions that separate east from west, or ethnographic from aesthetic, Chase-Riboud uses fiber and bronze to proffer affinities and learned knowledge, but also, as with *The Albino*, direct challenges and confrontations. Abstraction and material juxtapositions incite haptic and sensorial engagement with the viewer by modeling those material intimacies within the works themselves.

1. Material Reciprocities

Chase-Riboud was born in 1939 in Philadelphia, and her biography and education is often rehearsed as a foundation for her attentions to global aesthetics. Having received early encouragement for her artistic abilities, Chase-Riboud studied art as an undergraduate at the Tyler School of Art at Temple University and won a year-long fellowship to the American Academy in Rome. This led to a stay in Egypt where she met the artist and Magnum photographer René Burri, with whom she maintained a long-standing friendship. Upon return, Chase-Riboud attended the architecture school at Yale University where she received an MFA in 1960, with her attention remaining split between art and architecture. Shortly after graduation, she visited Paris (by way of London) where she took up permanent residence after marrying another Magnum photographer, Marc Riboud, in 1961, whom she met through Burri.

Initially Chase-Riboud articulated her interest in a reintegration of aesthetic principles that originated outside of the framework of sculpture through a desire to escape the stasis

endemic to the western use of a sculptural base. Her oft-quoted quip, “I wanted freedom from the tyranny of the base”, is a remark that reads today as if “base” metonymically comprises the entirety of western sculptural convention. Fiber provided the solution, appealingly registering as non-western, or perhaps, better, as non-sculptural, disrupting the conventions prescribed by the base. This resistance was initially derived from her attention to the principles of dance and movement, but also to natural forms such as flowing water. In a works such as *Malcolm X #3* (1969; Figure 3), one of the first works in which fiber becomes a full partner to metal, fiber acts as a ‘skirt:’ the cords and tassels, which have a fluidity and implicit motion to them, hide the lower half of the solid form. In the new exchange the materials undertake, the skirt achieves a structural status, forming a mode of support with and connection to the floor, while the bronze suggests a new lightness and mobility. As Jones further notes, in this, Chase-Riboud asserts an affinity with “African creative traditions” through the work’s vertical orientation and structure, in particular drawing “parallels to West African masquerades, which join wooden mask superstructures with fabric, raffia and other materials draping the body, and are then put into performance” (Jones 2006, p. 20). A similar comparison might be made with Louise Bourgeois’ personages, which invoke certain principles of African art in their direct connection to the floor as a means to assert autonomy and agency (Zeidler 2004).⁵ In many ways, these seem much closer to Chase-Riboud’s thinking than the minimalism and postminimalism of her contemporaries.



Figure 3. Chase-Riboud, *Malcolm X #3*, 1969. Polished cast bronze with spun artificial silk and mercerized Egyptian cotton (260.4 × 94 × 81.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art: 125th Anniversary Acquisition. Purchased with funds contributed by Regina and Ragan A. Henry, and with funds raised in honor of the 125th Anniversary of the Museum and in celebration of African American art, 2001, 2001-92-1 © Barbara Chase-Riboud.

As the literature on modernism amply attests, Chase-Riboud was not alone in her turn to non-western art as a way to reframe her practice. See, for example (Leja 1997). In this, her approach aligns with that of U.S. and European women sculptors of the 1960s and 70s who used materials and processes to establish distance from the masculine sculptural traditions of their predecessors and contemporaries. On the one hand, there were the novel assemblage sculptures of the likes of Lee Bontecou and Louise Nevelson from the 1950s and 60s, which have been productively linked to aesthetic paradigms that sit outside of conventional European frameworks. See, for instance (Helfenstein 2007, pp. 207–9). On the other, there is the work of fiber artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Olga de Amorim, Françoise Grossen, Sheila Hicks, Leonore Tawney and Claire Zeisler, who looked cross-culturally and deployed fiber in terms that were fundamentally distinct from the history of sculpture.⁶

What is equally necessary to acknowledge is that Chase-Riboud's experimental approach to fiber was adopted nearly in tandem with a new commitment to practicing lost-wax casting, which led away from modern forms of welding and toward a decidedly historically-minded approach. The history of the lost-wax process has somewhat unknown, dispersed origins in ancient cultures in South America and Africa that precede its better-known resurgences in Benin and Renaissance Italy. Revitalized several times throughout art history across the globe, it had fallen out of fashion by the 20th century, likely due to its labor-intensive process that required specialized foundry work to achieve the exceptional degree of precision and detail for which it was known. The process first requires the sculptor to create a wax model from which the metalsmiths could work to create a cast. Chase-Riboud has explained, "I use large sheets [of wax], which represent foundations, armatures, walls and decorations. Each layer has a function, and the whole is architectonic in nature" (Britton 1988, p. 32). The wax is highly impressionable and allows for additive and carved accumulations of intricate details to then be translated into bronze and other metals. The difficult, multi-step process ultimately destroys the mold, but is highly accurate in its retention of surface detail.

Such a capacity for detail is visible, for example, in the Benin Bronzes of the 17th and 18th centuries, many of which feature complex coral bead patterns that decorate and adorn the elongated collars of their commemorative heads. Yet lost-wax bronze is equally notable within western art of the middle-ages for its broader connection to the senses beyond sight. Its facility for registering texture has long aligned it with haptics, sensuality and bodiliness. See, for example (Weinryb 2016, esp. ch. 2). As art historian Gwendolyn Shaw remarks, the lost-wax casting process retains the sense of the material's prior life: "Ghosted upon the surface of the bronze, the dribble and flow of wax made liquid by Chase-Riboud's torch endure, the surface of the paraffin once molded by her fingers standing as the indexical marker of her actions" (Shaw 2013, p. 24). This material and conceptual expansiveness appealed to Chase-Riboud, perhaps all the more so given the ancient, multiple roots that mark its origins as globally, functionally and temporally dispersed.⁷ Through the wax cast, bronze could adopt a haptic posture associated with the handwork of textiles while concomitantly asserting a shared, global history steeped in the technical space of the foundry.

In this, Chase-Riboud's sculpture courts a relationship with the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, to whom Chase-Riboud was introduced in Paris through Sheila Hicks, and with whom she became friends. Art historian and critic Wayne Andersen has remarked that Chase-Riboud often cited Lévi-Strauss's quip that "art is the only proof that anything has ever happened in the past" (Andersen 2000).⁸ Yet Chase-Riboud's material approach suggests that she is most interested in the past as reconceived in the form of imaginary dialogues that push toward new possibilities for future relations. This points to an affinity with other views expressed by Lévi-Strauss at the time. In his 1952 essay, *Race and History*, he articulated a long-standing problem with cultural theories of evolution and the tendency for contemporary accounts of history to be structured around chronological forms of cultural progress. His efforts to work against that model involved a new emphasis on both

a scholastic reestablishment of sustained attention to cultural diversity absent of value judgments. Pointing to contradictory tendencies either to denigrate difference as culturally inferior or to deny difference by seeking “to eradicate what still shocks and offends. . . in that diversity”, Lévi-Strauss argues for a conception of history that favors the significance of coalitions and relational positions over and above a conception of the progress of individual cultures (Lévi-Strauss 1952, p. 13).

Recognizing that emphasizing coalitions might seem to undermine an investment in cultural diversity, i.e., through a propensity toward homogenization, Lévi-Strauss concurrently articulated the deep need for *active* forms of acceptance, which we might translate as an investment in difference fashioned on a user-like model that advances beyond passive appreciation. “Tolerance”, he writes, “is not a contemplative attitude, dispensing indulgence to what has been or what is still in being. It is a dynamic attitude, consisting in the anticipation, understanding and promotion of what is struggling into being”. The best possibilities for tolerance seem to rest in instances of relationality, for which the acknowledgement and engagement with material intersections among cultures is one primary example (Lévi-Strauss 1952, pp. 10, 49).

Lévi-Strauss can be used to shed light on Chase-Riboud’s investments, which provide models by analogy. Enacted in her work both materially and processually are what might be read as “encounters” of cultural diversity that register forms of active tolerance. If fiber initiated a gendered dialogue through its resonances with femininity, all the more altered and politicized in the feminist climate of the 1970s, it also acted to bridge the present production of sculpture by a generation of women (sculptors and fiber artists) with sculpture’s history by inviting bronze into that dialogue. By working not with individual threads but with skeins, fiber can encompass a raw sense of volume and weight, as one might imagine derives from the amassed layers of wax in the creation of Chase-Riboud’s models (Lansner 1972, p. 65). The expansive reciprocities that emerge within the exchange infuse one cultural form of expression with the other. Both materials and forms of making come to engender qualities associated, first, more assuredly with fiber—a malleable and varied materiality that aligns within the (opposing) realms of the functional and the decorative. But the sense of strength, power and endurance persistently found in her use of fiber concomitantly contest those associations that follow from fluidity or ornament. Furthermore, rather than making fiber appear exclusively bodily, it also tends to appear sculptural and architectonic: a component of structure.

This multivalenced use of material is by design. Chase-Riboud speaks of *working* to impart such qualities to the fiber, to sculpt with it. The idea of the translation of one medium into another is important: the effect is to shift thinking away from material contests and toward forms of translation and homologies without the effects of reducing one to the other. Material stickiness lends that distinction. In the end, one registers not a fusion of opposites, but methods for establishing acts of transfer: of information, characteristics and power (de Zegher 2011).⁹ In this way, the work’s material negotiations open western sculptural practice to a broad and conceptual form that is newly engendered, and which reworks the alleged specificities of both craft and bronze into global sites for the manifest exchange of ideas and practices.

Fiber and its connections to women and non-western traditions contributes to Chase-Riboud’s investment in upending the western notion of the sculptural base to become one means of promoting the sculpture’s agency and contingency. In *Confessions for Myself* (1972; Figure 4), for example, fiber ‘hides’ the base, replacing its fixity with organicism and pliability in ways that respond to forms of motion that Chase-Riboud had been coaxing out of the metals with which she worked. We might read this relation as exemplary. Built to resemble the stele form with which she was increasingly preoccupied, Chase-Riboud treats the materials as each conveying a notion of “active tolerance” (Lévi-Strauss 1952, pp. 42–43).



Figure 4. Barbara Chase-Riboud: *Confessions for Myself*, 1972; black patina'd bronze and wool; 120 × 40 × 12 in; University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Purchased with funds from the H. W. Anderson Charitable Foundation. © Barbara Chase-Riboud.

The conversation and conflict that Chase-Riboud increasingly implements between fiber and bronze produces a form of making that invests the physical properties of adaptation and translation with a relational posture that is historical and political. In registering a continual sense of becoming, the sculptures mark a debt to a past that is gendered and global at once, while signaling something that is nascent and possible. Fiber, particularly when juxtaposed with the specific forms of metalwork undertaken, renders effects that appear, in some sense, temporally specific, and yet pan-historical; similarly, bronze signals a distinctive sculptural tradition even as it is abstracted and reformed. The mechanics of making further the dialogue. The use of the foundry embeds within the object the

deep-seated connection between sculptor and craftsman, the guild worker as artisan, while also yielding forms that are modern in their transmediality. This is the revisionist labor that the sculptures enact. In creating active dynamics, work like *Confessions for Myself* endorses an attitude complementary to Claude Lévi-Strauss's articulation of a "cumulative history", one spawned by an active attention to difference and understood not to feature the properties of a singular culture or race, but cross-fertilizations across cultures and times (Lévi-Strauss 1952, pp. 42–43).

Critical theorist Michel De Certeau posits a condition of hybridity that complements such forms of intercultural exchange—for example, between the Benin bronze and its counterpart in the Baroque, or between ancient textiles and modern experiments in fiber—that Chase-Riboud advances materially. Speaking on the relationship between immigrants and native populations, De Certeau proposes that such instances of confrontation can create hybrid forms "in a reciprocity of historical exchanges. . . organized and mobilized by factual situations of intercommunication. Thus the special importance of the 'interrelational' dynamics that, in a group of immigrants, the passage from the first generation to the second or third generation, generally inscribes. . . the necessities of adaptation that populations of immigrants or minorities have to confront give them a vanguard role in the application of the means that their group has as its disposal. . ." (De Certeau 1997, pp. 17, 33).

Here, De Certeau considers forms of exchange that occur synchronically in ways that extend and alter historical tradition. 'Adaptation' and hybrid cultural forms that emerge through necessity and circumstance produce mediations rooted in disjunction and dissonance, which come to be based in a user-like model, and whose generative effects are all the more manifest.

Consider how this relates to the hybrid form of sculpture taken up by Chase-Riboud ca. 1970. Her immigration to France does not call for all of the necessities of adaptation to which De Certeau alludes, and many of the aesthetic cultures with which she enacts an exchange (ancient Egyptian columns, for example, or Benin Bronzes) are, in a sense, equidistant from the present aesthetic field in which she was operating.¹⁰ Yet in many respects she effects a necessary form of mediation that speaks to the idea of intercommunication and adaptation. Necessity, here, is a matter of cultural reckoning: placing her work in a position that is in-between, that does not resolve neatly in cultural, national, aesthetic or ethnic terms. Whereas Chase-Riboud does not squarely belong to the past moments that she performs, neither does she desire a belonging to any one position or moment in the present.¹¹ The sculptures instead traverse time and space in order to reopen history, to enliven it for her contemporaries. The hybrid dynamics cultivated are ultimately artificial enactments based on a series of material and processual choices that signal newly active sites of dialogue. The exchange is made materially manifest and palpable for sensorial and perceptual apprehension.

2. Modernist Antagonisms

In what becomes a long-term commitment to contrasting materials and technical processes, we see Chase-Riboud's manifest interest in a partnership forged through productive, and productively antagonistic, exchange. Materially and conceptually, *The Albino* offers an express window into the terms of that contest. Conflict is one key to the reconfiguration enacted in the work, as I hope to make visible by now examining one work in particular. I will consider the ways in which *The Albino* leverages forms of material antagonism to enliven questions regarding racial and gendered politics.

The Albino shakes off the sculptural elegance of the artist's uniformly vertical steles in favor of something more disorderly and less sanguine. Part of what sets it apart, and connects it to Chase-Riboud's other gendered works from the period, such as *Time Womb* (1967), is that it is one of a very few sculptures in which fiber visually occupies the sculpture's top register, imparting greater anthropomorphic traits and establishing an initial rhetoric of conflict with the work's express abstraction. In so doing, the sculpture performs what art historian Darby English might posit as a modernist act of negotiation

understood principally as a process involving conflict and antagonism. In articulating the aptitude of the politics of modernism to the project of racial reformation as it existed in the very early years of the 1970s, English posits, “The enduring sociality of modernist art originates in its quality as an intensive site of negotiation. A place literally ‘involving all’, it exemplifies the act of dealing with another, making it a particularly congenial cultural medium for an extension of integration’s radical creative project” (English 2016, p. 99). *The Albino*, in addition to brokering the apparent distance between different materials and their histories, also negotiates between the terms of figuration and abstraction. Such issues place Chase-Riboud alongside those of other painters that English cites, such as Al Loving and Alma Thomas.

While silk was the primary material used in her fiber experiments, Chase-Riboud also incorporated others including wool, hemp and synthetics. *The Albino* features multiple fibers, which set up a contrast in textures and an unruliness that is heightened through irregular treatment (Figure 5). Where silk’s delicacy makes an attractive complement to the highly polished metal work and its evocations of water and fluidity, wool and synthetics are heavier and more textured, suggesting hair and textiles, and all the more able to converse with the industrial features elicited from the metal. Their presence hanging here in large clumps recalls the dyed wool skeins that might be found hung on walls or from ceilings awaiting use. As with other fiber works at the time, the loosely wall-bound configuration used seems poised to reject the controlled terms of weaving and horizontality of the loom. Likewise, it contrasts directly with the preliminary construction of wax sheets that Chase-Riboud made at the time in preparation for foundry work. Such intricate handwork necessitates the use of a horizontal surface of a kind akin to the loom and its ordered framework.



Figure 5. Chase-Riboud, *The Albino* (detail), 1972.

Fiber in *The Albino* recalls the language of the artisan's workshop in ways that revise the conflation of the gallery and studio so recently explored by her American contemporaries, from Robert Morris to Sam Gilliam. Moreover, the portability and freedom of fiber, especially when practiced off loom, were attributes likely brought to Chase-Riboud's attention by fiber artists such as Sheila Hicks—who was also based in Paris—and Claire Zeisler, a mutual friend also in Paris briefly in the mid-sixties (Selz 2009)¹². In *The Albino*, the activity and composure of the fiber changes across the work: some passages feature orderly knots and tamed tassels, and the corded silk at the base wraps and coils in a regular manner. Experimentation with a variety of non-loom-based techniques was widespread, and Chase-Riboud adapted many of these in the means by which she varied the treatment of fiber.

Zeisler, for instance, had begun regularly incorporating the knot into her work about half a decade earlier. Knotting techniques that she learned in the early 1960s from Spencer Depas, a Haitian assistant to a colleague, provided portability and freedom from the loom while adding volume and, as such, were transformative (Auther 2009, p. 13). In the 1960s, the knot came to manifest the architectural parameters of textiles, its structural capacities affording textiles a new agential potential for volume and mass that tapped directly into their historical roles within functional objects such as sailors' hammocks. Knots have the virtue of egalitarianism: inexpensive and requiring no equipment, they comprised a method available to artisans with less formal means or training, and could be performed outside a studio and away from special equipment like the loom (Zeisler 1981). The knot was a central component of the amateur practice of macramé, for instance, which re-emerged in popular culture in the late 1960s and expanded exponentially through the 1970s in the U.S. and Europe (Coulthard 2019).¹³

Symbolically, the knot manifests something of the greater properties of weaving on an abstract level; it articulates themes of connection, transformation and the shift between registers of value (e.g., from the architectonic to the decorative, from beginning to end, inside to out, and so forth). Sheila Hicks captured the idea in suggesting,

"It's the knots that interest me the most. . . where one thread becomes attached to another. Joined together, overlapping and twisting actively. The thread flows on and when turning eases over and under another, disappearing, re-appearing, transversing or binding together, attaching one network of fibers to other harp-like series. . . Weaving. . . Twining. . . each with its multiple variations. . ." (Chadwick 2010, p. 171).

The tassel, a decorative partner to the knot, is often found at the edge of textiles, and particularly rugs and prayer mats. It has a texture and freedom about it that exaggerates the means by which the form breaks with the rest of the textile's formal, architectonic structure. It appears, in this way, the very undoing of the works' emphasis on architectonics.

If the knot testifies to a form of egalitarian politics while making a virtue of pliability, other portions of *The Albino* disrupt the contemporary conventions of fiber altogether, taking their cue from the tassel. Wool dominates the majority of the composition and it is left in an unrefined state that appears tangled, crimped and disorderly, at times resembling different types of hair. The wool clumps and clusters in loose forms to impart a degree of rawness that affects all the more attention to process and the aesthetic work that enables the sculpture's transformations, heightening those connotations and overtones of the 'feminine' already summoned at the time by thread.

The distinct lack of refinement of the wool matches the apparent degraded state of the relatively small bronze component of the work. In contrast to the vertical tectonics of the majority of Chase-Riboud's works, *The Albino's* bronze register is as highly compressed as the fiber is distended. It behaves most like an anvil or large boulder, a form that recurs—often entangled with fiber—in Chase-Riboud's virtuosic drawings. The weight of the bronze and fiber forms, moreover, are challenged by the work's configuration. The capacity for the anvil-like structure to be shored up by the fiber cord at its base is striking and incongruous, compressing a mounting dialogue of interchange and reversal.

In this sculpture, unlike others to follow, the material registers remain relatively discrete, connected largely by the sense that the bronze gives issue to the fiber that emerges from it. Furthermore, these interactions are malleable and based on the position in which the sculpture is oriented. Where *All That Rises. . .* seems unruly, *The Albino* feels pinned, flayed even, and that much less resolved. The bodiliness of that reversal is palpable, fiber here suggesting not the dynamism of the costume or textile so much as hair or the rising arms of a figure. Or perhaps the fiber is shackled to the wall. The effects are ambiguous, and themes of crucifixion and enslavement merge with those of ascension and escape, which altogether performs a strange alchemy that leaves a residue of conflict.

The Albino's posture raises associations with the violence of the surrealist object—a tradition with which Chase-Riboud was familiar and sympathetic.¹⁴ The color black, moreover, had long been conceptually important to Chase-Riboud, and it plays a particularly significant role here. The sculpture's format initiates a direct contrast with the white walls of the gallery that come to comprise the negative space framed by the fiber arms. As posited through the accompanying poem, it reads as a "walking negative" (Chase-Riboud 1974, pp. 19–20). Author Sheena Garrant proposes that, in conjoining the color of the sculpture with the title 'albino', the work "negates (and masks) expectations and reflects how whiteness is a prerequisite for the blackness of the sculpture" (Garrant 2009, p. 366).

Black lends a "mysterious and not far from threatening underbelly to this 'beautiful' surface", Chase-Riboud explains, "which has the same emotional effect as some African sculptures have on Westerners—and for the same reason: displaced in time and space, taken out of their real environment, they assume a certain impenetrability that can disconcert and repel as well as please and attract" (Nora-Cachin 1972).¹⁵ The tension in this statement is palpable. She refers here to the displacement of the institutionalized African artifact separated from any specific tradition, thereby alluding to western primitivist stereotypes in ways that, appropriated and reframed as they are here, feel apt and generative in their translation (Cahan 2015).¹⁶ Materiality becomes altogether conceptually loaded: both *The Albino's* stark blackness and its emphatically fibrous form seem extracted from elsewhere, belonging not to the conventions of the clean white museum wall but to somewhere less refined—the studio wall or floor, or the sewing corner, perhaps. The effects, as dramatized within the museum in 1972, fostered an awareness of one's aesthetic biases or the dominant, if implicit, material and technical hierarchies at play even as they initiate their displacement. In this way, the viewer's reckoning with the material form of *The Albino* activates a sense of antagonistic exchange.

Titling enhances the provocations of color. The term *albino* initiates jarring incongruences and compels attention to the association of skin tone with a notion of 'truth' about race and identity. Its alternate title, *All That Rises Must Converge*, points to such ideas all the more directly by way of Flannery O'Connor's, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965).¹⁷ That short story hinges on just such an abrupt instance of hostility and displacement, with the denouement culminating in a break or rupture founded upon recognition and shock that turns upon juxtapositions of race and class, with an everyday article of clothing—a hat that two women happened to be wearing—engendering the symbolic resonance of the encounter. In the narrative, the charged event is ultimately not much more than a chance meeting on a bus between two women (one white and one Black), but the social mores of the white woman lead to a rebuke from her Black counterpart, who cannot brook the condescension she perceives in the exchange. The white protagonist ultimately has what might be read as a mental break fueled by latent racist attitudes that clearly demarcate an unwillingness to disavow features of the segregationist South of the past. The allusion to that story, in turn, transforms the sculpture into an enactment of the interpersonal encounter among two women and an exaggerated restaging of the feminine realms of fashion, textiles, hair and the symbolic resonances of each.

While the story itself revolves around conflict and antagonism, the sculpture's merits emerge from a capacity to elicit the terms of conflict while also forging connections that

attest to sensorial and material compatibilities—between metal and its art histories and fiber in its newest permutations. Such acts of processual exchange initiate an opening up of the materials to each other’s histories in unforeseen ways that push forward. As these speculative forms of learning emerge and reframe the parameters of both metal and fiber, Chase-Riboud’s works bring distinct frameworks into contact by allowing each to take up more space, to grow in their capacity for dexterity and facility, and in their ability to do more than their position within a singular historical tradition might convey. A spirit of generosity and pleasure underwrites such an exchange even when material frictions emerge. Just as Sara Ahmed speaks of how “pleasure opens bodies to worlds through an opening up of the body to others”, so too can we see the different materialities of the sculptures opening up to one another and becoming all the more expansive and worldly for it. Ahmed continues by connecting pleasure that is practiced and exhibited in the public realm, particularly by minorities, to subversive forms of “entitlement and belonging;” and such properties likewise feel relevant to the experience of Chase-Riboud’s works, which, in their material sensuality, stake a claim for a set of conditions and values that stand apart for their freedom and unyielding lack of conformity (Ahmed 2014, p. 164).¹⁸

This strikes me as part of *The Albino’s* specific form of feminism. It is less revisionist in tone than it is a “renewal” and “reconfiguration”, to quote Homi Bhabha, that “innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha 1994, p. 7). Similarly, we might read such compatibilities as akin to the form of contemporary feminist teaching that Ahmed articulates: “I want to suggest that feminist pedagogy can be thought of in terms of the affective opening up of the world through the act of wonder, not as a private act, but as an opening up of what is possible through working together” (Ahmed 2014, p. 181). Temporal and material juxtapositions incite haptic and sensorial engagement through acts of modeling within the work itself. In that staging of a “working together”, Chase-Riboud anticipates our current moment. By establishing forms of material relationality and cultural intersection, Barbara Chase-Riboud constructs a historical exchange that uses the vocabulary of the past as a model for something else, something that much more additive, experimental and free: an alternate set of values and ideals that can establish new forms of currency and connection. In materializing these intersections, Chase-Riboud points the way toward a more critical and conceptual apprehension of the material turn visible in sculpture today.

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Notes

- ¹ One exception is a recent essay by Stephanie Weissberg. See (Weissberg 2022), pp. 13–31.
- ² Chase-Riboud was seen, on occasion, to connect to other Black artists and abstractionists in shows such as *Afro American Abstraction* (P.S. 1, New York, February–April, 1980) and *Afro American Artists: New York and Boston* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, May–June, 1970). On the complicated reception of Black abstractionists, see (English 2016).
- ³ Barbara Chase-Riboud, letter to her mother from Algiers, 23 June 1969, rep. in *I Always Knew* (Chase-Riboud 2022), p. 240.
- ⁴ On this issue, see (Auther 2009).
- ⁵ This relates to the principles of African sculpture as discussed, for example, by Carl Einstein and Sebastian Zeidler. See (Zeidler 2004, pp. 14–46).
- ⁶ Many fiber artists traveled through Central and South America, as well as other global sites, to learn historic, local traditions that might then be adapted and reworked within their own fiber structures. Sculptors also traveled for similar reasons, but the processes of education and adaptation were less tied to specific historical techniques.
- ⁷ Chase-Riboud also made and successfully sold jewelry at the time, and the lost-wax process is also historically connected to jewelry making.
- ⁸ Lévi-Strauss’s wife, Monique Roman, was a textile collector and researcher, and it is likely through her friendship with Hicks that the group came to be familiar.

- ⁹ I am thinking here of how distinct Chase-Riboud's practice is from the Neoconcretists. On their investment in the breakdown of boundaries, see (de Zegher 2011), esp. 198.
- ¹⁰ Chase-Riboud is a dual citizen of France and the United States, but her path to immigration via choice and marriage does not follow the type to which De Certeau alludes.
- ¹¹ This point is indebted to one made by Françoise Nora-Cachin, though I am interested less in Chase-Riboud's work as fictional archaeological ruins than as a conceptual coalition that connects across culture and time. Nora-Cachin, "Dialogue: Another Country", np.
- ¹² Frequent references exist in the literature to the fact that Sheila Hicks suggested fiber as a solution to a problem that Chase-Riboud was trying to resolve regarding her bases. Today, however, Chase-Riboud denies the import of that initial exchange, leaving some question as to the role that Hicks played in her early adoption of fiber. See, for instance, (Selz 2009).
- ¹³ The knots central to the practice of macramé have ancient, global roots as well that are as diverse as those of lost-wax casting. But in nearly all cases, they were used by "amateurs—tradespersons or other makers in everyday situations", including in the 19th century quite often by sailors who made hammocks and other nautical objects and who spread their knowledge through their travel from port to port. For a brief history, see, (Coulthard 2019), esp. ch. 3.
- ¹⁴ The sculptures Chase-Riboud made prior to the mid-1960s share a good deal with surrealism by way of contemporary practitioners such as Germaine Richier.
- ¹⁵ Chase-Riboud, as quoted in (Nora-Cachin 1972), np.
- ¹⁶ These references appear all the more resonant once the work goes on display at The Museum of Modern Art, given that museum's central role in establishing the terms of primitivism, and in producing several of the most formative exhibitions to the construction of the relationship between African art and western modernisms. For an excellent overview of that history, see (Cahan 2015), especially chapter four, "Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual and The Sculpture of Richard Hunt at the Museum of Modern Art".
- ¹⁷ Although the second title was only appended to this work in 1994, Chase-Riboud had used it to title another work made in 1973, thereby suggesting her early interest in the short story and her consideration of its affinity with her work. She has confirmed that this title is a reference to O'Connor's story.
- ¹⁸ Regarding the freedom expressed through abstraction, see (English 2016), esp. chapter one.

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