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Oral history interview with Barbara Chase-Riboud, 2019 June 7-11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Barbara Chase-Riboud on June 8–11, 2019. The interview took place at Chase-Riboud's home in Paris, France, and was conducted by Erin Gilbert for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Barbara Chase-Riboud and Erin Gilbert have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose

Interview

ERIN GILBERT: —then it'll start recording.

[END OF chase19_1of2_sd_track01]

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ERIN GILBERT: I, Barbara Chase-Riboud, do hereby agree to the verbatim sound recording of an interview conducted by Erin Gilbert on June 8th through June 9th, representing the Archives of American Arts and Smithsonian Institution. I hereby place the interview and transcript that will be generated from it in the public domain and relinquish all claim of copyright in the interview. I disclaim any right of privacy in the interview and assert no right of publicity in my name, image, or voice in connection with this interview.

It is understood that the interview will be owned and maintained in the collection of the archives and will be made available in accordance with the archives' policy and may be available, via the internet, on the archives' website. The Archives of American Art will make a transcript of the interview to facilitate access. The transcript will be made available to the interviewee for review.

So, Barbara Chase-Riboud—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hi.

ERIN GILBERT: I want to thank you so much for allowing me to come into your home on this beautiful Saturday afternoon in Paris and have this discussion with you about your very long and illustrious career. And I'm hoping that today we can just take it bit by bit, and year by year, perhaps, and discuss what the pivotal moments have been for you. But if we could just start with the beginning, tell me where and when you were born.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was born in Philadelphia. My mother, actually, was an immigrant because she's a British Canadian. And she wasn't naturalized until 1957. So, I can say [laughs] that there was one immigrant. And my father was born, I think, in Baltimore and is, you know, born in America. [00:02:05] So, that's it. I was born in America.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], in Philadelphia.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Native-born, born in the U.S.A. And there's a very interesting story, which I will tell you about, my first in-law family, who had a member who was Indian, Hindu.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And there was always this, you know, "Well, where are you from," you know? And the idea that, as far as Indian people were concerned, she was a native. She was, you know, someone who was non-white. And her husband, who's a brilliant businessman, decided this wasn't, you know, this wasn't, you know—she was not going to be, sort of, submitted to all these kind of questions, especially since he was, you know, the CEO of Schlumberger Oil in Texas.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, they decided that they would move to—move—he was born in Paris—that they would not live in Texas in the U.S.A.; they would live in Paris; he would run the whole Schlumberger [laughs] operation from Paris, which he did for, maybe, 20 years, I don't know. And when he referred to his wife, he never referred to his wife as being Indian. [00:04:01] He referred to his wife as being born American.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, what happened with me was that we decided that it was a very good way of describing me. And so, I became "born in America," you know, "American-born," let's put it that way. And that, you know, that, sort of put things in perspective for me, that, you know, the only other response that I could have had when people say, "Well, where are you from," you know, "I'm from the transatlantic slave trade."

So, you know, born in America is what we decided to do. And so, I became "l'américaine." And I said, "l'américaine." And then, I became—because I was so young—I became "la petite américaine." So, I was, "little American," you know? And very affectionately, you know, it became my family—it became my family name. And it became my name, or my, kind of, position in French society. I was American, period.

ERIN GILBERT: Right. And that is amazing overview of how you situated yourself as a person who has travelled the world, and lived globally, and lived in Europe for such a long time. But I want to go back to those early experiences, those thought processes around artmaking, and sculpture, and poetry, and writing, all of which you've done over the last almost 80 years. [00:06:05] Can you take me back to your early age, your early memories of artmaking, and of writing, and describe what that has been?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, first of all, there are no memories of writing because I never considered myself a writer. I had a terrible, sort of, experience when I was 11, in middle school. I had written a poem. And I had written this poem. And my middle teacher accused me of copying it from somewhere.

ERIN GILBERT: Is it "Autumn Leaves" that you're referring to?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: "Autumn Leaves," is that the name of the poem that you're referring to?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, I can show you the poem. I've forgotten [laughs] the name of it, but it's "In the Graveyard." And it was a poem about death, and autumn leaves, and, you know, all kinds of things. And she accused me of—she accused me of copying it. And she wanted me to go in front of the whole class and confess that, you know, that I had plagiarized this poem. And I said I was not going to do that.

And she sent me down to the principal's office. The principal called my mother and my grandmother. They came to the school. They explained that they had seen me, you know, writing this poem on the kitchen table. So, you know, to accuse me of plagiarism was really unfair.

And they said, you know, "If you do not apologize—she doesn't have to apologize to you. You have to apologize to her, or we will take her out of school." [00:08:05] And, of course, nobody did. I wasn't going to apologize. So, my mother and grandmother took me out of school.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But I never wrote another poem for another 40 years, 40 years—

ERIN GILBERT: Wow.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I never did.

ERIN GILBERT: So, even prior to that moment, you were making art, right? You were taking courses?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I began art school when I was 7 years old.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I went to Fleisher's Art Memorial, and I went to the Philadelphia Museum—

ERIN GILBERT: That's cool.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —classes for children on Parkway. I began at seven. I remembered the first picture that really, sort of, caught my—really, sort of, fascinated me was a Degas, enormous red Degas ballerina.

ERIN GILBERT: Of course.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I would just stare at this picture every time I had to walk by it. And I had to walk by it to get to my classes. And this was—I think this was really the moment when I decided that if I could make something as beautiful and as powerful as this painting, then I would be happy.

ERIN GILBERT: So, it gave you satisfaction, from an early age, to think of yourself as an art—as an artist?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Do you think that that was your realization—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That was—

ERIN GILBERT: —that you were an artist?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that was—yes. It was not—well, you can say that it might have been sculpture. [00:10:01] Because I used to go to Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia. And in Rittenhouse Square, there was a famous goat. It was a bronze-casted sculpture that children could play—could—they could touch it. They could get on it, you know. And I think—and maybe it's between those [laughs] two things. This was my first, you know, experience with sculpture.

ERIN GILBERT: And it was a public sculpture, so—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's a public sculpture.

ERIN GILBERT: —that's meaningful?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's in the middle of Rittenhouse Square. They had just restored it. What they had to do is recast it and because it was just falling apart. But they did that last year, I think, or year before last. And it is—it's there. It's always been there. And I remember, as a very young child, you know, maybe three—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —or four, climbing on this object, this goat.

ERIN GILBERT: So, it was tactile, and you were able to touch it? And so, you were touching bronze at an early age—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well—

ERIN GILBERT: —in the public sphere?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I don't know. I didn't think of all those other things. All I thought about was, you know, my beloved goat, you know, that I went to see in, practically, every afternoon because it was Rittenhouse Square. We were very close to Rittenhouse Square. And my grandmother or my mother would take me there all the time.

ERIN GILBERT: That's meaningful.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, maybe it's the Philadelphia goat, in the end. You know, I always think of, you know, the Degas painting. But maybe it was the goat.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, they certainly are not mutually exclusive. They could both be playing in your memory in a similar way. [00:12:02] Let me ask you about that time when you were being home-schooled, or that when—after they took you out of that middle school—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —your transition from middle school to the Philadelphia High School for Girls —

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —in '48, what was that like?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That was not like anything. For me, it was simply normal. It was normal that I was no longer in a public school. It was normal that, you know, I had tutors and I was—and my mother and my grandmother, you know, sort of supplemented my lessons until—and then, by some miracle, because I was much too young [laughs]—I was too young —they got me into the elite, you know, high school of Philadelphia, which was the girls high school for—only for girls.

And that's where I finished—you know, I finished high school there. I was valedictorian. I designed the yearbook [laughs]. I, you know, I was very happy there and I shone. And it was all a matter of attitude. And, as you might not know, in Philadelphia, there was segregation. The school had only seven Black girls. And they—I think began with me [laughs]. But, anyway, you know, I remember in my graduation class, there was seven. [00:14:03]

ERIN GILBERT: Total?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There was seven, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Do you ever remember taking art courses in high school?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: Did you take art courses in high school, any drawing—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was still going to—I began art—I began classes when I was six.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I began classes when I was in elementary school.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, of course, you know, I continued through high school.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. And there wasn't one particular teacher, or one particular class, that changed the way you thought about it in high school?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That I remember? No.

ERIN GILBERT: No?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The mentors came later at Tyler School of Fine Arts.

ERIN GILBERT: And you enrolled at Tyler in 1952?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, let's talk about that. How did that experience shape your artistic practice?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, Tyler was a very special, very small art school, which has now been integrated into Temple University. But, at that time, it was in the suburbs of—in the suburbs of Philadelphia in a place called Elkins Park. And every day, I would walk by this enormous fake palace, you know.

It was a mansion that had something like 52 rooms, or 60 rooms. It was falling apart, but it

was still open. And it—we'd—of course, it was the copy of a Roman palace built by a millionaire Philadelphian and filled with, you know, European furniture, paintings, et cetera, et cetera. [00:16:13] And you could, you know, you could go in.

ERIN GILBERT: And did you?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And this—in order to get to school, I had to walk, you know, by it every day. I have to go back for a minute to let you know that what this, sort of—the sort of atmosphere that was in Philadelphia, at that time. It was a northern city. It was the first, sort of, northern city stop for people coming from the South. But it was one of the most segregated cities, you know, in the United [laughs] States, which, at the time, meant that, you know, it was completely separate.

And there was this little corridor of—I don't know how you could say it—of, kind of, educational and artistic monuments that gave you a kind of—gave you, kind of, a glimpse of what history really was about and what, you know, the outside world—because it was also very provincial—what the outside world could, maybe, look like to you. [00:18:06] And so, there was the Barnes Foundation. And there was this mansion in Elkins Park, I remember. And, of course, there was the Philadelphia Museum. And it was those three, kind of, triangular institutions that, sort of, shaped the way I was beginning to look at the world.

ERIN GILBERT: It's an extremely rich overview, an extremely rich way to think about it. And that corridor that you referred to seems—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —symbolic, in many ways, of where you would go later and how you would experience the world later, traversing these channels. But in—at the Tyler School of Art, did you have particular mentors, or professors, or art—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, first of all, the dean of Tyler School was a man called Boris Blai, who was a Russian immigrant. The professor—the head professor of sculpture was a man called Sabatini, who was also an immigrant [laughs]. And those two men really, for whatever reason, sort of took me in hand and, sort of, showed me that there was, you know—that the United States of America was not the middle—was not the center of the world and, you know, opened up the idea of Europe, the idea of travel, and so on.

And so, when I won this *Mademoiselle* contest, which was an editorship at *Mademoiselle* for the summer of—what—'56, they, you know—they were the ones that sort of pushed me to do this, in the first place. [00:20:21] And when I had interviewed Leo Lionni for—who was the director of Fortune magazine, the art director of Fortune magazine, and he had decided that what I should do after Tyler was to go to Europe. And he recommended me for a John Hay Whitney Fellowship. And the fellowship was, you know, to Europe.

And, finally, because I was so young, they decided, "Well, she should go someplace that's institutional in Europe and it should be the American Academy in Rome." So, I ended up being the first Black resident at the American Academy, female—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that has—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —because Ralph Ellison was there when I was there. And so, what they had to do was convince my mother to let me go because [laughs] I wasn't even 21. I, you know—I needed her permission. And they were, sort of, convinced that this was the road for me, that, you know, I shouldn't stay the summer, you know, doing drawings for a department store in Philadelphia when I could be on my way to Europe. [00:22:16]

ERIN GILBERT: That's an amazing—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, they finally, after much ado, they finally convinced my mother, and my grandmother, and my grandfather that I should go. And so, I had this wonderful picture—two wonderful pictures: one of my mother and I standing on the *Flandre*, which was the boat that took me to Le Havre. The second picture was—is my grandfather

and my father. And my father's, sort of, peeking over all these people who had come to say, "Goodbye" to me [laughs] on the boat, you know, with flowers, et cetera, et cetera, which I didn't remember until I, sort of, looked up the photograph. And that was how I left, you know, for Europe, without any preconceptions whatsoever.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: My mind was completely free of all kind—any kind of prejudice. I simply didn't know, you know, what was going to happen. All I knew was, you know, these kind of guard posts, you know, things that had happened along the way that had brought me to this particular moment. And it was a moment of, you know—my mother had just gotten divorced from my father. [00:24:01] And she, at the same time, she had become a naturalized [laughs] citizen. And I was leaving.

So, she, too, was, sort of, in that position of the whole world, sort of, changing and opening up. And so, the photograph is very poignant, now that I look at it. Because she was, of course, a very young woman, herself. She was—what—not even—how old could she have been—30 [laughs], not even.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, there you are. So—

ERIN GILBERT: And so, this—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —there was the trip. And, as part of the trip, I started writing letters home. And the first letters I wrote from the boat, I remember, and mailed them in Paris. And it was something that I continued to do for the next 50 years.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you have an entire composite of letters to your mother that you wrote from the moment that you left the shores of the United States?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: From the moment that I left, you know, America until she died.

ERIN GILBERT: And let me ask you, just in terms of what led up to the John Hay Whitney Fellowship that—for which you were at the American Academy in Rome. You had exhibited at the ACA Gallery in New York in 1954—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —prior, correct? And then, you had a woodcut acquired by MoMA—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —a piece called—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The youngest-ever artist—[00:26:00]

ERIN GILBERT: And that was in 1955?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that entered into the collection. Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, again, you weren't even 20 years old—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No.

ERIN GILBERT: —at this moment?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, no.

ERIN GILBERT: Exactly. Exactly. And there was also, that accompanied a short piece, a story called *Reba*, also, that you wrote and was published?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, because the illustration was a narrative [laughs]. And it was

supposed illustrate the story. And the story was about a girl named Reba, who was not colored; she was white. And so, the woodcut is the woodcut of a young, white figure.

ERIN GILBERT: So, at this point, the work was still thinking in the vein of figurative.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: In—at this point, your work was thinking in the vein of the figurative.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you know, all artists start off as figurative. Because the first thing you have to do in life is to learn how to draw figuratively. I mean, you have to be able to reproduce reality before you can do anything else.

The fact is that, you know, art schools are accepting, as artists and as students, people who don't have the basic technique of drawing, is insane. You know, the—okay, you could use collage. You can use photographs. You can use a lot of things. But you have to know how to draw.

If you don't know how to draw, then you have no conception of composition. If you have no conception of composition, you cannot make a paint—you cannot make a painting. You cannot make an object. I'm sorry. [00:28:01]

ERIN GILBERT: No, I just wanted to—for those who may not see this work, think about—provide a way of thinking about it. So, at the time that you graduated from Tyler, you were, as you say, the editor of the yearbook and 14 of your woodcuts were in that yearbook, the *Templar*, correct?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, which I don't have a copy of [laughs], and I don't remember. I don't read—I didn't even remember, you know, visually, what it looked like. I'm glad somebody has a copy because I don't.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, it's very poignant to think about how that experience as an editor points to your interest in the manuscript, and in publication, and in novels. And so, I've been thinking about your career trajectory from that moment. Before going to Rome, you spent summer in New York, is that correct?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was one of—I think we were 12—we were six, what they were called guest editors at the *Mademoiselle* magazine. Now, *Mademoiselle* magazine had a contest every year for college students in writing, in illustration, and in editorial work. And the prize was to come to New York and to work, professionally, at the magazine as whatever editor, you know, your gifts, you know, sort of, presented themselves for.

And I was the first, of course, [laughs] Black editor of—at *Mademoiselle*. [00:30:01] And there was a wonderful editor who, actually, stayed for 35 years at *Mademoiselle* for the magazine, whose name I can give you. But it's, sort of, going out of my head, at the moment.

And she—yeah, well—just recently there was someone—there was a reporter who came who was doing a book on *Mademoiselle* and on the hotel that we stayed in in New York, which was a women's hotel. And so, the whole, sort of, experience of living in New York, high style, in a fast-moving position of trying to get out a whole magazine in a month, came back to me. And it was marvelous.

And she had found, in their, sort of, files in their archives all the letters and all the, sort of, notes that were taken because when they found out that I was not white, I was a girl of color, they were astounded. They didn't know what to do with me. [00:32:00] You know, so, there are [laughs]—there are, sort of, letters.

Because there were—there was all kinds of social things going on. There was the debutante ball. There was a fashion show in Georgia. There were all [laughs]—there were all these things where, you know, they didn't know to, sort of, integrate me [laughs] into, you know, into this kind of, you know, this kind of social package; that, of course, the rest of the girls, it was quite normal, you know.

And the—one of the big problems was, "Well, who is going to escort her" to whatever ball, dance, whatever it was, you know: "Is he going to be a Black boy? Is he going to be a white boy? Is he going to be a Chinese?" You know, I mean, they—and these were editorial board

meetings, you know, about what to do with me.

And so, I must say that the editor, whose name was Betsy [Blackwell] something-or-other, was marvelous because [laughs] she managed, you know. And, for example, the hotel, which was a woman's hotel, which didn't allow—it didn't allow men over—men except in the lobby—was—also had a segregated swimming pool, you know [laughs]. So, I mean, what the—how was I going to stay in this hotel, you know, if I suddenly decided I was going to use the swimming pool? And so, these were editorial questions, you know, for them. [00:34:04] Because—because—

ERIN GILBERT: And you were—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I mean—

ERIN GILBERT: —successful in that program. You were successful in completing your time there and in working with everyone who was a part of the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, that's how I did—

ERIN GILBERT: —system?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that's exactly how I got the John Hay Whitney Fellowship.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Because my assignment was to do an interview with Leo Lionni, who was the art director of Fortune magazine. Leo Lionni picked up the telephone and said, "I've got this girl here. I want her to have whatever it is," and, you know, which, it turned out to be a John Hay Whitney. I didn't make any kind of application.

I mean, I didn't, you know—I didn't write, you know, any kind of, you know, demand. I didn't ask for anything. And that's the one, sort of, theme through my whole career is that I've never applied to anything. The only thing I applied for, from the Rome academy, was a Guggenheim, which I didn't get.

That was—that's the only—quote, unquote—application I've ever made. I didn't—you know, I didn't apply to Yale; Yale applied to me [laughs]. I mean, I was recruited by someone who's on the board of Yale that I met at the American Academy.

ERIN GILBERT: When—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: He says—you know, I told him the story—I told him the story that, you know, I had always dreamed of going to one of the Seven Sisters' schools: probably Wellesley or Radcliffe. [00:36:09] And—but I decided to stay in Philadelphia because of my mother and her divorce. And I didn't want to leave her: an immigrant, alone, without any family in Philadelphia. So, that's why I went to Tyler.

And telling her this story, she said, "Well, I mean, you know, I don't think that you should have gone to Wellesley or to Radcliffe. I think that you should go to Yale." And I just, sort of, thought, you know, it just kind of dismissed the whole idea as being crazy. And, anyway, there were no women at Yale. As a matter of fact, there were women in the graduate school, at the time. And my mentor here had also gone to Yale architectural school.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, but, you know, there was a handful of women, no more. I think the whole proportion was something like one to 600. And so, you know, it just passed. And the next thing I knew, I was still in Rome, and I got a letter from Yale University saying, "Would you like to come [laughs] to Yale—" you know, "—on a full fellowship for two years to the School of Architecture and Design?" [00:38:01]

ERIN GILBERT: Amazing.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Please [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: They asked you?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And they asked me. They invited me. And, you know, all expenses—all expenses paid, et cetera. And that's what happened. That's—and that's what I did.

ERIN GILBERT: And let's talk about—because that—knowing where you were going afterwards is an amazing way to how to not have any pressure around what happens during that experience. But let's talk a little bit about everything that happened during that—your time at the American Academy in Rome. You said that you met Ralph Ellison. I understand that Paul Keene, the artist, was also there, and—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, Paul Keene was at Tyler.

ERIN GILBERT: He was at Tyler?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah—

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —he was at Tyler. He was a painting professor at Tyler.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, let's—in terms of Rome, you did meet Ralph Ellison there. He was already there.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: He was, yes, absolutely. And there's a very funny story with Ralph, with Ralph Ellison. Because, you know, when I realized that he was there at the academy, I was, you know, I was thrilled. So, I, you know, I was trying to figure out a way of meeting him. Because the academy, at that time, was extremely stratified. And it was very English. You had an American breakfast, an Italian lunch, and a French [laughs] dinner, and an English tea. So, you can imagine how much weight you put on [laughs] when you—puts on very fast. [00:40:01] And we—you had to dress for dinner.

So, after dinner, there was usually some kind of musical, you know, concert; or there was a film, or something. So, this night, there was a film after dinner. I thought, this is— you know. So, I, you know, I walk into the dining room and—no, it was in the auditorium. And so, I walk into the auditorium and there's a seat that's empty beside him. And I thought, oh, my God [laughs], you know.

So, you know, I, sort of, rush over and I sit down. And he said, "Don't sit next to me. They'll think we're having an affair [laughs]." Can you imagine, you know, a 19-year-old, sort of—and the first words out of his mouth are—and, of course, it also summed up the whole entire situation, you know, situation, as far as Blacks in that kind of social situation, were. I mean, how could—I mean, how could he even conceive of something and then, seeing me, looking the way I look, how could he have—the words have come out of his mouth?

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And, anyway, this is a true story, which I confronted him with many, many years later at a, kind of, conference at the New York public library. [00:42:01] But that is what happened.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you didn't actually have a conversation that day—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I—no.

ERIN GILBERT: — or while you were in Rome?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No.

ERIN GILBERT: Very interesting. Did you—but you met several other people while you were there. And you traveled. You left Rome and went to Egypt.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I went to Egypt because my architectural colleagues, of which there—I think there were 12 architects in the academy. And there was one couple, very famous couple, whose name I'm not [laughs] going to give. Sort of, the night—I think it was Christmas Eve—it was, I think, Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve. I guess it was New Year's Eve.

They, you know, started teasing me about the fact that I was still—you know, I had arrived in September, and it was December, and I was still stuck at the academy; and why didn't I get out and, you know, roam around Europe; and, you know, this was a unique opportunity; and so on and so forth. And they were leaving that night for Brindisi and for Alexandria.

And they said, "I dare you to come with us," and, "Why are you, sort of, sitting in this staid, you know place, when you can be in Africa, you could be in —you can be in Egypt?" And I ran up the stairs. I remember very well. I ran up the stairs. I packed my bag and [laughs] I left with them that night for Brindisi. [00:44:00] And we caught a Greek freighter for Alexandria the next morning.

And as we were getting out—we got off the boat. I got off the boat with my little suitcase, and so on. And we—it took five days. I don't [laughs] know why it took five days, but we were on that boat forever. And, you know, as we descended the plank, you know, we were on the wharf. And the couple said, "Well, I'm so glad you did this, you know. Good luck." And they left.

They left me standing [laughs] me standing on—they left me standing on the wharf in Alexandria with no contacts whatsoever: no hotel, no nothing, you know; not one name, not one, you know, address. And they went off with some Egyptian colonel that had come to pick them up. And so, there I was.

ERIN GILBERT: And what did you do?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I went up to the nearest policeman and [laughs] I said, "I need a hotel room." You know, well, actually, I went up to him and I didn't say anything. And he said [laughs]—he looked at me and said, you know, "Can I help you?" And I said, "Yes. I need a—I need an address in Egypt. I don't have a hotel. I don't have, you know, a guide. I don't— you know, I just got off the boat and I don't know where to go."

And so, he looked at me, up and down [laughs], and he said, "The Hilton hotel." [00:46:06] And so, that's where I went, to the Hilton hotel in Alexandria, which is, you know, the most chic hotel in Alexandria. And I walk into the lobby. And I guess I really looked lost because I sat down in the lobby trying to think of what the hell am I going to do. I mean, I could have just turned around and got back on the boat. But I wasn't going to do that.

And so, there I was, in the lobby. And there was a gentleman, not far away, who's looking at me, also, and sort of askance, very elegant, very distinguished gentleman. And, finally, he came over and he said, "What are you doing in, you know, Egypt? Where is your nanny? Where is your, you know, whoever's taking care of you?" And I said, you know, that my mother was in Philadelphia. He wanted to know where [laughs] my mother was. Well, my mother was in Philadelphia.

And he said, "Don't you know that you can get kidnapped and you'll end up in a harem somewhere? And Egypt is dangerous for women, unescorted women, to go around, you know, in the Middle East?" You know, "Where's your governess?" My [laughs]—yeah. Well, my governess is in Philadelphia [laughs], too.

And so, he said, "Look, I am going to call the American embassy in Cairo and tell them you're on your way. I'm going to buy you a ticket—a train ticket from here to Cairo. Do not talk to anybody on the train. Do not, you know, don't stop," and, you know, "My driver will take you to the—take you to the station."

And that's what I did. I got on the train in Alexandria. I got off in Cairo. He said, "Go straight to the YWCA." I didn't go straight to the YWCA. I went straight to the embassy. The cultural—he wasn't the cultural attaché, at the time. I think he was the commercial—the commercial attaché, which means that he was a CIA. Was a Black guy, name of Phillips [ph], Ralph [ph] Phillips. And, of course, he said, "What are you doing wandering the Middle East alone? Don't you know that you will, you know, end up in a harem," [laughs] et cetera, et cetera.

And so, he took me home to his wife. And I stayed with them for maybe a week. And then, they found me a flat in the middle of the Nile of somebody who was going home on home-leave, you know, who was—wanted somebody to feed his goldfish. And so, I needed, you know, staying a month, or even more, in Egypt. [00:50:02] And I took—I took the train trip from Cairo all the way up the Nile to Khartoum and—by myself.

It was the height of the Suez Canal war. So, there were no English, I mean, English ones. There were no Americans [laughs]. There was only me and a very big, long, you know, English-type train that went up, you know, back and forth, up the Nile and then back down the Nile, which I took. And in the Valley of the Kings, I met a Magnum photographer who finally many, several years, introduced me to my first husband.

And we were in the Valley of the Kings. There was—there were two—there was two photographers. There was René Burri, who was Swiss; and a German photographer, and me. And there was one boat that was going across the Nile to the Valley of the Kings. And we were having this big argument about whose boat this was.

And, you know, finally, you know, I began to laugh because here we were—it cost, like, 3 cents to go across [laughs]—and we were arguing about who was going to [laughs]—whose boat this was and who was going to pay the 3 cents, you know, to go across the Nile. And, finally, they started laughing, too. And we all went.

And that was the first afternoon. And René took a lot of pictures of me and that day. [00:52:01] And I saw him later, in Cairo, as a matter of fact. And, then, he became part of my life because I saw him several times in the States and, then, in Paris. And then he—and, literally, introduced me to Marc Riboud.

So, that was what happened in Egypt. And, from Egypt, I went to Turkey. I went to Istanbul. From Istanbul, I went to Greece. I went to Delphi. And, finally, at Delphi, I wrote my mother and told her where I was. Because [laughs] what Ralph Phillips had been doing, he had been taking my letters and putting them in the diplomatic pouch, so that they would be—get mailed in the States and my mother would not know where I was.

ERIN GILBERT: [Inaudible].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, this had gone on for a month or so. And, finally, in Delphi, I wrote her and said, you know, "Mom, I'm in—" you know, "I just got back [laughs] from Istanbul and I'm in Greece, but I'll be home, you know, in a few days [laughs]." And I don't have her answer. But, you know, she—her head just hit the ceiling. "What? What? Why didn't you tell me?" And so, I said, "If I had, you know, if I had told you, you wouldn't have let me go."

And so, that was the end of the—the end of the story was, you know, I got back in one piece. Nobody kidnapped me. [00:54:00] Nobody put me in a harem. Nobody raped me. Nobody did anything to me. Any—everybody was absolutely wonderful, you know. And I met all these wonderful people. And I met all these great men.

And, you know, there I was, back in—at the academy, a heroine because I had gone, you know, to Egypt, to a war zone, you know, in the middle of nowhere. I mean, I was really—I would never let my daughter do that. And I'm sure [laughs] my mother would have been on plane, or the helicopter, or whatever [laughs]—or whatever it is, if she had known. But she didn't know.

And so, when I got back to—when I got back to the academy, there was this rumor, you know, that MGM was making this movie called *Ben-Hur*. And they were looking for Americans in Italy, as actors, you know, as actors. Okay? And so, since I had left with $200 [laughs], I didn't have any—I didn't have any money, you know, for the rest of the month. And so, I decided this would be a good way to make some money.

So, I arrived, you know. And they took one look at me and they said, "First of all, you're not Italian." [00:56:05] "And so, we cannot hire you as an extra. But we can hire you as an actor. So, here's the contract." You know, and you—I got something, like, 20 times what an Italian, you know, extra would get. I mean, 20 times what any extra would get. And I got to meet Charlton Heston and the other, the other one with the blue eyes. I've forgotten. And Charlton Heston spent his time between scenes doing watercolors.

ERIN GILBERT: [Inaudible].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: He's very, you know, very sweet man, you know, at the time [laughs]. And that led to—first of all, I was feeling very rich because I, you know, was making all this money. And so, that, sort of, allowed me, actually, to make my first bronze castings. Because I had enough money to cast how many—to cast at least a dozen sculptures and one

large sculpture, *Adam and Eve*, which was six feet tall, and learned the technique, which I use today.

ERIN GILBERT: The Lost-wax method.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And there's a small foundry in Rome. [00:58:02] And they introduced me to the Lost-wax process. And it was that Lost-wax process which I transferred into a different technique using sheets of wax, very thin sheets of wax, which is the basis of my technique, of my practice.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, it was that year, 1958—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —that you began working in the Lost-wax—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Absolutely.

ERIN GILBERT: —method?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: And it was, in part, because of the money you earned—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —working on *Ben-Hur*. That year, there were some other things that happened. But I want to ask you if there were things that stand out in your memory now, that you saw while you were traveling through Egypt, and Istanbul, and to Delphi that really influenced your practice and became a part of what would—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, because—

ERIN GILBERT: —what we see, years later?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —all of the—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —all of the Islamic art—you know, I walked into the Santa—I walked into Santa Sophia and I burst into tears. You know, I was at the top of Delphi and I burst into tears. I was in the middle of the Sahara Desert, looking up at the Sphinx, and I burst [laughs] into tears. No, I mean, it was transformative. It had to be. This little girl from Philadelphia, who had never, you know, New York was the end of her—end of her ambitious—ambitions. Up until that time, you know, it was absolutely transformative. [01:00:02] I came home not the same person, ever.

ERIN GILBERT: Did you write about seeing those things in your—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No—

ERIN GILBERT: —letters to your mother?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —not a word.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I didn't have a camera because I couldn't afford one. So, I didn't take one picture.

ERIN GILBERT: It's all—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No.

ERIN GILBERT: —in your mind's eye?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Not one [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, I definitely believe that, in looking at your work now, that those influences are present. And so, I just wanted to ask that. But I think, also, when you returned to Rome in 1958, you had this *Ebony* magazine cover, and you—on which you were—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, that was simply, you know—that was simply, you know the cherry on the top of the cake. *Ebony* decided, for some reason or other, to do an article—what was it—to do an article on "August," which they've never done this before. [01:01:11] And they've didn't—and they've never done it since [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: That's true.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I mean [laughs], I was the only—I'm the only artist who has ever been on the cover of *Ebony*. And I don't think that Toni Morrison or James Baldwin have ever, you know, sort of set foot on *Ebony*. It was insane. And so, this, you know, this photographer shows up, and says he's from *Ebony* magazine, and he has to take a picture of me for their cover story. And I say, "What?" And he says, "Yeah. Well, I think we should go to the Ponte Sant'Angelo [Bride of Angles of Cellini –BCR]—

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BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and we'll take you in front a—in front of the—oh, God, so [laughs]—[inaudible] in front of the angel there, and that'll be our cover. And that's what he did. And the next thing I knew, I—you know, I got a phone call from my mother [laughs] saying, you know, that I was on the cover of *Ebony* magazine, and what was I doing on the cover [laughs] of *Ebony* magazine? And I said, "I don't know," but, you know—and he never did it again.

ERIN GILBERT: No, it's true, they have not. In terms of really this solidifying of a place, both privately, knowing what you've seen and forming your aesthetic, and then having a process in terms of the lost wax method that you would be able to use, and then having this platform where people knew you as an artist, and you developed relationships with architects and writers and actors now, how did that all provide you with the confidence to go into Yale's MFA program the next year and really begin what would be the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you—

ERIN GILBERT: —final academic—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —tell me [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: —portion of that?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You know, I'm just the actor in this. You know, you figure it out.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You know?

ERIN GILBERT: Well, let's just talk about that.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This—you know, this whole process up until I got back to Rome and then, you know, what happened in Rome was, you know, the invitation from Yale, which I thought was normal [00:02:00]. You know, you—this mentor of mine had decided that this was the next step in my career, and it seemed to me logical, and I didn't know that I was going to be the first and the only, you know, Black student in the entire, you know, architecture school, et cetera, for—this was in—this was '60 when I graduated. Women didn't come to Yale until '65. So, I was there with two other women in the graduate school, period.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who were they?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: One a philosopher and the other a lawyer. And that was it. And so, the two years I spent at Yale were years that I had a different sort of attitude. I had a much more professional attitude than the students that were there, and I was also much more sophisticated than the students that were there. So, there were two of us that had come from Europe, from fellowships in Europe. There was Sheila Hicks, who had had a Fulbright to Chile, and there was me. And [laughs] so, in order to get out of New Haven,

provincial New Haven, you know, we would take the train down to New York on the weekends [00:04:03].

We would get maids' rooms in the Plaza Hotel, I remember very well [laughs], because the Plaza Hotel had a whole floor of maids' rooms for the ladies that arrived with their maids. I mean, where were they going to sleep? So, there were all these little cubicles upstairs, you know, and they would rent for nothing, you know. I mean, $10 or something like that. And so, Sheila and I would take the train down to New York and get a room, get a maid's room, and spend, you know—and spend the whole weekend.

My mother would come up from time to time and spend the whole weekend going to museums, going to the movies, going to the plays, you know, whatever. And then we would get back on the—you know, back on the train in the morning, you know, Thursday morning so we would be there for classes. Monday—yeah, Monday morning. We would be there for classes.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you and Sheila Hicks were classmates and became great friends over the years.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, she was a year ahead of me, so she graduated a year before I did. So—but she—we were there together for a year, for her last year and for my first year.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, during that time as you were making sculptures and as you were thinking about having used the lost wax method and thinking about form, what were you making, and what were the conversations that you had with your colleagues and classmates around the objects that you were making and [00:06:14]—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We had no discussions. There was not—there—we were students. We were there to listen and learn from the professionals that came to Yale to teach us. You know, Albers and company. We were not there to discuss anything. We didn't have the right to talk about our practice [laughs]. This is ridiculous. First of all, we had to—you know, we had all these problems to solve, design problems to solve, drawing problems to solve. We had to perfect our—you know, our organizational, you know, architectural drawings and the skills, et cetera. I mean, we didn't have any time to talk about practice and what we were going to do and what we were doing.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We weren't doing anything as far as they were concerned. We were there to listen, to shut up and listen.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, who do you think you learned most from in that process? What professors stand out to you now as having influenced you deeply?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Who was the—well, there was Albers. There was Philip Johnson; there was Louis Kahn. There was Paul Rand [00:08:00]. I—you know, the—I haven't made a kind of list of them, but it was a kind of ensemble of men—they were all men. There were no women professors, now that I think about it. And I hadn't thought about it, but the fact is that they were all men. And they were there—they were taking their busy time, and profitable and expensive time, to come all the way to Yale to teach a bunch of kids, you know, how to function as designers, as architects, as artists. So, we weren't there to discuss anything with—neither between ourselves, neither with the professor. We were there to listen and shut up.

ERIN GILBERT: And do you think that you, at that time, had aspirations around architecture or public sculpture?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was in the architecture school.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The person who convinced me [laughs] that I was not an architect was James Stirling. But, no, I was there as a professional. I was going to be an architect. Then I was going to—and then, in my second year, I changed from architecture to sculpture. You know, as I evolved, I realized that I did not have certain qualities that were

necessary for architecture, and when you really are involved with a true architect you will know that you will never be able to do that. [00:10:25] So, for me, it was a matter of not even decision; it was a matter of evolution because what I really wanted to do was not architecture, it was sculpture, and what I was capable of doing was sculpture, not architecture.

I knew very early on that I was not a painter. That was for sure. I didn't even know what color was, you know. I saw everything in black and white, and so, you know, painting was out for me, and in the end, architecture was out for me, simply because I did not have the heft and the mathematics and a lot of other things to be able to make what would have been sculptural objects anyway. So, it was—you know, it was almost like a shortcut to what I really wanted to do. And, of course, there was the fact that in my second year one of the visiting critics and faculty was James Stirling, who was, you know, the poster boy for English architecture, a great—you know, a great architect. [00:12:17]

And we fell in love, and he asked me to marry him [laughs], and I said, "Yes, and—but I have to graduate first." And so, when he left for London, I promised that, you know, in June, as soon as I graduated, you know, I would meet him in London, you know. I [laughs] would meet him in London, and we would get married, and we would live happily ever after. My mother pointed out the fact [laughs] that we were felons, you know, in 24 states in the United States because interracial marriage was against the law. This was seven years before Loving versus Virginia. And first of all, Stirling didn't believe her, and I believed her, but I thought, you know, this was insane, and anyway we were not going to live in the States.

But the fact is that my mother was very upset, and probably his father as well [laughs]. Who knows? And so, we were living in this—you know, we were living in this dream world of great expectations, which went against all convention [00:14:05]. And since he was already an unconventional architect, and I was already an unconventional woman, there was a big scandal at Yale, and there were all kinds of rumors about, you know, us being chased around the New Haven green by the Ku Klux Klan [laughs] and all kinds of things, which were not true, of course.

But the fact is that there was a policeman who asked us to leave the New Haven green because we were loitering. So, I mean, it's not so farfetched that it finally got to the fact of being, you know, sort of chased around the green, you know, by the Ku Klux Klan. There was a Ku Klux Klan in New Haven. There still is. And New Haven is—New Haven, like Philadelphia, is one of the most racist—

ERIN GILBERT: Segregated.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —cities in America. And so, you can imagine their blonde, blue-eyed poster boy, and they let in this little colored girl, and [laughs] what does she do? She seduces, you know—she [laughs] seduces the prize—the pride and joy of Yale. Okay, so, anyway. [00:16:02]

ERIN GILBERT: How do you think that affected your academic standing within the Yale community at that moment? Do you think that people were impacted perhaps?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I had no idea because I was so unconscious of the whole situation. You cannot imagine. Both Stirling and I were, but me, I think, even more than Stirling. It was—I was unconscious. I really—I thought we were having this great, you know, romance because it was "meant to be," quote unquote. You know, this was destiny. This was, you know, whatever it is that—you know, the movie ending of all movie endings. This was *Ben-Hur*, you know, happy-ending [laughs] *Ben-Hur*.

ERIN GILBERT: So, when he left and went back to London—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —in your process of graduating, you were still making sculpture, but it is my understanding that you made a large sculpture that's—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I had a commission from Jane Doggett, the same Jane Doggett who had gotten me into Yale to begin with. She had a mall to do in Washington, D.C., and she wanted a fountain for her mall, and I said, okay, I would do it. So, I did it. It was 18 feet tall; it weighed—I don't know, six tons [laughs]. There was I don't know how many tons of

travertine to make the pool. [00:18:02] There was the waterworks; there were the molds for the stamping. You know, it was—you know, there were all the architectural drawings to do; there was all the waterworks to do. There was the pool, and then there was the structure. And on top of all that, you know, when the water was turned on it made music. This was my thesis.

ERIN GILBERT: In 1960? A fountain that made music?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. I can show you photographs of it.

ERIN GILBERT: And where was it? Because it was not on campus. Where was it that you made this?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: At an airplane factory in New Haven.

ERIN GILBERT: And how did that impact your MFA thesis? As you said, this was your thesis project, but how did that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, the fact was that three weeks before graduation the administration said that this was not acceptable as a thesis because it was not done under faculty supervision. So, I—

ERIN GILBERT: Three weeks prior to graduation?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. So, I could not graduate because I didn't have a thesis.

ERIN GILBERT: Unless you were to do another project?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, that I was not going to graduate. When the visiting faculty and all the visiting critics found out that I was—that, you know, my thesis had been rejected and that I was not going to graduate, they said, "Okay, if Ms. Chase doesn't graduate, then nobody graduates, because we're not rating anyone. [00:20:15] You don't have a graduating class, period [laughs]."

ERIN GILBERT: So, they were willing to let the entire class not matriculate if you didn't matriculate? And then what happened?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, you know, they came through, all these guys, and what happened was that I was—I would graduate. What happened was the administration gave in, but I would have to do another thesis in three weeks, which I did.

ERIN GILBERT: What did you do?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I did a portfolio of etchings, bound. They were—I think there were 10, I think, etchings, which meant that I had not only to do the etchings, but I had to print the—[laughs] print and bound them with a text by Henri Peyre, who was the big French expert at Yale, on Rimbaud's *Season in Hell* [laughs] in French. And so, I did, and I handed it in, and it has since disappeared.

ERIN GILBERT: It is not at Yale? It is not—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's not at Yale.

ERIN GILBERT: —in the archives?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's not in the archives.

ERIN GILBERT: Do you have any suspicion about what happened to it? [00:22:02]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: None whatsoever. I don't know what happened to it. Nobody knows what happened to it, because it's supposed to be there.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you graduated. Did you—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I graduated, yeah. Sure. I got—

ERIN GILBERT: And you became the first African American woman to earn an MFA from Yale.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: In 1960.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative] [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: Not without trial and tribulation.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Not with trial and error [laughs]. Not without adventure, now I think about it. And, of course, you know, one thing I truly regret is that I didn't stay for commencement. I told them to send the diploma to my mother, and I left on commencement day for London.

ERIN GILBERT: To be with James?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Which means that my mother never saw me—my mother and my father actually—never saw me graduate from Yale, which is why I want the honorary degree [laughs] so my grandchildren can see me graduate. Okay?

ERIN GILBERT: Cap and gown—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —and the scroll.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, but I was—you know, I was really furious. I wasn't—you know, I couldn't figure out my emotions about the whole situation. I was happy as hell because [laughs] I was going to marry one of the greatest architects in the world, and I didn't give a shit about Yale on one hand. [00:24:04] And on the other hand, there was my mother and father, you know, who had supported and who had loved me through all these adventures, et cetera, et cetera, and put up with all, you know, my shenanigans that was—who were not going to see me, you know, walk down the aisle and get the diploma that my father was denied from the University of Pennsylvania. And if I had really thought about it, which I didn't, you know, I would have stayed for commencement.

ERIN GILBERT: And just in terms of your family structure, you're an only child—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —so you were the only chance that they would have had to see someone receive this.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, only me.

ERIN GILBERT: It was only you.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was only me.

ERIN GILBERT: And you just mentioned your father having been denied a degree from the University of Pennsylvania.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: He had ambitions to be an architect, and he was not admitted to the University of Pennsylvania. It was very simple. There were no Blacks at University of Pennsylvania architecture school.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, he had applied but been denied?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And for some reason or other, he just sort of gave up instead of, you know, going to another school or going overseas or whatever. His circumstances must have been—you know, that this was the only possibility, and it was no possibility. [00:26:06]

ERIN GILBERT: Did you see him draw? Did he make architectural drawings? How did you—did you all have conversations about this years later? How did you know?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, he did architectural drawings for my grandfather, who was a contractor who built houses, and so he was the local builder. And also, he was involved in all the Levittown construction, which he could build, but he could not rent, and he could not

buy, and he could not live in.

ERIN GILBERT: So, this would have had huge significance for the entire family—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —you being the third generation—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —involved in architecture—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —and/or construction to some degree, and the first woman in your family to have been able to do so. So, I completely understand how that would impact and—now differently than even perhaps then. What do you think your parents' response was to your achievement, nonetheless? Whether they attended graduation or not, they were obviously proud of you and supportive of, as you say, your career as an artist.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, they couldn't do anything about my career as an artist [laughs], but sort of bemusement. Of course, they were happy and proud that I did the thing, but really, you know, they had given up on me long ago, you know. "Well, just let her do [laughs] whatever it is she wants to do, because, you know, if you try to stop her, she's unstoppable." [00:28:03] And so, there was this kind of calm, you know, before each storm, and, you know, my father was always talking about Marian Anderson, and my mother would say [laughs], "What does Marian Anderson have to do with this?" You know? "This is Barbara. This is not, you know—this is not the greatest opera singer in the world." But, you know, there was a kind of a bemusement, you know, of, "Well, this is what she's done now. Well, what's she going to do next week?"

ERIN GILBERT: So, did the letters continue when you left on commencement day and moved to London? Did you continue to write to your family, to your mother specifically, when you got there?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, sure.

ERIN GILBERT: What was this London moment?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I continued to write to my mother until the day she died.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, going to London now, this is June of 1960—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and you're there with James.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Tell us about it.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: What happened then?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was wonderful. It was marvelous as far as I was concerned, you know, and this went on. And then, you know, the sort of reality sort of stepped through. James was—Stirling was a very difficult man. You know, we had this big argument about one of his first commissions, which was a house in a part of Hyde Park, which has beautiful landscapes, just outside of—no, it was just outside of London, but it was part of London [00:30:09]. Anyway, it was in this huge park, and he had made a gorgeous house, but it was all underground. You remember Philip Johnson's Glass House?

ERIN GILBERT: Glass House?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Well, half of it, you know, is underground [laughs]. Well, that's what he did, and then he wanted to know what I thought. And what I thought was that

the client is never—you know, the client [laughs] has this gorgeous landscape. He wants to look out of plate-glass windows. You know, he doesn't want to look up at the sky, you know, which gave the house an ethereal sort of beautiful lighting, sort of. He wants to look out at his landscape [laughs], you know. And I thought, "Oh, my God, you know, what am I going to do? What am I going to say?" And finally, of course, the house was—the house was never built because of that. I hope somebody, you know, builds it one day, but I think that, you know—and—

ERIN GILBERT: But—so that was—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —this was a kind of dawning in that, you know, I was getting into something beyond my years and beyond my force of anything. Character, you know. And anyway, you know, there was the social life; the work life went over very well between his—they were all architects—all his architectural friends, et cetera. [00:32:27] You know, life in London was—you know, you work 12 hours, 13 hours a day, and then on the weekends you go to somebody's country house and—you know, for two days, et cetera, and that was our life.

And suddenly—and it really happened suddenly—one day I woke up in—it was in November, and I look out the window. It's pouring rain, and there are two Englishmen playing tennis in tennis whites back and forth [laughs], *clunk, clunk, clunk*. And I'm thinking, this country is crazy, you know. [laughs] "I've got to get out of here. Help, help. So, I call a friend from Yale who's now a Meriton architect in Paris, and I say [laughs], "Remember you said that I could come, you know, for the weekend anytime I wanted to? Well, I would like to—I'd like to get away for, you know, just a weekend, okay?' [00:34:07] She said, "No problem. You know, you can come and stay as long as you want," you know. So, I did.

And I met—I—for some reason or another, I don't know how it happened, but René Burri was in Paris, and we went out together to the premiere of—remember that jazz movie starring Sidney Poitier and Paul Newman and his wife, whatever it was called [laughs]? We went to the premiere, and coming out of the premiere of this movie, René says, "I've got to stop by Magnum office to pick up some stuff," and so we passed by Magnum, who was—which is on Rue Saint-Honoré on the other side of the river. And who was there, but Marc Riboud, editing. And so, we come in; we go out. There are no introductions. René takes me by the hand and leads me out, and, you know, Marc is sitting there.

And a few days later, we go to this—and I'm trying to think—it was also René. [00:36:06] We go to an opening of Yves Klein, and he's throwing himself out of the window for the, you know, delectation of the Parisians. And who was there but the new director of the *New York Times*, whose name was Taubman, and we meet, and he says, "We're looking for an art director for the *New York Times* in Paris." And I say, "Well, what do you need an art director in Paris for [laughs]? You've got an art director in New York, you know. It's wonderful." And he says, "Well, you know, it's more for the publicity. We want to do this, and we want somebody in Paris."

And so, I say, "Well, I'm very expensive, you know," and he says [laughs], "Well, I think that the *New York Times* can afford you [laughs]." I mean, I said it, you know, as a kind of joke, and he said it as a kind of joke. And before I knew it, I had this job, and so I began—I got—well, little by little, you know, I was sort of half between Paris and London. And so, I told Stirling that I had this job, and that, you know, we could do a kind of back and forth between Paris and London temporarily. [00:38:10] And so, I began flying back and forth, or he would come to Paris for the weekend, or I would go back home for the weekend, and this lasted until I went to the Magnum office to look for a photograph of—by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Marc was there.

And he said, "You know, I've been looking for you for months. René wouldn't give me your name. He wouldn't give me your telephone number [laughs]. He wouldn't do anything." And so, I gave him my telephone number, and I said, you know—I gave him my name, and I remember it was like a kind of clack, because at Yale it had been Stirling who was following me around the school until he got up enough nerve, you know, to ask me [laughs] what I was and why I was there. And, you know, he said, "Who are you, and what are you doing here?" and I said, "I live here." And he said, "You're Ms. Chase," and I said, "Yes, I'm Ms. Chase," because at Yale everybody was, you know, Tom, Dick, and Harry, but I was Ms. Chase, and Sheila was Ms. Hicks, and that was it.

And so, he said, "Oh, so you're Ms. Chase." I said, "Yes." [00:40:01] "Do you have a first name?" and I said, "Barbara," and he said, "Barbara? Okay." And the same thing happened again with Marc, you know [laughs]. He said, "What are you doing? You know, I've been looking for you, you know, for months. Nobody would give me your name. Nobody would give me your telephone number." And so, I gave him the telephone number, I gave him my name, I told him where I worked, and I must have given him an address, or maybe not. I don't know.

But anyway, when I got home that night a messenger arrives at the door, and the messenger has my gloves that I left in the office of Magnum, and there was a note saying, "You're very forgetful, you know. Don't forget me because I'm leaving tonight for the Congo, and I will call you from the airport when I get back." And the rest is history. The rest is whatever.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, you are living in Paris, going back and forth—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. So—and—which means that I'm a runaway bride. At this point, I'm a runaway bride.

I: Because you're falling in love—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —with Marc Riboud.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, you finally decide to leave James Stirling—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and stay in Paris—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —with Marc.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:42:00]

ERIN GILBERT: And you all wed. When do you wed? Where do you wed, you and Marc? Where is your—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We—

ERIN GILBERT: When and where is your wedding?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The wedding was at Sheila's ranch in Mexico. He said, "No wedding in Lyon." I said, "Okay, you've got it. No wedding in Lyon," because his family was in Lyon. His family is enormous with—you know, there were seven of them, and, you know, seven with the wives. That makes 14. And, you know, a prominent family in Lyon that, for a wedding, that means 300 people. It was, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: So, you all, as I understood, wed in December, December 25th.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: You were married on Christmas Eve? Is that correct?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: I'm sorry, December 24th.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, we could [laughs] remember the anniversary of the day.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, it wasn't a long courtship. You were proposed and married within a year of meeting.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it wasn't as simple as that, but, you know, Marc came back, and he called me from the airport, and we went out that night. And it was the night that—of

the attempted assassination of de Gaulle, and James was calling me on the telephone. I had left my keys inside my flat [laughs], so I could hear the ring-ring-ring. Marc takes me to the all-night post office so I can call Stirling, which I did, and then I have no keys, I have no money, I have no passport. [00:44:09] I have no hotel; I have no place to sleep. So, Marc says, "Well, I can sleep on the couch, you know. You can"—you know, and so I said, "Okay." And the next morning, who opens the door with her own key? It's his sister. It's his big sister, who he adores, and she takes one look at me, and she says, "Oh, I'm so glad Marc finally found somebody [laughs]." And that was it.

ERIN GILBERT: Yes.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, then there was back and forth between Paris and London, and who's going to tell what to whom when. And finally—I think I went back twice without being able to tell Stirling anything, and finally Marc said, "If you don't tell him, I will tell him." So, at that point [laughs], I was so scared until, you know—and he hands me the telephone, and so I actually didn't even tell him. I just said I wasn't coming home anymore, and he said, "You mean you're not coming home for Easter?" [Laughs]. And that was our last conversation for, you know, years, almost four years. [00:46:07] And then, of course, much later at somebody's funeral we meet again, and we begin this big fight about, you know, [laughs] Marc taking me away from him and et cetera, et cetera. I mean, it was like nothing had happened.

And so, up until that point he had not gotten married; he had not—you know, he was not attached at all. He was still fuming, you know, about this. And it wasn't until he got married—let's see, I've forgotten the date, but a few years after that, a few years after this friend—this very close friend died. And his end—I mean, Stirling's end is so unjust and so, you know—and so sort of heroic. He was at the top of his profession. He went in—it was a little bit like Andy Warhol. He went in for a banal operation, a hernia operation, and he had gained a lot of weight, and they gave him too much anesthetic, and he choked to death.

[00:48:03] So, it was a malpractice, you know, as far as the hospital was concerned, and the British health system as far as I was concerned, and he died, you know. And it was nobody's fault. It was like, you know, a train crash or an automobile crash or something. I mean, one day he was there, you know, and he had won every single, you know, architectural prize that there was to win. He was finally making a lot of money. And the next day, he was not there.

ERIN GILBERT: But he certainly played a very important role in your life at the time, and this moment now that you've moved on and you are with Marc Riboud and you're married situates you in Paris, which is another transition from your working at the *New York Times* into your life as a practicing artist. So, you establish a studio in Paris in 1962.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Do you want to talk about that studio space and what happened there?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: My first atelier in Paris—well, our first house was on Rue de Vaugirard, and it was a kind of classic French 1930s atelier. [00:50:00] You know, double-height ceiling with the balcony, et cetera, et cetera, with a garden, a very beautiful little garden. And about two blocks or three blocks away I found my first atelier, which was Rue Blomet. But Rue Blomet was a famous street because Jacqueline—

ERIN GILBERT: Josephine?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Josephine Baker had her theater and her famous, you know, banana dance, and *art de Bals Nègres* was on that street [Rue Blomet, where my atelier was –BCR]. And so, I was delighted, you know, to have the first studio there, and I kept my old foundry in Italy, which meant that I had to make these wax, you know, models and then somehow transport them to Italy, and I did this usually by train. [Laughs.] I would get on the train with all these boxes and, you know, crates and stuff because it was the cheapest way to do it. Otherwise I would have had incredible transportation problems. [00:52:00] And these things were so—they were so delicate, and they were so fragile until I wouldn't know how they would arrive, you know, in Italy if I did it that way. So, I would take them on the train, on the overnight train, to Verona.

ERIN GILBERT: Did you go alone, or did someone go with you?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, I would go alone [laughs]. I would go alone. I remember once I went alone, and I had all these boxes, and the conductor—the train conductor was giving me help because I was taking up all this space, which was not mine. [Laughs.] It was very simple. And so, he wanted my passport; he wanted this and that. He was going to give me a fine; he was going to give me this. And so, I gave him my passport, and he said, "Riboud?" You know, "Madame Marc Riboud? Hmm. Oh, he's the greatest photographer in the world [laughs]. Oh, Can I—what can I do? What can—I'm so sorry. What can I do to help you? Do you need another cabin? Okay, we can put this stuff in another cabin."

ERIN GILBERT: Change of heart.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. And so, this continued until—until when? Because—when was my first—well, then I began showing in France. [00:54:02] I'll have to look at my—I have to look at the chronology because I'm not sure what the chronology is. But at any rate, I went from Rue Blomet to Rue Dutot, which was the second—my second atelier there, and I found just outside of Paris another foundry that did aluminum sandcasting, which I had never tried before and which I made—where I made the Cleopatra plaques, and they'd had this sort of secret—you know, this sort of secret method of producing a kind of combination of aluminum and copper and iron, which produced a bronze which was iridescent exactly like that wall there, and nobody else in the world, as far as I can see, was able to do this.

ERIN GILBERT: So—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, I began a series of straight aluminum sandcasting and then these plaques with which I made the capes, and they're—the series is now six, I think. [00:56:04] There's the cape, the chair, the bed, the door, and there's one other.

ERIN GILBERT: The dress. The wedding dress.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The bed. Did I say the bed?

ERIN GILBERT: You said the bed. The wedding dress.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Now, this would have been—when you moved from Rue Blomet to Rue Dutot was 1969, but I want to take us back a little bit to right after your move into the first space. In 1963 you marched in Paris at the same time that the March on Washington—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —in the U.S. was taking place.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it was organized. It was not organized by me [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: Right.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But we had no—I mean, of course we were going to march.

ERIN GILBERT: And what I found most interesting was with whom. Who else was in Paris, and with whom did you march outside of the embassy on the day of that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I don't remember.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] You're going to have find that out for yourself, because I strictly don't remember. Everybody who was anybody was there. I certainly that William Klein was there. Jack Youngerman was there. Let me see here. Possibly—I don't know where James Baldwin was. He could have been there, easily. Jake Lemond [ph]; I don't know whether he was there or not because it—it's very strange. It came together in a way in which the people who knew each other only met there, you know, if you see what I mean.

[00:58:10] I mean, there was no kind of premonition about it or—everybody individually decided that they were going to do it, and so everybody gathered there without, you know, even picking up the telephone and saying, "I'm going. Are you going?" et cetera. There was none of that. It was really sort of instinctive that people just gravitated towards that march

for their own personal reasons without telling anybody.

ERIN GILBERT: I found that extremely interesting—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —this notion of the parallel—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —participation and that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —you would be united and solidified—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —with African Americans—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —in the United States.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And then everybody, you know—we were not friends—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —you know, and there was no kind of social circle, and then everybody dispersed down into their own lives again—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —as they had been before.

ERIN GILBERT: I think that's amazing. And also, in 1963, then you went to Russia for the first time. Is that correct?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, I went to Russia. That was extraordinary, and there—and Marc was supposed to photograph dissidents, and this was my encounter with Akhmatova, the poet, and Yevtushenko and all that gang. And, of course, it was—now, just shut it off, okay?

[Audio break.] [01:00:23]

ERIN GILBERT: Okay, Russia.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, that was an extraordinary experience, and it was only the second time that I had been behind the Iron Curtain. The first time had been Berlin much earlier. And I hated Russia; I did not get to—I did get to the Hermitage, and that was the only thing [laughs] I was really interested in. And then, you know, the—it was the most oppressive, dangerous, corrupt society I had ever been in, and what happened was [laughs] on the way out, Marc was going to Poland, and I was coming back to Paris, and we went to the airport together. Marc left before I did, and so I was at the airport alone, but I had already gone through customs and, you know, I was just waiting for the plane [01:02:06]—

[END OF chase19_1of2_sd_track05.]

—to take off. And all of a sudden, there was a Russian policeman who came and said, "Will you follow me?" [laughs] and I thought, "Well, what is this?" You know? And so, he said—I don't remember how he began the conversation, but, you know, the gist was that they had found in my luggage that I was smuggling Russian rubles out of—you know, out of Russia. And I said, "What? That's impossible," you know. I mean, first of all, I don't have any Russian rubles, and second of all, you know, there's nothing in my luggage. And the luggage had already gone through. And he said, "Well, you know, you're going to have to pay a fine for smuggling, and the fine is"—I don't know what.

And I said, "Well, I don't have any money, you know. I don't have any money. I have only—

and I don't have any traveler's checks," because I'd given all the extra traveler's checks to Marc to take to Poland [laughs]. So, I was penniless now. I mean—and I had no—and I said, "I have no rubles. You know, I'm not taking any rubles out because I didn't bring any rubles in." And so, it was—then it dawned on me that this was a shakedown, that I was going to have to find something to bribe them with. [00:02:02] And so, he—you know, he said, "Well"—and I could see that the plane was rolling out, you know, onto the [laughs] tar, and there it was, and here I was.

And he said, "Well, I don't know. I'm going to have, you know, go see my superiors and [inaudible]. Don't you—if you have any cash, even if it's rubles"—I said, "You just said that I was smuggling rubles. How could I have rubles, you know, to pay you?" And so, I took off my watch, and I said, "Will this do?" It was a Piaget watch. And he said, "I'll get back to you. I have to go see my superiors." And so, they—he disappeared, and I was thinking, "I'm going to end up in a Russian prison, [laughs] you know, and nobody knows"—you know, there was no iPhone. There was no way I could call; there was no way I could get out, actually, of customs because I was already on the other side.

So, he disappears, and he comes back, and he says, "Okay, yeah, that will do." And in the meantime, I said, "My plane, my plane." [Laughs.] The plane is taking off, and so I'm left with no flight out to Paris, no money. I had a credit card because there were—and there were no planes leaving. [00:04:01] That was the last plane for the day. And so, you know, I went to Air France, and I said, "What can you do?" He said, "Well, we can get you on a plane from Moscow to"—I don't know, some place in Poland—"and then from there to Amsterdam, and then from Amsterdam to Paris." So, it was, like, eight hours' flight, you know, by the time—and I said, "I'll take it [laughs]. I'll take it."

I wanted so badly to get out of Russia, I can't tell you. I would have swam if there was a way, you know, because I could just see the doors closing in on me [laughs], you know, and I'm in this dungeon with, you know—being raped. Okay, and so that's what I did. But meantime, there was Bill Klein's wife, who was—and my sister-in-law Françoise, who were waiting for me in Paris at Le Bourget. They expected me, you know—the plane was just a few hours after Marc's, so they figured—you know, they had the flight, et cetera, et cetera, and, you know—and I was incognito.

So, what happened is the plane—my plane landed, and I didn't get off, and I had disappeared. And [laughs] when Air France—and when they went to Air France, Air France said, "Well, she got on the plane, so she must have disappeared between Moscow and Paris." [00:06:09] That's not possible. Françoise calls another brother-in-law, and she says, "Barbara has disappeared between Moscow and Paris." He begins to call the Quai d'Orsay: "An American has disappeared between Paris and—between Moscow and Paris. What happened to her?" Kidnapped [laughs] American disappeared. And this lasted for what? This lasted until I—eight hours, you know, with everybody running hysterical.

Françoise was, you know, in all her states, and then they couldn't find Marc because Marc was someplace [laughs] in Poland. You know, nobody knew exactly where. And so, finally I arrive, you know, and now it's in Amsterdam. I'm waiting for the plane; I'm waiting for the last plane to Paris, and somebody from the Quai d'Orsay comes up and says, you know, "Madame Riboud?" Yes, it's me. And then he explains what happens, you know, and that they had been looking for me, you know, for several hours, but that, you know, they were glad they had found me, and could I please [laughs] call, you know.

[00:08:00] And then they found Marc finally, and so he called, and I got on the plane for, you know, Paris. And then I [laughs] arrive, you know, and it's exactly the same thing that happened in China, you know. I got this big [laughs] welcome. Everybody thought that this American had been kidnapped by the Russians.

ERIN GILBERT: Wow.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So [laughs], that was—I haven't been back to Russia since actually.

ERIN GILBERT: I can't see why you would have under those circumstances.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But this was all before I went to China.

ERIN GILBERT: Well—and let's talk about that.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, that was, you know—I'm thinking, "China? Why should I go to China? I've already been to Russia. I've already been to a Communist country, and I don't want anything to do with it," et cetera. But anyway, yeah, this was before China.

ERIN GILBERT: So, that was 1963.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: In 1964, you become a mother.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: And then, 1965, two things happen.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Malcolm X dies—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and you go to China.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, you tell me which ones—how did it—how did Malcolm X's assassination affect you? How do you think it affected the way you saw the world, your artistic practice at the time?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was very upset. I mean, I was as upset as I had been for Kennedy, which was—the reaction in Paris had been incredible. [00:10:01] My brother-in-law had called me from New York saying, "It's like an anthill where somebody has stamped on, and everybody is kind of dispersing in all different directions in total confusion, looking for a television, looking for information, looking for—but as if, you know, the whole society has suddenly, you know, kind of exploded." And this was exactly my reaction for Malcolm X. It was exactly the same. It was exactly the same except that we had expected him to be assassinated. I mean, it had been, you know, an obsession for—an international obsession for at least a year that—

ERIN GILBERT: The thought that he would be assassinated?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —somebody—yeah, that somebody was going to get him. But, you know, they thought the same thing about—and the thing about Kennedy was that nobody expected it, you know. It was absolutely unthinkable. And so, you know, for me, it was this kind of sick rage, which the steles—I had already begun to make them. I had already done—let's see. [00:12:01] I had already done four, which had been exhibited at MIT. I'd already—I had already done four or five, and I decided to dedicate them to Malcolm X after the fact. They were untitled, as a matter of fact. If I remember correctly, they were untitled, and that's when I decided that I would dedicate them to Malcolm.

ERIN GILBERT: So, we'll revisit that idea, the idea of the monument and of memorializing Malcolm X through the steles, later on, but I do want you to talk a bit about China. This is the same year, and—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, China was—it was like the Egyptian period, the Egyptian trip, exactly. It was marvelous. It changed the way I worked. It changed my life. It changed my attitude toward Oriental art; it changed my attitude toward China and the Chinese. I did a lot of traveling on my own. I had a big trip from Peking to Siam, which you would think from one city to another is no big deal [laughs], but there was, like, 7,000 miles between the two.

ERIN GILBERT: Huge.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. [00:14:00] And so, it was mostly by airplane, but on the way back the plane, which was a DC-7—it was the most—a propeller plane—we got caught in a storm and had to crash-land, and then there were all these little—and this was a village airport, and so there was nothing on the plane except other Chinese [laughs]. It was not an international flight, to say the least. This was a local flight. And so, all these little Chinese whatever, mechanics, came and sort of glued this plane together, and then we were

supposed to get on it.

And I said, "I'm not getting on that plane [laughs]," and my guide, because I had a guide, said, "But you've got to get on that plane because, you know, it's—that's the schedule, and you've got to get back to Peking by, you know, a certain date." And I said, "No way. Find me another way to get home, because I'm not getting on that plane again." And so, then there was this discussion with the guide, and I took out my little red book, and I said, "Mao says," [laughs]. And I went through, you know, nothing is impossible, and that, you know, if there's an emergency, then you have to deal with it.

[00:16:02] This is an emergency because this lady is not getting on this plane, so you have got to find—Mao says that [laughs] you've got to find a way to get her back to Peking, you know, any way you can. So, they finally found a train that was going to take three days [laughs] to get back to Peking, and I said, "Okay, I'll take it." [They laugh.]

And so, they put me on the train without a guide, without an interpreter, and so for three days I was in seventh heaven because I traveled the whole breadth of China all by myself in a compartment all by myself. And the cook would get off the train at each village and buy my dinner or my lunch or whatever and cook it for me and serve it to me, because I was the only one on the soft seats, so I was the only one in the cabin, and I had to eat. And there was a cook, so that's what he did. So, he would get off the train at each stop; they would wash the train down because the train had to be impeccable.

So, they would wash the train down; he would go to the market, he would buy whatever I pointed to on the menu, and he would cook my lunch or my dinner. And this went on [laughs] until I arrived in Peking. [00:18:04] And, you know, the journalists were absolutely livid because they were not allowed to go outside of, you know, five miles of Peking, and here was this amateur who had gone all the way across China, you know, by herself. It was a little bit like, you know, the train that went up—the English train—the empty English train that went up the Nile. It was exactly the same except that I was going across—you know, I was going across China. But I went—we went to Mongolia, we went—no, it was a fabulous trip.

ERIN GILBERT: Did you—I mean, again, the question I asked about Egypt stands here, the question about how your practice was influenced. You used silk, and you used the color red sparingly, but in a very strong manner in certain works. Did China—did that experience lead you to silk in a different way?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you know, I mean—

ERIN GILBERT: Did it lead you to—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —you guys want things to be, you know, sort of explained. I can't explain the red. I know that the red is an extremely emotional color and extremely attractive color for sculpture. It always has been. And so, these red sculptures—I intend to do a whole exhibition, because I have enough red sculptures to do an exhibition called Red. And it's true that the configuration of that particular color with abstraction is irresistible. [00:20:07] People are fascinated—people are hypnotized by seeing this. I've seen it happen, and, of course, Calder knows this very well, and the Chinese know this very well because lacquer is their masterpiece of craftsmanship. And it is—it's something that's emotional, but it's also intellectual, and I can't tell you why. I just know that it works. And there are two—it's a combination of two things. Can you stop?

[END OF chase19_1of2_sd_track06.]

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. So, let's talk a little bit about your—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: One thing before.

[END OF chase19_1of2_sd_track07.]

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. So, I want to pick up by talking about the commission by fashion designer, Pierre Cardin in 1966.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, okay. Pierre is a very funny story. Pierre Cardin, because I sort of had two lives with Pierre Cardin. The first was that Georges Mathieu—I was still in

London. Okay? And I met Georges Mathieu at an opening. And was I already—was I already sort of a runaway bride or not? It was that weekend. It was that first desire to leave London. And so, I told him that I was coming to Paris for the weekend [laughs], and he said, "I'll pick you up at the airport."

ERIN GILBERT: Oh.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, that's what he did. And he came to fetch me at the airport in a white Rolls-Royce. I will never forget [laughs]—I will never forget that he—that's what happened. And so, he was very helpful. [00:02:05] He didn't sort of fall in love or anything like that, but he had this incredibly protective attitude as far as I was concerned. And he wrote letter to Pierre Cardin saying that I was coming, and that he thought—

I'm trying to—I've got the letter. I've got the letter framed actually. [Laughs.] Well, because it's such a funny letter. You know, he wrote it on a big piece of drawing paper like this, you know, with his handwriting and so on and so forth. And, you know—and it—basically, he was saying, "I think she would make a fantastic model." Basically, that's what he—that's how he saw me. He didn't see me as, you know, a great sculptor. He saw me as looking like something that he would like to see wearing Pierre Cardin clothes. Which I did for many years. He dressed me. Okay?

And so, when I got—during this trip—during this runaway trip, I made an appointment to see the head of his house —who was a woman whose name is going out of my head—with that in mind. [00:03:58]

And what happened was that we had this disastrous—I had this disastrous meeting with the head of his fashion house because the idea of having—this was before Jaqueline Matisse. So, this was before they had anybody. But the idea of having—you know, when she saw me, she was absolutely shocked because she had gotten this letter from Georges Mathieu saying that this fabulous woman was coming to Paris. And that, you know, either she was going to be a customer of hers or, you know, she could do the runway.

And so, the shocker—the mutual shock, because I was shocked. You know, I was as shocked as she was. And it turned into that disaster. And she stormed out. And I stormed out, you know, and there was absolutely zero.

Then after—let's see, almost the first year of marriage with Marc, I met Pierre Cardin. Of course, he didn't know anything about anything [laughs]. You know? And we became friends. And he asked me—he was opening up a new Couture house for men. And he asked me to do these two abstract—well, he didn't ask for that. [00:06:05] He just said he wanted two sculptures for the entrance way of his new house on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

And I said, sure. I would do it. And I did it in—I did it with an Italian metal worker in Paris. It's one of the few—it's one of the few sculptures that I actually built and did in Paris. And we did it in my studio actually. We did it in Rue Blomet. Doggy's gone.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. So, you said you did the sculpture in Paris?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, in Paris.

ERIN GILBERT: At your—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —Paris studio, entirely.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And so, when was it installed? When were they—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was installed. I've got a picture of the inauguration. It was—oh, God, I don't know the date. What date is there on the chronology?

ERIN GILBERT: It says the '66 was the commission, so I'm assuming—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, well it was '66. It was '66 whatever.

ERIN GILBERT: Amazing. And then—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so—well, then nothing. He began making my clothes. [00:08:01] And I began making sculpture. And the two sculptures are in the south of France now in his big art center down there, which I have never seen. You know, since they were moved from, Rue St. Honoré down to the south. I've never seen them.

He's still alive. He's a member of the academy. I don't know in what kind of shape he is. He must be at least—well, if he was same age as Marc. He would be 94 in 2016, which means that he would be 96 now—97. He's 97, and he's still alive.

He's still in—you know, I didn't know if he's in Paris anymore. You know, the house is still there, but I didn't know whether he is, you know, going south. Or if he's still— Knowing him. I would say that he is still, you know, the Quai d'Orsay. You know? [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And—you know, but I no idea what shape he's in. I haven't seen him. And we exchanged letters maybe 10 years ago—10, 15 years ago. [00:10:06] But I haven't really seen him, you know, in any, you know, kind of intimate way, you know, in years. Well, that was you know, the whole, you know, thing with, you know, this director's—. And then I'm showing up. And she's expecting a white girl. You know? [Laughs.] And here comes, you know, this dark lady, you know, which for her was unthinkable. Absolutely, you know, beyond even her wildest dreams.

And so, I never pursued it. I mean, I never, you know, sort of went back or tried to, you know, connect with him personally. And it's just—in the way things worked in Paris, it was evident that sooner or later I was going to meet Pierre Cardin. And sooner or later, you know—and sooner or later it would be connected with art because he was a great collector. And sooner or later, art's going to do something. And it happened, you know, it happened in '66. And in '66 I had already had an exhibition in Paris at the Museum of Modern Art. [00:11:58]

ERIN GILBERT: Well in '66, you also participated in FESTAC in Dakar.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: What else did I do in '66?

ERIN GILBERT: Well, you participated in the World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar. Isn't that correct? You showed sculptures.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: In a [inaudible] exhibition.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That was through the State Department.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember what sculptures you took?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Let's see, what did I send? I sent two. I sent two small bone sculptures. It was in the period where I was using real bones to make sculptures that I would then cast in bronze.

ERIN GILBERT: What—animal bones or human bones?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: If you get—no, it's not in that one. It's on the piano. There. Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And they're actually sculptures I never reproduced. So, you wouldn't even recognize them. Let's see. I think I sent those two.

ERIN GILBERT: Wow. [00:14:00]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Okay?

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow. So, where did the bones come from?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: Where did the bones come from?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I bought them on Rue du Bac in the most famous—what is it called? The people who make stuffed animals. What are they called? [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: Taxidermy.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Taxidermy, right. [Laughs.] And, you know, I got mostly small bones. You know? And—because the bones, you know, they take out of the animals. And so, in their cellar, they had cases and cases of animal bones.

ERIN GILBERT: I didn't know that. But it makes perfect sense. And these are stunning.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Because they have to take the bones out of the skin. And in order to stuff the animals. And the bones they throw away, more or less. And so, there was always, you know, a kind of reserve of these things, you know, in their cellar. And that's where I bought them.

And what I regret absolutely is that I didn't buy an elephant skull, which I should have done. I could have. You know? I don't think that I can do it now. There are all kinds of rules and regulations about, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: Poaching.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. But at the time, I could've, you know, I could've bought beautiful elephant skull. [00:16:07]

ERIN GILBERT: These are—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: With or without the ivory. Without the ivory.

ERIN GILBERT: Those—the sculptures, you immediately look at them and think of Giacometti. You start to think about those elongated legs in those forms. It reminds you of Giacometti. But, so—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But that was, yeah, that was a pathway I simply dropped. I didn't pursue it any further than what you see there. Although, I'll show you. Probably the most realized of these bone sculptures—is this one.

ERIN GILBERT: Wow.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But this one also is—begins with a skull. This one there are skulls over everything. And do I have—this one also. This is probably the most realized of all of them. No, it's this one actually, which my brother-in-law bought as a matter of fact. [00:18:06] And—

ERIN GILBERT: It's truly amazing, the lungs. This is Walking Angel, 1962. Private collection. So, that is in the collection of your brother-in-law. The brother of Marc Riboud.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Excuse me?

ERIN GILBERT: The brother of Marc Riboud.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, the brother. When I say brother-in-law, it means one of his brothers—

[They laugh.]

Because—

ERIN GILBERT: Because there were seven of them total.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —there was no other—yeah. And Sergio is an only child like me.

ERIN GILBERT: Right. Okay. So, do you remember who else was in that exhibition that went to Dakar? What do you remember about Dakar about that FESTAC?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You know, there are articles about it.

ERIN GILBERT: Yeah, I've seen them.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There are recent articles about it. Because a couple of people called me. And so, you'll just have to look it up.

ERIN GILBERT: There are—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Because I don't remember.

ERIN GILBERT: There's a woman named Marilyn Nance who went as a photographer. And who took a series of images that are now being held in her space in New York. And so, I've seen those—seen a lot of those images. Some of those were from the Nigerian Lagos FESTAC and not as many from the Dakar FESTAC. But I think there are a few people who are trying to write more holistic understandings, narratives about both FESTACs. Dakar and Lagos. Which is why I ask.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, Dakar was—Dakar got me written into the Congressional record. [00:20:02] [Laughs.] Now that I think about it, yeah, I've got a citation from the United States Congress for that show. But the sculptures were quite small. You know? They were tiny compared to—and then for this new Dakar, which was a disaster. I sent them two huge sculptures, Obelisk One and Obelisk Two. Which were black bronze and silk, which they lost. And then—because the transporter was never paid. And he just kept all the whole exhibition until somebody paid him.

And so, there was—the artists that came from Paris sued the festival because it was more than two years before we got those sculptures back.

ERIN GILBERT: But you did eventually get them back?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. Yeah. Eventually, we got them back, but it took from two to three years. And it took a suit to do it, because they paid just—they just messed up. You know? They lost things, and then nothing was insured. And then, you know, the transportation was never paid. [00:21:57] So, the transporter—whom I know well because I used him sometime—just said I'm keeping everything, you know, until I get paid. That's it.

ERIN GILBERT: No one can fault him for that on some level because he may not have been paid otherwise. So, interesting. That then all led to your first major gallery exhibition in Paris at Galerie Cadran Solaire.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was Obelisk the first. The Miroir d'Encre—no, that was Brussels. Okay. Where were we?

ERIN GILBERT: So, it was the Paris exhibition at Galerie Cadran Solaire.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Cadran Solaire, okay.

ERIN GILBERT: Do you remember the show?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Which was—probably my best friend in Arisa. She eventually—she was married to a record magnet, one of the big companies. And I don't remember which one. It was something like RCA or whatever. Let's just say RCA because I don't remember who it was. It was one of the big international record companies.

And she was married to him, and she was a collector. And she decided to open, you know, a gallery. [00:23:59] And she asked Dali to make her a cadran solaire. You know, a sundial for her gallery, which he did.

ERIN GILBERT: Oh, hence the name.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that's why it's called the Cadran Solaire. So, that's why it's called the Sundial. And that's where I met—that's where I made my first show. And then she went on to become a restorer at the Louvre.

ERIN GILBERT: Now the name of the show was *Barbara Chase-Riboud*: *Dessins et sculptures, couples mythologiques*. That was the work. And they were the same of the same works, a plaster, bone, and bronze.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yup. That's it.

ERIN GILBERT: So, it would have been of that similar body of work.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was still in that body of work.

ERIN GILBERT: In that body of work, okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And there, you know, I made very large size sculptures. Most of them are lost because I just threw them—when I changed to—you know, when I changed completely my vision and my style, I just threw them away. I threw most of them away. I have photographs of a lot of them, but they simply don't exist anymore. They just don't exist.

I'm trying to think if—well, I can show you photographs of many of the, you know, of the life-sized sculptures that I did. [00:26:05]

ERIN GILBERT: So, looks like then this is the pivotal moment, right? Because in 1967, you have Alexis.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: And then in 1969, you move the studio from Rue Blomet to the larger space in Rue du d'Eau. So, is that because the works had already started to increase significantly in size larger than the prior space?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, basically. Basically, that was the reason.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You know, this—where do you say I go?

ERIN GILBERT: You went—you mean from one studio—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Rue Blomet to the Rue du d'Eau studio.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The Rue du d'Eau studio was much larger. It was in an old factory that made Christmas cards. [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: Of all things.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right? Who made Christmas cards, and in a kind of courtyard. So, yeah. And that's where I made—that's also where I made all the aluminum sculptures and casts—

ERIN GILBERT: Sand casting.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and so on. Yeah. And they were just getting bigger and bigger. And I just had to have a bigger studio.

ERIN GILBERT: But then also that spring is when you did the exhibition, *Seven Americans in Paris*, at Gallery Air France in New York. And so, in that space were—in this new space did you begin working on the Malcolm X steles, this is '69 now? The Malcolm X series?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Not quite, but it was that kind of transition—

ERIN GILBERT: You're moving in that direction.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —between the Air France gallery sculptures, which were half bone, half futurists. [00:28:08] If you could imagine that. And that was a decisive moment. And it was decisive also because I had not bothered to exhibit in the USA. Because I was just not interested in doing that. And this was kind of serendipity because it was—you know, it was an Air France—it was the Air France company, which had organized all this. And of course, it was called *American in Paris*. And you know [laughs]—and the funny thing is that the next show that I'm in, which will be at New York University, is called *American in Paris*. [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: I thought about that when I read the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. So, it's very funny. Okay.

ERIN GILBERT: Now, was Sheila Hicks also in that show?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: Sheila was in that show. And that's where you met Bertha Schaefer. Is that correct? Did she come to that opening? Did you meet her during that moment?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Bertha Schaefer, when did I start working with Bertha Schaefer? Frankly, I don't remember, and I don't even remember why we met. No, I remember why we met—where we met. She came to see me in Le Chénierie which was my atelier in the country. It's in the Loire Valley. It was the barn of our country house in in Pontlevoy or Montrichard.

We were between these two villages. And the house was an old 18th century or even 17th century ruin when we found it. But it was a compound of three farms which made it kind of—which made it kind of square. Which we tore down two sides. And so, we made a long kind of u-shaped house, which was restored and rebuilt, really, stone by stone. And it was one of the most gorgeous houses that I had ever seen.

And we stayed there for 30 years, as long as I was married to Marc. And then, you know, when he divorced, he kept that house. It was supposed to—it wasn't half mine. And eventually, it was supposed to be sold it for, you know, to be divided in half, but it was never sold. So, it, you know, it sort of stayed his house because—I said, you know, you could have it for the children. So, it was basically David and Alexis' house. [00:32:00]

And when we had finished the restoration, the old owner of the house—and the reason why we bought it in the first place was that there were magnificent 300-year-old trees, oak trees. 30, 40, 50, of them which surrounded the house. And at a certain point, we got oak disease, and all of the oak trees died. And it was so earth shattering for me, anyway. I had written many poems about Le Chénierie. And I was sure that I was going to be buried under one of these oak trees. And there was no question about it. And at the same time, it was the beginning of the end of my marriage. And it took a long time, but there was something about that moment which was decisive.

And these oak trees, we tried everything. We got so many tree doctors. We got, you know, we did. And they just died. They died. There was a screen of oak trees, and on the other side which faced the house. And then on the other side that you could see through the trees, there was an enormous lake, which belonged to us as well. [00:34:03]

And this was my—and then my atelier was to the left. And it looked in the opposite direction, and there was a little pond that was part of the landscape there. And then there was a kind of a patio, which connected the big house to the barn. And then there was a small house on the other side. And that was my—you know, for three months out of the year, that was my environment. That was my world. And that's where, you know, David and Alexis grew up.

And all of a sudden it was all, you know, gone. It was gone because the trees were gone. And the house was absolutely nude, you know, without the trees around it. And I suddenly sort of developed a kind of antipathy for this house, which we had spent so much money, so much time, you know, so much passion until—I didn't want it anymore. You know? It was—it belonged to another epoch. It belonged to another time. And it belonged to, you know, a world which was no longer mine. [00:36:04]

And I wrote a series of poems at that time about this—no, about losing this house. And I published them in '74 in my first book of published poems which is from *Memphis and Peking.* And then they were republished in the last collection. You know, the *Knots* book. The *Knots* collection.

ERIN GILBERT: *Everytime a Knot is Undone, a God is Released.* I'm glad that you talked about that space because I'd read about it and hoped that we would get to talk a little bit about the way in which it had functioned as a studio space outside of Paris at large. To go back to that year, 1969, you also attended the Pan African Cultural Festival in Algiers.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, this may have been another moment where you had a set of interactions and had conversations about Malcolm X. Is that true, or what happened in Algiers? You tell me.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, what happened was a festival where everybody who was anybody in the civil rights movement was there. You know? You had to be there. And then it was three days—or three or four days of intense sort of—they were not lectures. [00:38:00] It—they were kind of manifestos. One after the other of, you know, what was going on. And for the first time, it was international. It was not just, you know, Americans. Everybody was there. Africans were there. Algerians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Guineans, you know, Sudanese, they were all there.

And so, for the first time it became a kind of international occasion of people coming together. And it—actually, because the French and the Algerians were so politicized, they sort of gave a lesson to the Americans about how to politicize anything. [Laughs.] That's what they—and that's what the Americans, I think, brought home from Algeria, from Algiers. The way and the language of politicization. You know?

Because, as a matter of fact, there was no language of the civil rights before. That was almost the first time that, you know, American activists try to put into words what was going on and what was going to go on for as long as it took. [00:40:08]

ERIN GILBERT: And that was this immediate post-colonial movement in Africa. So, at the same time, you have these Jomo Kenyatta and Leopold Senghor and all of that wave of liberation. So, I can only imagine that it was very much that.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly. And then the Africans taught the Americans how to do it. And it wasn't—you know, people think that it was the Americans that taught the Africans, but it's the contrary. It's the Africans that taught the Americans. You know? The whole discourse of colonialization, de-colonialization, war, political war. And the Americans didn't know all this stuff. You know? They had only—what did they have as a reference? Africa had 600 years and, you know, America had 200.

ERIN GILBERT: 200. Well—and it's very interesting to think about having come from Paris and then going to Algiers, these French speaking spaces or francophone spaces where, you know—I think about Aimé Césaire and these African philosophers, poets who had been educated in Paris, in French, under this rubric of *égalité*, *fraternité*, and then took that back to the continent.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, that must have been for you, this familiar—having a very familiar relationship to that French understanding and equal familiarity to the African American need for a shift.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: But I don't think I've ever heard anyone put it in that way, that they were finding the language for it in that moment. [00:42:03]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I'm putting it in that way because that's what happened. I think. And of course, I met Cleaver. I met, you know, his wife. And we have wonderful—

ERIN GILBERT: Kathleen.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Kathleen. I have wonderful photographs of them as a matter of fact from Algiers. Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Did Angela Davis go as well?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: That's what I thought.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: As I said, anybody who was anybody—everybody who was anybody was there.

ERIN GILBERT: So, to think then about this context of liberation and the language and this next exhibition of yours, which was in 1970 at the Bertha Schaefer gallery in New York.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And note that was not the first time I—or was it the first time? Did I exhibit the three Malcolm X that began the series? Because I had an exhibition at the Hayden Gallery in MIT at practically the same time. Which they did a poster for. Which has become kind of iconic. And I'm not sure which one came first. The Bertha Schaefer must've come before MIT. What does it say there?

ERIN GILBERT: The literature that I've read says that—the literature that I've read says that it was Bertha Schaefer and then MIT.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And then—okay. I'll buy that.

[They laugh.]

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. Well, I just wanted to, you know, make sure that it was as you recall. [00:43:55] But the—for what we have in writing so far, it says that it's the first time that those three were shown.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Okay.

ERIN GILBERT: And there's—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, that seems logical because how did—you know, how did MIT see the sculptures? They would not have—you know, they would have to have come to Paris to see them. So, it's logical that they—by contrast, they came to the Bertha Schaefer gallery.

And Bertha Schaefer is—she's less famous than Betty Parsons. But she was the same kind of dealer and the same kind of woman. And also lesbian, both of them.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. We have Betty Parson's records. So, I'm sure that there will be more we can talk about with regard to your presence with her moving forward. But there's an interesting note about a review by Hilton Kramer where he talks about your work and a concurrent exhibition of Romare Bearden's work.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, I remember. I—

ERIN GILBERT: Do you—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's a famous stupid article. And you know, I mean it isn't even—we don't even discuss it now. It's just too old fashioned, too racist. And he is going out of—

ERIN GILBERT: Vogue.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —vogue, totally. So, he's completely forgotten. So, whatever he said, you know, it doesn't matter. And what he said was, you know, that "Black art had to be a certain way." [00:46:07] And a certain way as he saw it, on top of everything else. Not only did we not have the right to do whatever it is that we were doing on our own, but that there was a kind of canon of what you were permitted to do and what you were not permitted to do.

And—it's coming back slowly. This kind of insistence on Black art being illustrative. It never went away. You know? And it's back again. And you know, abstract artists are in the same, you know, situation as they were 40 years ago. That somehow narrative art is the only art that can be sort of considered Black.

And you know, as you said the other day, you know, these mammy figures that are stretching across the façade of the Metropolitan Museum. It is—you know, it's really a scandal.

ERIN GILBERT: I do think, you know, and with regard to our conversations, just looking—and this is why I mentioned the Hilton Kramer article, is because that space in which the recognizable Blackness of the figure renders the artist someone who can be called a Black or African American artist. [00:48:02]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: And outside of form—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And if it's about—

ERIN GILBERT: —and content one can discuss the biography of that artist and feel as though one has understood the work.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: And therein lies the shift that once you've moved to abstraction—be it sculpture, performance, or conceptual practices—the way in which a work of art needs to be read and unpacked and referenced within the canon of perhaps other geographic or ethnic or cultural practices, or, for the Black artist in conversation with the white European artists, that tension seems to be one that critics of this era—and, you know, as we discussed now—had been less likely to engage in that broader dialogue. So, it is the very accessible characteristics—the physiography of Blackness.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I agree.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There's nothing more to say about that. You said it.

ERIN GILBERT: No, I just found it as we were going, you know, this is going through this process. And as you had made that very—that shift from even working with the bones and the figure to covering it up with the skirts, very interesting.

So, there we are. We're back in New York in that European context. And you said that's when Betty Parsons came along. And do you remember when you all first met? Because it seems as though she starts representing you immediately after Bertha Schaefer dies.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you have this show with Bertha Schaefer. Bertha Schaefer passes away the next year, and the next thing we know you are showing with Betty Parsons.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. That's what happened.

ERIN GILBERT: That's exactly—okay. And kind of speaking of, again, New York, shortly thereafter, you and Betty Star become the first African American women to exhibit at the Whitney. [00:49:58] Your work is entitled *Ultimate Ground*, and it's included in the exhibition, *Contemporary American Sculpture*.

Can you describe the context? What was the experience? There were a series of protests. There was a series of dialogues that led to this exhibition.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was not there. I was in Europe. So, I really don't know what happened.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you got the call to say your work would be included?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I got the call. No, it was Betty. It was Betty who got the—I'd never—I—let's see. What did happen? I don't know. I didn't know how the curator who had—Doty. Doty came to see me in Le Chénierie and—if I remember correctly. But the meeting was completely—the meeting has gone completely out of my recollections. I don't remember what happened or why or what we talked about. But the—and I don't remember—it must've been Parsons who—

That sculpture, the *Ultimate Ground*, was one of the aluminum sculptures that I had done in France. So, that was the Dutot studio. Okay? [00:51:58] And so, where would he have seen this sculpture? How did the sculpture get to New York? That's what I don't remember. So, you'll have to figure it out.

It was—evidently, it had already been sent to New York to Betty, and then Betty did whatever she did with it. Because I didn't see it. You know? I didn't see it. And I had no

contacts with it after that. So, I don't even know where it is. I have no idea—yes, I do know where it is.

It returned—okay, it returned to France, and I integrated it into a fountain, which I did for Palladium International. Which was Sergio's cultural center, who was the backer for his cultural center that he ran for five years in Paris. [00:54:01]

ERIN GILBERT: So, it became a part of the fountain.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. I can show it to you.

ERIN GILBERT: We will have to look at the pictures of it, yes.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. It became a part of this fountain. Which was a long, I don't know, 12-meter fountain that is in a restaurant in—that is the restaurant-part of this cultural center, which is called Kiron.

ERIN GILBERT: Kiron. So, that was—*Ultimate Ground* was shown in the *Contemporary American Sculpture* in 1970. And then in '71, you are featured in the exhibition, *Contemporary Black Artists*, at the Whitney. And *Malcolm X #3* is the piece that's shown.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Did you—were you there for that opening? Did you come back to the U.S.? Were you a part of that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, I was not there for the opening.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. I just always wonder what the context must've been around this highly politicized moment in the U.S. So, it's probably nice not to have to endure that [inaudible].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was there.

ERIN GILBERT: This was all leading up to two things. The film *Five*, which we talked about briefly earlier, and you know, if you could just talk a little bit about—for that segment that they shot, you said the studio was du d'Eau?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, they were shooting you in du d'Eau?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: In the studio, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. And you said the film was done by—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That segment of the film was done by René Burri.

ERIN GILBERT: Renee. So, by now we're looking at—you and René met in Rome when you were at the American Academy in '57, '58. [00:56:02] And so, here we are now in '71, and you are still working together and still friends.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: What am I doing? [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: No, in '71 you were still close to René Burri.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, well, we've been friends ever since Egypt. You know? And he was Marc's best friend. So, of course, you know, we were friends until he passed. And he passed before Marc or after Marc? I think he passed before Marc, and Marc had a long illness, you know, that lasted, you know, lasted until 2016. I think that Renee died in '15. '14 or '15, I remember.

ERIN GILBERT: So, him shooting that segment for the film seems really intimate because it was really intimate. And when I first saw it, I thought how special it was to see you in Paris in all of your natural element. It seemed as though they shot you over the course of two days in the studio, in a foundry, and then kind of picking up your sons and putting them in the car, and you know, carrying out daily activities. So, it makes sense to me now thinking it through that it was someone who you'd known so closely.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, it was. Well, it was a good film. It, you know, it's become a kind of classic, too. [00:58:03] What can I say? [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: It certainly has.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I think that the guy that made this little video—who's working on a longer film over many more years, because he started taking photographs of me 20 years ago. And half of that video is footage from, you know, another epoch. The only way I recognized it was because my hair was streaked. [Laughs.] Because, you know, it's in the same place, you know, the same time, and just the, the time is different. But the conversation is the same. And so, it was very funny looking at that the other day when he sent it.

Because I had called him, and said, "Look, there's going to be this exhibition, you know, at the New York University Grey Museum next year. And they want to do a kind of"—oh, I should have told you to go. As a matter of fact, too. But it was this afternoon. I didn't have no idea of how it went. But I said, "if you could give—I'm not going to—I'm going to be in Rome. Because I had all the intentions of being in Rome. [Laughs.] And can, you make a little—you know, do you have any footage that you can give them to make a little video to, you know, represent me. Because I'm not going to be there." [01:00:00]

And this is what he did. And, you know, they were delighted. And they said that they would—you know, that they would show it at the American University. And then of course that they will show it at, you know, in New York. So—

ERIN GILBERT: It's great to have footage that's timeless, but footage that has been captured over the years that can be incorporated into these contemporary projects. And in fact, the film, *Five*, that initial shot is a shot of your 1972 solo exhibition at Betty Parson's gallery. So, what we have is that being the first year—I mean the first Solo Exhibition that you had with Betty. And do you want to talk a little bit about that show? Do you remember it particularly for any reason?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Are we talking about the birth of the Shaffer's show, or the Betty Parson's Show?

ERIN GILBERT: The Betty Parson's 1972 show. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, first of all, this—the Betty Parsons Gallery meant that I was in the front ranks of postmodernism. I was showing with, you know, everybody, Cy Twombly, Kelly. You know, younger men, Rothko. You named it—Agnes Martin. She had three—she had three women artists. She had—she had me—

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BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: She had Agnes Martin, a woman named Reubens [ph], and that was it. And, you know, she would show us beside all these guys without any commentary whatsoever [laughs], and, you know, the critics would just—they would just ignore us, you know. They would review the exhibition [laughs], and there would be a list of names, and our names were never there. You know, I did a lot of group shows with Betty, and they—I was never reviewed. You know, they just—they would just walk on by. I mean, they would just write on by, you know. And this was true not only of me, but of Agnes Martin and all the rest of them.

And at one time, she had four, I think. She had another woman, and I was so naive until—or so sort of—how can I put it? Male-centered, until I didn't even realize most of these women were lesbians [laughs], and at least one of them was her girlfriend or, you know, husband or whatever. It was just beyond me. [00:01:59] I mean, I just couldn't focus on—and so there was never any kind of ambiguity about our relationship. It was very straightforward. It was, you know, very asexual, to say the least. And so, you know, to find out many, many years later, you know, that she had had this life, which I had no idea that she had, was sort of interesting. It just illustrated how dumb I was, you know [laughs], and how—you know, how uninterested I was in any kind of relationships between two women.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You know, I knew all about Rothko's marriage and [laughs] his

mistresses and whatever, and I didn't know a damn thing about Betty Parsons.

ERIN GILBERT: And you also met Kenneth Noland and Robert Rauschenberg in those contexts.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Well, I exhibited with both of them. I knew both them.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Ken is a very good friend of mine, and he has a poem in both the first book of poetry I wrote and the last book I wrote. And that was an extremely interesting relationship because he was a West Virginian, and he was a West Virginian hillbilly. [00:04:00]

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And he was fascinated [laughs], because I was probably the only Black woman he had ever encountered, you know, in his life. And he was mesmerized. And I was mesmerized, but for other reasons that had to do with art and practice. But there was a mutual mesmerism going on [laughs], and so, you know, it was a relationship that was very intense and extremely intellectual, which he was not. And so, I was having one conversation with him and—[they laugh]—he was having another one with me, okay? But I love him dearly, you know, and he's still alive.

ERIN GILBERT: I think it's the case very often that men and women happen to have two different conversations happening simultaneously. But—so, shortly thereafter, MoMA acquires two drawings. So, in the context of these exhibitions, you're not just showing sculpture. Sometimes you're showing drawings—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —and sometimes you're showing jewelry, so there's this third element that I wonder—because I don't see it anywhere now—when it came in and when you phased it out in terms of this—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It came in when a French jeweler named Gennari asked me to make a collection of jewels for him.

ERIN GILBERT: Uh-huh [affirmative]. [00:06:01]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, I made all these little miniature sculptures which he, you know, sort of reproduced exquisitely.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that was the only jeweler I've ever worked with, and it was something—it was—you know, there was a kind of time change. It was also the time—it didn't come very much later than the Pierre Cardin sculptures. I sort of—for me, the jewels were not jewelry at all; they were simply very small sculptures [laughs], very small sculptures. And so—

ERIN GILBERT: So, that's why they were shown in the same context as the larger sculptures?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: And then the drawings that were acquired by MoMA. Were those drawings also shown in the Betty Parsons exhibition earlier that year that had been—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, she always—you know, she always showed drawings of mine. And the third drawing, which is a small drawing which MoMA showed last year in an exhibition of women in their collection, they bought from Betty. [00:07:57] And so—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I found that exhibition.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You know, Betty was always someone who—and then she gave him—she gave MoMA a drawing as well.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It seems as though all at once, with this transition to working, having the show at the Whitney, representation with Bertha and then with Betty, leads to MoMA, and then the university art museum in Berkeley does a solo exhibition in 1973.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, and this was only the second exhibition of a woman in the United States at a major American museum. The first being Georgia O'Keefe [laughs], and amazingly enough, you know, to realize, but it was—that was true. I mean, that was reality.

ERIN GILBERT: And that particular exhibition, *Confessions for Myself*, a large sculpture is shown. And then it's acquired by the University of Berkeley art museum—the university art museum in Berkeley.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, that exhibition had weight to it, in terms of not just the size and scope of the exhibition and it being a platform, and then also that this acquisition of a major work is then made. And the other institutions have smaller drawings but not necessarily a sculpture in the way of this *Confessions for Myself* piece.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, the *Confessions for Myself* is one of my key—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —you know—and seeing it in—seeing it so many years later in the Berkeley, you know, exhibit was amazing because it's an amazing sculpture [laughs], and I didn't remember that I had even done it, you know. [00:10:09] I mean—or how I'd done it, or why I did it, or whatever, you know. It sort of stands unique in its time and its space, and [laughs] it couldn't care less what I thought, you know. [They laugh.]

And—

ERIN GILBERT: Well—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —so it's a very—it's very interesting. And I was so happy, you know, that—and Peter Selz is, you know, the person who has done the only monograph on me that exists. I mean, it's time for a couple of others, but they don't exist, you know. I mean, there's so much sculpture—

ERIN GILBERT: Well—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —which is unpublished.

ERIN GILBERT: And we should talk about this window briefly, because *Confessions for Myself* is black. It's black bronze—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and it has the character that follows with the set of steles that you're best known for in the way of the Malcolm X steles in that it is vertical and, I believe, stands—this one—how many feet high.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's enormous. It's—

ERIN GILBERT: It is. It is over—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And it's even bigger than its size, so it really is, you know, kind of monumental.

ERIN GILBERT: But—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And—

ERIN GILBERT: —in thinking about the wool then, the wool and the way in which this skirt is full, and you have the knots, I mean, this is what will be your signature. And so, it's a very—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, this is—

ERIN GILBERT: —established style—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —in 1972.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, that's it.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That's it. I will not change—

ERIN GILBERT: This is it.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —very much, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: We will see it. We will see it—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —for the next 60 years.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: We will see it. Mm-hmm [affirmative]—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:11:57] So, I thought in terms of the positionality of the university art museum in Berkeley and, as you say, Peter Selz having—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —having done the exhibition that should likely happen again in a newer context, it was—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And—

ERIN GILBERT: —in 1973.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —Peter Selz is still alive. He must be a hundred now, but he's still alive.

ERIN GILBERT: Another curator who I think had meaning for you at that time period, and who you must have met immediately during this time period after the exhibition, was Lowery Stokes Sims, who was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And, I believe, in that context made the acquisition again of a drawing. Is that true? Is that what happened?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. The funny story [laughs] about that is that she has this letter where I'm thanking her, you know, for having acquired the drawing, and I call her, "Dear Mr. Sims," [laughs] you know. I simply assumed that Lowery Sims was a white male. You know, there was no—there was absolutely no question as far as I was concerned that this is—the person to whom I was writing was that.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, and I think—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, "Dear Mr. Sims" was the way I addressed her, and it—you know, we laugh about it now. But, you know, that was my introduction to Lowery.

ERIN GILBERT: I'm sure you weren't alone in thinking that she wasn't, because, of course, she was the first African American, and first African American woman, to be a curator at the Metropolitan Museum. And so, because there hadn't been anybody through that time period, and wasn't for 30 years afterwards, I would imagine she received a few notes—[they laugh] —or phone calls that made assumptions about both her gender and her race [00:14:05].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And, of course, when William Lieberman—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —the same William Lieberman who had bought my first print for MoMA who was now the head of 20th century at the Met, decided he was going to do my drawing show, it was also a kind of—how can I say it? They were—and, of course, he asked Lowery to do it, I mean, as her boss. She was—you know, she was given, you know, the assignment of doing this exhibition. Well, the Metropolitan staff gave her such a hard time, and, you know, finally I said to her—a lot of things she never told me about. I don't know why, but she kept it to herself. But Lowery suffered for many years from asthma, and [laughs] I told her that if she wanted her asthma to stop, that she ought to leave the Met because that was what was wrong with her. There was nothing wrong with [laughs]—

ERIN GILBERT: Stress.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: She didn't have asthma—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —you know. She wasn't sick. [00:15:59] It was the Met that was sick, and, you know, as long as she was in that atmosphere, you know, she was—that was her—her body was going to do that to her. And, you know, it was so petty what they did at the—you know, at the Met against me and against the show, which was—you know, we knew that it was going to be a summer show that, you know—and it was not going to be a major show at the Met. But we were happy enough, you know, to do them the favor of giving them this show. And the show was from June until September, so it was a long—it was a very long show, as a matter of fact. And people were so incensed until they did everything—you know, they did everything they could to sabotage this show.

They didn't want it. They didn't want it known that the Met was doing it. You know, they refused to do any kind of publicity and communications for it. They refused a regular opening. [00:17:48] They did a poster, but as a matter of fact, the catalog was a catalog from the Cameron Museum, which they just put a new cover on. Or, actually, I put a new cover on so that there was—so that there would be, you know, a record of the exhibition, because what I wanted, and I asked—the only thing I asked them for besides the opening was the banner on the façade, because I just wanted [laughs] the banner on the façade.

ERIN GILBERT: And what year was this? Can you say again the year of this exhibition?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This was 1999. It was 1999.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, at this point, you've known Lowery for about 20 years, or 15 years.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: When did I meet Lowery for the first time? Well, yeah, when they bought the—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —drawing.

ERIN GILBERT: If you all met in '73—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —then by the time '99—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —came around—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —you'd certainly known each other—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, that's it.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And when Lowery told me, you know, that they were going to do the—you know, they were going to do the drawing show at the Met, which meant that this was one of the few American female shows at the Met—it was number two or number three; there was nobody—I fell to my knees [laughs], you know, in front of Lowery, and I said, "Thank you."

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And she said, "Barbara, get up off your knees," you know. [00:19:59] And—but that was how significant it was. It was—even though it was in the Paul Klee gallery, which is a beautiful gallery. And, of course, the idea was that we were going to do the same show that we did at the Walters, which was a big sculpture in white aluminum called *Bathers* in the center, and then they would put the drawings around it. Well, *Bathers* never happened. I don't know why it didn't. So, it was only the drawings, because if they had put *Bathers* in, then it would have been a sculpture and drawing show, and they didn't want that.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think I—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So—

ERIN GILBERT: I think we will be able to interrogate that a little more, but I'm just thinking now about how long it took for the museum to make an acquisition in '73, but then to do an exhibition in '99, and that exhibition actually having been an exhibition that was traveling from another venue first—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, it was not—

ERIN GILBERT: —exactly, it was not an originated exhibition—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —an exhibition that was organized by—

ERIN GILBERT: By the Met.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —the Met.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It would never have happened if it had been [laughs] because it would never have been organized in the first place.

ERIN GILBERT: I want us to go back briefly to this 1973, because in the same way that you have solidified a style and a signature in *Confessions for Myself*, there's another series that's emerging in this moment, and that's the Cleopatra series. [00:22:02] And Cleopatra's cape is what we have on record as having been made and conceived of first in that year. Do you want to talk a little bit about the Cleopatra series?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, they started—as you say, that's the year they started. The first one was Cleopatra's cape, and it was because I found this foundry in—outside of Paris who could do these iridescent [laughs]—this iridescent bronze, which they never told me how they did it. They just said, "Oh, it's a secret, and [laughs] we're not going to tell you, but we can do it." And the reason why I started the plaques was because Marc had written me from China that he had seen these extraordinary Han shrouds, which were made of plaques of—it's gone out of my head. It's coming to me in French and not in English [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: You can say it in French. It's okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But in jade, the—

ERIN GILBERT: Jade?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —*Plaque de jade, avec les fils d'or qui étaient dans les tombeaux d'un prince at d'une princesse Chinois de Han Dynasty qui étaient du treizieme siècle*. [00:23:55] Okay?

ERIN GILBERT: So, they're jade pieces with gold—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —and they belonged to the prince.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And he didn't send me a photograph of it because in those days, photographs had to be physical, you know.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: They had to be sent, you know, by the mail, et cetera.

ERIN GILBERT: There was no iPhone again—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —no Instagram. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, all I had was his description of these extraordinary objects and this bronze which glowed, which was luminous, and which was iridescent. And I put the two together. And I produced the first Cleopatra, which was not called Cleopatra's cape, but simply *The Cape*. And I only changed the—you know, the name when it became a series of, you know, six sculptures. But—

ERIN GILBERT: So, they were jade burial suits.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I'll show you.

ERIN GILBERT: It's what they were buried in.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, I can show you a picture—

ERIN GILBERT: Yeah.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —of it. Where's that book?

ERIN GILBERT: No, it's here. But just in terms of your thinking around this series, you said—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This is the fountain.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That's a carillon fountain there, and this is the ultimate ground. It's there [00:25:59]. [Laughs.] Somewhere around there.

ERIN GILBERT: It certainly is.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Okay.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Amazing.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Okay, now I'll show you the Han shroud.

ERIN GILBERT: I have a copy of this at home. Now I'm going to have to go back—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Let's see.

ERIN GILBERT: —and—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Where is it? Let's see.

ERIN GILBERT: This was in the film.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah—

ERIN GILBERT: Five—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that's the series of aluminums. And, of course, when I started

putting silk with the aluminums, I had to dye the silk because I couldn't find the color of aluminum in—you know, in regular commercial—

ERIN GILBERT: Of course not.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —whatever, and so I had to have it dyed, you know.

ERIN GILBERT: Black, red, gold, and the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —silver color.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And the silver.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, the Cleopatra series begins, and I think—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That is the Han shroud. That is the Chinese Han shroud, and it's a magical object. I've seen it in the flesh. I've really seen it in the flesh, and it's magical. There's no two ways [laughs] about it. [00:27:58]

ERIN GILBERT: Well, what's so interesting is this seems like one fully constructed object, and your cape and bed and wedding dress are much more deconstructed in the way that they flow, and that their form is accommodating of the human form but not necessarily encompassing the human form in the way that this object does. Just looking at these, your construction of the bed, each one of these tiny tiles is held together by wire.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: You did them all yourself—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —and so how long did these take? Or—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] You are like the 68,000 people who ask me. What difference does it make, [laughs] as a matter of fact, how long it took me—as long as it took me? It took me as long as it took me. As a matter of fact, I had an assistant, an Italian guy who was a worker at the Dassaut airplane factory, who was married to my housekeeper and who actually put together all these objects. He is the one who did it, and he was also—he had also worked on Pierre Cardin's sculptures as well. But, yeah, it took as long as it took, and the reason why it took so long was, of course, because there was no way to do anything mechanically, and it all had to be done—

ERIN GILBERT: By hand.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —by hand. No, it's truly—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —the intricacy—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —of looking at something made in 1973 and knowing they were—each one was hand-constructed. [00:30:04] And kind of speaking of your hand, and I think we can use this as a transition, in 1974, after all these acquisitions have happened, you publish the first book of poetry, *From Memphis to Peking*, which is edited by Toni Morrison and published by Random House. And so, one immediately thinks to oneself—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that was thanks to Ken Noland, because I went to a dinner party with him, and sitting in front of us was one of these uber-agents called Nesbit [ph], and he said to her, "Guess what Barbara's done?" [Laughs.] And she said, "What?" and he said, "She's written a fantastic book of poetry." And she said, "Well, why don't you send me the manuscript?" and I did, and I—it couldn't have been that she read it that night. But at any rate, she called me, you know, either that night or the next night and said, "I will take you." And, of course, she sold it the next day [laughs] because whatever she took, she sold

[00:32:02]. And that's how I met Toni Morrison, because Toni Morrison was the editor who bought it. And that's how my relationship with Toni began, as simple as that.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, Ken Noland made the introduction?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: And—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Now, I haven't thought about that in ages, but absolutely. And, you know, why was I with Ken Noland? Because we were in the same gallery together.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, I was thinking less why you were with Ken and more how did you manage to create such important bodies of work and sculptures at the same time that you were writing this poetry?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was not doing it at the same time. You know, people think what? I get up in the morning, and [laughs] I run downstairs, and I write a few poems, and then I climb up some other stairs, and there I'm making sculpture. No. Come on.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, and you've spoken about them as being separate practices for you.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: For me, not only were they separate, but there was an invisible wall—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —between the poetry and the sculpture, and there was a sort of impermeable wall between the poetry and the drawings.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And it was Selz, but it was also Anthony Janson who insisted that, "No, Barbara, it's not true that there's no connection between [laughs] the drawings and the poetry. You are out of your mind if you think that." [00:33:59] And, you know, I gave him a very hard time because I said, "No, there's no absolutely no—you know, I want to keep them separate. I don't want to be known as a sculptor who does poetry or a poet that does sculpture. That's ridiculous. And, you know, so I have to keep the two completely separate, professionally speaking." And I still believe that. So, a lot of people know me as a poet who don't have a clue that I do sculpture, and there are a lot of people who know me as a sculptor who couldn't care less, you know, that I do poetry because they don't read it.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, and you won an award for this particular book. Do you want to talk about the critical reception for it?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I'm very—I've been very acclaimed as a poet, but nobody [laughs] knows that I do sculpture. I swear it. And a lot of people who know that I do sculpture know that I do poetry, but poetry is such a closed world, and it's so non-visual, you cannot imagine. And the people—the critics and the people who read poetry don't need an object in reality. It's all in their heads, and that's what poets do, and how I can do the two things at the same time means that I'm really schizophrenic. And at any rate, I do not—there is a wall, and it has to be kept separately. [00:36:05] I do not—because otherwise I would be thinking like a sculptor when I'm doing poetry. That's not possible. Or thinking like a poet when I'm doing sculpture. That's not possible. So, [laughs] you know, it's like the combination of bronze and silk. You know, it's an impossible situation. It's irreal. It has nothing to do with reality.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. So, this—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Shall we leave it at that? For today anyway.

ERIN GILBERT: If you like.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Because I'm tired, you know. I mean, we had this—

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ERIN GILBERT: This is Erin Gilbert, interviewing Barbara Chase-Riboud at the artist's home in Paris, France, on June 10th for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number two. So, when we left off, we were discussing your book of poetry, *From Memphis to Peking*, and we were talking about that period of 1974. The same year, you have an exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, and then you go to the Greek island of Scorpios to visit Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. So, your year, 1974, was extremely packed. What do you remember most about that year? What were your kind of most fond memories of your conversations, especially with—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Most—

ERIN GILBERT: —Jackie O?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, let's—first of all, the exhibition at MoMA Paris was the first time they had ever done an exhibition of an American female, period [laughs], and so it was a kind of landmark, you know, exhibition for them. It was a very good, very beautiful catalog, and I exhibited *The Albino* for the first time, and it is the same—it is now going to be installed in MoMA in a few weeks, or over the summer anyway, as part of their new extension. [00:02:00]

ERIN GILBERT: And—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So—

ERIN GILBERT: —you mean MoMA New York?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: MoMA New York.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Not MoMA Paris—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —but MoMA New York. So, this sculpture has really—has traveled the globe, has really traveled the globe under two different titles, under *The Albino* title and under *All That Rises Must Converge*.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And the reason for that is that it can be installed two different ways. It can be installed closed—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and it's *All That Rises*, or open, and it's *Albino*. From now on probably, it will be referred to only as *The Albino*—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and it goes with—it goes within a poem that was written—actually I don't know which came first, the sculpture or the poem. And I'm thinking the poem came first, and then the sculpture.

ERIN GILBERT: And this would be a black piece, because you have *All That Rises Must Converge*, gold, and *All That Rises Must Converge*—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes—

ERIN GILBERT: —red.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —it's all—

ERIN GILBERT: So, this is all black.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —black.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's amazing. I do think that this MoMA install is a moment for many artists whose work has been exhibited in other places to be shown in New York for the first time, so it's going to be amazing to have that piece installed permanently on view in New York.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And Paris was—France has always been sort of four steps ahead of—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —the U.S., you know. Even the Italians were much more ahead of the U.S., because my first exhibition of *Adam and Eve* was in Spoleto [00:04:02]—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in, what? [Laughs.] '57—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —with the—

ERIN GILBERT: The Spoleto Festival.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that was the first international show, and then the big show in Paris was international also and had that kind of impact there. So, the Americans were, you know, sort of, as usual, you know, behind the times. Let's put it that way.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, they're catching up now.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And it—and as far as Jacqueline was concerned, it was our summer vacation to go every year with friends from Paris to Spetses, which is a small Greek island near Athens, off the coast, which has [laughs] no public transportation, no tourists, no hotels, and very few restaurants [laughs], which is really a kind of family island for Greeks. And we stayed with friends, the Woods [ph], who have between them eight children, and then my two were added to this, plus their friends, so we had, like, 15 children sleeping on the roof because, of course, [laughs] that's what you do in Greece [00:06:00]. And so, there were two housekeepers, one that only did laundry [laughs] and one that only cooked, and this was our summer.

And of course, it's a gorgeous island, and, you know, what you can do there, you know, is only swim, sleep, eat, and sail, and do yoga, if you want to, on the beach, which is what I did every morning before—well, the beach was a private beach, so, you know, there was no problem about tourists or anybody else, you know. First of all, they couldn't get to the island, and if they did get to the island, [laughs] they couldn't go anywhere. And so, this was kind of the atmosphere of the island. It was very quiet; it was very tranquil. And every—you know, every summer Jacqueline would call and say, "Why don't you come over to Skorpios, you know, and pay me a visit?" and there was always something wrong. There was a kid who had a broken arm, or, you know, somebody sick. I mean, with eight of them, one of them there was something wrong with, and so we never went.

And then in '74, for some reason or other, I said, "I don't know what you guys are going to do, but I'm going," and I didn't know really why. [00:07:55] It was just—Marc was not there; he was in Cambodia or Vietnam or wherever, or the Congo [laughs], and so Jesse [ph] and I—you know, they sent the helicopter, and we flew over to Skorpios, which is, like, 10 minutes from where we were, and the Onassis were there to greet us, and that's how we started, you know, the weekend. And in the middle of the weekend, for one reason or another, we were sitting on the beach, and I suddenly start telling Jacqueline about Sally Hemings and my

problems and why I should or shouldn't write this book, and that Toni Morrison can't—you know, can't do it at Random House. Random House doesn't want it; nobody wants this book.

And then we start talking about presidents and power and politics and fame and history and slavery and all—and the Constitution and whatever until, you know, we just talked into the night really. And there was this little motorboat filled with paparazzi which would circle the island, you know. [Laughs.] Every sort of half an hour they would come back. And, you know, suddenly she turned to me and said, "Barbara, you've got to write this book. It's too important for you to just let it go." [00:09:56] And so, I—you know, I sort of looked at her, and she looked at me, and this was the first time I had met her. This was not some friend of mine that I was, you know, whining to.

This was Jacqueline Onassis, who I didn't really know except that on meeting her I felt that I had known her forever, and there's a kind of—there was a kind of empathy evidently, and then there grew a kind of empathy for this woman and her story and what she had gone through and what this meant to America and Americans. And we left it at that; she had sort of energized me, you know, really thinking about, you know, "How can I get this thing done?" And I started—you know, I told my agent that I would—you know, that I was going to go ahead with it. I was going to really pick it up again. And by the time I had, you know, the first draft, Onassis was dead, and he had died of this mysterious illness, and Jacqueline had gone back to the States. I had seen her a couple of times in Paris, and I'd seen her at the airport, you know, because Onassis was in the hospital at the American Hospital in Paris.

[00:11:51] And so, you know, when Onassis had died, she had a friend at Viking who offered her a job just to get her out of her grief and so on, and keep her busy, and she started calling my agent saying, "Has Barbara handed in [laughs] the manuscript yet? Has Barbara handed in the manuscript?" You know, the months would go by, et cetera, et cetera, and finally, you know, Lynn [ph] said, "Yeah, she has put it on my desk." And Lynn sent it over, and she bought it. At that point, it meant that, you know, it didn't circulate at all—the manuscript. No one else saw it; no one else knew [laughs] what was in it or what was going on. And, you know, it went into Viking production.

So, we had no idea what a controversy was going to come out of this, because we thought we had a great historical story that everybody would be interested in, but we didn't know that it was going to be contested by the Jeffersonians, which made it famous, you know, without even trying, because no—it was my first book. It was my first novel. Nobody had ever heard of me, and it went straight to Literary Guild Book of the Month Club, you know. [00:13:57] Paperback was a half-million first printing. It was—you know, it just went off the walls, and why? It was simply—it was because of Jefferson.

I mean, the book wasn't even about Jefferson, it was about Sally Hemings, and the Jeffersonians, if they had just ignored the book, nothing would have happened, you know. I mean, nobody knew who I was. I was not a historical writer. I wasn't even a writer. I had no—I had only poetry published, and this was my first book, and this is what happened. There were—there was a front-page *New York Times* review, glowing, glowing review, and people went bananas.

ERIN GILBERT: And it was translated into multiple languages, I understand.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: It was translated into multiple languages, I understand.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was translated into about 12 languages, you know. It—Spanish, Portuguese, French, Greek, et cetera. This came the year—a year later—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —but, yeah, it became an international bestseller all over Europe, and the Europeans were fascinated by the story. They also believed the story, as did the American public. I mean, they weren't listening to the Jeffersonians [laughs] at all. [00:15:54] They were listening to what they knew about America and what they knew about the racial situation, and they thought, "Yeah, that really happened." And, of course, the Europeans knew that it [laughs] happened because it happened all the time.

ERIN GILBERT: And just for the sake of understanding the context of the novel, Sally

Hemings is the mistress of Thomas Jefferson who bears seven children for him and who lives at Monticello.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you can call her mistress—

ERIN GILBERT: Wife.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —if you want to—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —but she was his enslaved woman—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —who was also his wife, his wife's sister—his wife's half-sister—and with whom he had lived—he lived for 38 years and seven children. And nobody knows what she looked like, but she probably looked like his dead wife. They were half-sisters.

ERIN GILBERT: And, again, for the context of the discussion around how this impacted you and how this impacted your career, this novel was highly contested, and then years later DNA evidence proved that your hypothesis—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was—

ERIN GILBERT: —was correct.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That I was right.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you endured a great deal—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It wasn't—well, I endured 38 years of contestation and defamation [laughs] and whatever else you want to add to that because people were swearing on the heads of their children that this was not true, that this had never happened, that Chase-Riboud had—[00:18:01]

ERIN GILBERT: There you go. No worries.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That Chase-Riboud had made all this up in order to defame Jefferson for what he did to her ancestors [laughs]. And this is—

ERIN GILBERT: Completely untrue.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, I think it's a very poignant way in which one might look at this notion of monument and memory within your practice, and I think that it's activated in two ways. The physical monuments, the physical sculptures, and then this monumentalizing that happens through prose, that happens through the making of novels. And obviously for Sally Hemings she is a figure in history who'd been forgotten and, in some degree, invisible to some, and I think you have been able to withstand the weight of representing these figures in both the physical and the intellectual space—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well—

ERIN GILBERT: —in very poignant ways.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I've never done a sculpture about or of or anything to do with Sally Hemings.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They've remained separate.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Never.

ERIN GILBERT: Yeah.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And the interesting thing is that the second Sally Hemings book

was written 15 years later—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and I recently read the two books together, and it is as if it was one volume and that they were written contemporarily, which means that together they make a monumental sort of fresco of five generations of enslaved women. [00:19:58]

ERIN GILBERT: And by this second novel, you mean *The President's Daughter*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: By—

ERIN GILBERT: It's about Harriet.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: By the second novel, I mean *The President's Daughter*—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —which was published in '84.

ERIN GILBERT: So—yeah.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: '84—it was '94.

ERIN GILBERT: '94.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Sorry.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, within the context of thinking about the timeframe we're in and this way in which you had been supported and—by this woman who obviously understood intimately what it meant to be part of the political structure, you then leave the U.S. and go to Africa for a month-long tour in 1975. How did that clear your mind or influence your thought process around the world and around African presence?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I did the State Department tour along with an exhibition. So, for the first time—and for the last time, because I never did it again—the two things were combined in one kind of package, which I realize now was not such a good idea. It was not such a good idea. We had the book, we had the poetry, we had drawings, and we had jewels, and [laughs] it was just—I mean, you know, it was chaos, so the people couldn't really focus on one thing. [00:21:56] And although Africans are used to focusing on one thing, most sculptors in Africa are poets, and they write.

ERIN GILBERT: Griots. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And most artists write as well. So, they—you know, they found it very, you know, sort of normal, but the audience, the State Department audience, who expected something different, you know, were confused. You know, "What is this lady? Is she [laughs] a poet? Is she a writer? Is she a historian? Is she a pain in the neck?" You know. And so, that was very interesting, and I will never—I vowed never to do it again simply because it was the most physically exhausting tour I had—

ERIN GILBERT: How many countries did you go to?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Fifteen countries in 30 days.

ERIN GILBERT: That's two days per country.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: That's insane.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That's two days per country. I—

ERIN GILBERT: And the artwork went with you?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you all installed and then—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —unpacked and—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —repacked a show every 48 hours.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It was insane. That's what they did. And so, I remember arriving in Ghana. [Laughs.] I don't know what number that was on the schedule, but there was a jeep sort of waiting for me to take me into the jungle [laughs], you know, to wherever the hell I was supposed to show up. [00:23:54] And I took one look at that jeep, and I took one look at the landscape, and I burst into tears.

ERIN GILBERT: Oh.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, [laughs] they sent me down, you know, and sent me to the embassy, and, you know, I was prostrate by that time. And I did—it was near the end of the tour, but, you know, I still had a couple of countries, you know, to go to, but I remember I thought, "If I have to get into that jeep [laughs] and roll into the jungle, I am going to die," you know. "I can't do it." And so, you know, I mean, it's more anecdotal than anything else because it didn't change anything, but it gave me a sense of, you know, how far I had reached, you know, into Africa and into the psyche of Americans, and—which was a little bit like, you know, going into the jungle [laughs] and discovering whatever. So—

ERIN GILBERT: Do you—because, you know, just looking at where you—I believe you went to Senegal, and I believe you went to Mali, but in thinking about these West African spaces where there are masks and performance objects made that include raffia and that begin—and lots of gold—that begin to kind of look like what's happening in the structure of the Malcolm X steles at least, where there is an upper tension and heaviness, and then the lower has this soft and light and moveable quality of the skirts [00:26:10]. Do you remember seeing that and thinking about the resonance between those things at the time?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, absolutely not.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, they were really two different things. One is the fact that the dancing mask is a piece of sculpture and—which is carried by a human being—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and which moves as a human being moves. My stele sculptures don't move; they don't dance. They're not rhythmic; they're not figurative.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That is—the African dance figures are trying to make themselves abstract art, and my abstract art [laughs] is maybe trying to make them—I don't know, visually or narratively—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —human.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Personage.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And it's interesting, because even though the sculptures are—you know, are abstract, they still have this kind of presence which is almost human, which is

almost, you know, personal. And this is, you know, this is the impression that they get—they give, and I don't know if there's a kind of echo from the dancing mask or not. [00:27:53] Of course, since I'm a Black artist, there was all—there's always been, you know, this kind of idea of appropriation and so on and so forth, but for me the dancing mask is one thing, and a futuristic abstraction is something else.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Perfect. So, in the coming years, you also showed at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, and that was a set of drawings, and then you showed in Freiburg, Germany, and then your work was included in documenta at Kassel. And I was interested in what was presented within the context of documenta, and with documenta being one of the most important regular exhibitions internationally, whether or not you had an awareness at that moment of how your work or how you were positioned in that space, meaning it would be until *documenta 11* that Okwui Enwezor curated the exhibition of—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it was—

ERIN GILBERT: —people of color.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was interesting to, you know, sort of situate myself on the international scene—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —exactly—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —where I was [laughs] and who I was and, you know, what the drawings meant, you know, internationally, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, then you were included in exhibitions at the Pompidou and the Smithsonian, and here we are now at 1979, and the Sally Hemings novel is published, and I think we've kind of talked about how that impacted you. [00:29:59] We go to 1980, and you're in an exhibition at MoMA PS1, the Afro-American Abstraction exhibition. And what's happening for you personally in this moment in 1980? There's a shift in your marriage. What is this moment happening—what's happening for you in this moment personally? How are you changing?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I mean, there was a seismic change in my personal life simply because I divorced Marc Riboud, and my oak trees died.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I had to find a way to cope with this sort of destruction of this very idealistic situation on every level. And, of course, I had two children, so it was much more complicated than it would have been if I had been—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —alone.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And my oak trees died. What can I say? And I wrote about it; I wrote, I think, 16 or 17 poems about Le Chénierie, and I had to—I—that's the way I dealt with it, as a matter of fact. And then what happened? [00:31:55] There was no kind of—what was extraordinary is there was no kind of transition period between a complete change of existence really. I came out of my agent's office in New York; I was walking down 57th Street, and I met—[laughs] I met Sergio Tosi for the third time, and my life changed overnight—overnight. We went out that evening to see *Evita*, which he had already seen, but he lied. [They laugh.]

And coming out of *Evita*, we were walking down Broadway, and we didn't want to go home, we didn't want to go to a hotel, we didn't—but we didn't want to separate either. And so, we went to an all-night movie that was playing *Fame*. [They laugh.]

ERIN GILBERT: Of all things.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right, of all things. And, you know, the rest is history. But he had just come back from South America and opened up a gallery in New York. [00:33:45] He had divorced maybe seven years before, and he had—when he left Milan, he had taken—he had destroyed all his letters, all his photographs, all this other—this previous life, but he had taken an address book which had seven names in it, and one of the names was mine. And he doesn't know why [laughs], and I can't explain it either.

ERIN GILBERT: But you had met three times prior?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, we had met three times previously.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, you all married the next year—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —in 1981.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: As soon as, you know, my divorce was final, we got married.

ERIN GILBERT: And you've been married ever since.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: That was extremely important, I think, to your continuing on in both realms. The next year, it looks as though—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I went from being alone in that Marc's photography had been, you know, the central part of our lives, and the rest of our lives sort of circulating around there, and then by marrying an art professional, suddenly all that energy and all that circulation was around me. [00:35:57] And suddenly I was in a position to really concentrate on what I was doing with someone who could, with one eyebrow [laughs], tell me whether I was on the right track or that I was full of, you know, what.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And this, you know—Sergio has one of the best eyes in the world, and certainly in Europe he is known for having, you know, one of the best eyes around. And so, he would never—he never judged what I was doing, but I could judge what I was doing by looking at him. Okay, he didn't have to say anything [laughs]. And so, this was the beginning of a whole new attitude toward my work and a new eye on what I was doing, and a kind of ambition that I didn't have before, because, of course, having, you know, a very active family life—for, you know, my family and my in-laws, this was a hobby, you know. This was what Barbara did in her spare time. [00:38:00] And this changed, you know, from "this is what Barbara did in her spare time" to "this is what Barbara does, and, you know, you better stay out of her way." And so, there, too, there was—and that was how the steles developed from the first three Malcolms to the series, which went up to 20.

ERIN GILBERT: And you were in the Dutot studio the entire time?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: Which studio space were you in as you were making this in this moment? Which studio space?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This was Rue des Plantes.

ERIN GILBERT: Rue des Plantes.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This was when Sergio was running the cultural center in Paris—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and one of the perks [laughs] of this, you know, situation was I had a magnificent atelier, 1930s atelier, on Rue des Plantes [laughs] which was really gorgeous.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you moved into that space in 1981.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Well, I didn't move into it because we lived here—

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —on Auguste Comte—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in that we had the floor, the fifth floor, and nobody was going to move out of this flat [laughs]. And so, we split the flat in half, and the—we put the boys' rooms on Marc's side, and nobody moved [00:40:04].

ERIN GILBERT: So—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We kept—

ERIN GILBERT: —Marc lived across the hall or—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, Marc lived [laughs] across the hall. Don't let your jaw drop because [laughs]—

ERIN GILBERT: Well, no, no, no, no, no, simply because—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —because it's a—it was a rather sophisticated but very French—

ERIN GILBERT: Very French.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Very French. And David told me one day [laughs]—he said, "I told my roommates at Brown, you know, our family arrangements, but they didn't believe me."

[They laugh.]

ERIN GILBERT: You were a woman of power. You were a woman—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —of grand stature.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I mean, for Americans, it was just out of the question.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, it's convenient. At least you don't have to—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But it was—

ERIN GILBERT: —travel.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —very convenient. The real estate situation in Paris is such that it was the best solution for everybody. And so, eventually Marc remarried and [laughs] had one child, and it was so funny. I remember this so well. He had—yeah, he had two children, but the little boy knew that, you know, David and Alexis were his brothers, but he couldn't figure out who I was [laughs], you know. And so, he would wander in, you know, from time to time and say, "Maman?" and I would say, "No, dear, [laughs], I'm not your mama. Your mama is over there." [00:42:00] [They laugh.]

But because if—since it was David's maman and Alexis' maman, why wasn't it his maman if he was the brother [laughs]? And so, I don't know how long that confusion lasted, but it must have lasted quite a long time because—

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.] Oh, my God.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —at a certain time we could laugh about it. But he was quite

adamant that, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: You were his maman.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Amazing. So, that part I didn't know. That's why I had such an interesting look on my face.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it was interesting—

ERIN GILBERT: That's—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and, you know, fairly common in—

ERIN GILBERT: I've actually heard of it before.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —certain strata.

ERIN GILBERT: I have in New York, actually, heard of people splitting space after they split up—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —just staying in the same space. So, you are always ahead of your time, though—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: —so, you know, I don't know why I'm surprised. And it's great that you had this support network and eye and ear in Sergio—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —because Betty Parsons dies the next year.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: Right? So, you lose your gallerist.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly. So—

ERIN GILBERT: You lose your dealer—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —but you have a husband who is—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —capable of—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —this kind of support.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: What else did it mean that Betty—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I didn't think of that actually.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I never thought of, you know, the comparison of I lost Betty, but I got, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —Sergio, or I got Sergio, but I lost Betty.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But actually, you know, I did—after she died, everybody got a gallery but me and the other two women [00:44:04]. None of us got a gallery.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you were without—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —representation—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —for quite some time following that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —moment. At least 20 years, right?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Hmm.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Which, in a way, it might have been beneficial because I worked directly with the museums—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and so I didn't really—the thing that I lost were the gallery exhibitions, because all the exhibitions after that were museum exhibitions—

ERIN GILBERT: That's how it—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —or institutional.

ERIN GILBERT: —it reads.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: You have a series of ongoing—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —museum exhibitions beginning with Paris—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —the next year, 1984, *East/West African American*—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —*Contemporary Art* at the California African American Museum, and you just continued to have exhibitions—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, I—

ERIN GILBERT: —with museum institutions.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We—but—right, [inaudible] gallery.

ERIN GILBERT: With no representation.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: With no representation.

ERIN GILBERT: And it's also interesting to note that you have these exhibitions without representation, but sometimes works are being acquired as a result of the exhibitions—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —in spite of not having representation. So, you did this yourself.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. And we'll go—I'll go back to the exact year, but for now, just suffice to say from 1982 on you do not have representation, and you continue to produce. In 1985, you establish a space in Rome, right?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That is—

ERIN GILBERT: A palazzo?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Sergio had decided that somebody ought to live in the country they were born in [laughs], so—

ERIN GILBERT: Ah, establishing residence [00:46:00].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And, of course, you know, we found this palazzo which is, you know, extraordinary historically—1599 the date—the palazzo of a French cardinal named Fesch who stored—who built this, you know, palazzo to store his 17,000 paintings.

ERIN GILBERT: Seventeen thousand?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Seventeen thousand.

ERIN GILBERT: Just to be—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: He just had a museum.

ERIN GILBERT: Just to confirm, you said in 1599 he—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: 1599, yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —a French cardinal—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —purchased or built this space to house 17,000—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —works of art.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right [laughs]. I mean, it's sort of the size of the Metropolitan. [They laugh.]

ERIN GILBERT: It's certainly a museum.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that's what happened.

ERIN GILBERT: So—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I—I'll have to check with Sergio for the exact number, but it was a phenomenal number of paintings and some sculpture. Paintings, drawings.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, you do not live there—you all do not live there alone. Are there multiple apartments or flats in this palazzo now or no?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There is—we live on the ground floor. At one time there was an incredible kind of population for this palazzo [00:47:57]. There was an English lord living on the fifth floor [laughs], and there was an Italian princess living in the *étage noble*. There a lute maker living [laughs] on the ground floor, and there were two little old ladies that

nobody knew, you know, what they did or why they were there. And let's see, there was one other floor, but it was a mélange of historic personages and aristocrats and poor people.

ERIN GILBERT: It sounds—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And it was, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: —mind-boggling.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was amazing. And the lute maker was one of the best lute makers in the world. So, we had—

ERIN GILBERT: But you were the only artist in the space?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I was the only artist, yes. But there were musicians, you know, that, you know, floated in and out, you know, with their instruments and so on and so forth, and then, you know, there was the princess on the noble floor who—well, I don't know whether we can go into the fact that it was haunted also. [00:49:52] So, at a certain time, the prince, who was on the noble floor, was getting sicker and sicker, and nobody knew why.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, the princess decided to call a priest and have the whole palazzo exorcised, and that's what she did. And so, the exorcist found in the cellar of the palace an X, and when they excavated it, they found a body who was haunting the palace, and it was the illegitimate son of the cardinal who had been murdered by his half-brother and buried there—a Medici—and [laughs] buried there. And so, they took him home and put him in the tomb with the rest of the family, and the guy got better. It was just that, you know, there was this personage who wanted to go home to his family. And what happened to me personally was that one day I found my keys, which I had left in the door—in a door that was not the—it was the front door, I think—completely twisted [00:52:14]. There was no way to get it in or out, and nobody could explain rationally [laughs] why this happened. And, you know, the exorcist did his job, found the body, so they, you know, got him home, and—

ERIN GILBERT: And it's been clear.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —everybody got well again.

ERIN GILBERT: Amazing. But I suppose—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Now, you can—

ERIN GILBERT: —between 1599 and 1985—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —it makes a little bit of sense that there'd been a moment of—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: At least one murder.

ERIN GILBERT: —one—

[They laugh.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: If not—

ERIN GILBERT: At least one—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —several.

ERIN GILBERT: —body in the closet.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, exactly, and that was exactly what it was. There was a body, you know, that had been murdered and had been, you know, walled up in the—you know, in the [inaudible].

ERIN GILBERT: Were there any other artists living in Rome at the time that you developed relationships with or lived nearby? Was there anybody else there?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Cy Twombly lived next door.

ERIN GILBERT: So, Cy Twombly—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —lived next door. Okay. I wasn't sure if he was in the same palazzo or if he was—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] In the palace next door, or in the—actually we looked onto the same piazza, which was Piazza Ricci, and he was to the left, and we were to the south. So, Cy Twombly, and of course Sergio had relationships with practically everybody in Rome because of what he did, you know [00:54:08].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], in terms of publishing.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so—but earlier, much earlier, in '57, '58, I had a gang of, you know, painters, Italian painters and architects like Mimmo Rotella and guys like that [laughs], terrific guys like that when, you know, I was at the American Academy.

ERIN GILBERT: A-ha. So, this is a homecoming of sorts—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —to be back in Rome. And so, once you leave here you will go to Rome, meaning in—later on this month. And so, you go regularly to the same space in Rome—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —every summer.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We've had that space since—what did they say there?

ERIN GILBERT: '85.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: '85, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And in terms of your practice, do you have a studio there? Do you—what do you—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There is no studio—

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —there. I don't work there.

ERIN GILBERT: You don't work. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I write there sometimes—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —but I don't—

ERIN GILBERT: No casting, though.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —because my foundry is in Milan.

ERIN GILBERT: In Milan. Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you've had that same foundry—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —for how long?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The same foundry, 30 years now.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. And speaking of writing, the next year, in 1986, you publish *Valide*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: In 1986, what did I publish? That's the *Amistad*. What is that?

ERIN GILBERT: *Valide*, and then—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, *Valide*.

ERIN GILBERT: —*Portrait of a Woman*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. [00:55:57] Well, *Valide* was my history of the harem, and it sort of grew out of my—it grew, I guess, out of my first visit to Istanbul, because it takes place in Istanbul, and it was my idea that I would do a white slavery novel because I'd done a Black slavery novel [laughs]—

ERIN GILBERT: A-ha.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and I wanted some symmetry in my life. So, that's how that started. And it was a marvelous adventure because we had to learn Turkish, old Turkish, and, you know, it just threw us into another civilization, another art, another—you know, another mentality, and it was a great experience.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, then next is *Nude of a Woman—Portrait of a Nude Woman*. Another—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: *Portrait of a Nude Woman* was a collection of poetry—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that won the Carl Sandberg Poetry Prize, which is an extremely prestigious and exclusive prize that no other woman has won, as a matter of fact.

ERIN GILBERT: Since?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Since.

ERIN GILBERT: Since 1988?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, not before and not after [laughs] [00:57:57].

ERIN GILBERT: You have a tendency to have this impact, the first and the only.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The first and the only, you know.

ERIN GILBERT: And then comes *Echo of Lions*. In 1989—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —is *Echo of Lions*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Then comes *Echo of Lions*, which I did a lot of it at Yale University. I did a lot of research on this revolt. It was the first—one of the first successful slave revolts in the history of transatlantic slavery. As a matter of fact, it was the first and the only [laughs], you know, victorious revolt, and at the end these men sailed, you know—it was led by a man called Cinqué, and at the end he managed to sail back to Africa only to find that his wife and son had been enslaved. And so, his only goal in life had been to sail back to Africa, and he managed to do it, and he managed to do it despite a court trial in New Haven which—in which he was defended by John Quincy Adams. And so, it was also the first civil rights trial. [00:59:55]

ERIN GILBERT: And so, when you began this at Yale—and just to be clear, the title is *Echo of Lions: A Novel of the Amistad*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, you began the research for this at Yale when?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, because the story and the court trial are at—is in the Beinecke Library—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in—at Yale. It's as simple as that.

ERIN GILBERT: So, did you start looking at this when you were there working on your MFA or —

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Absolutely not.

ERIN GILBERT: —years later?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I wasn't a writer. [Laughs.] I wasn't a writer.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you went back subsequently and started doing this research.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I went back when I found out where the papers were—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —but they hadn't been moved in a century. I mean, they hadn't been moved since they got there.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, everything that happened with the trial and their saying that they had discovered, you know, this story themselves was absolutely untrue. But that's nothing new [laughs] in Hollywood.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, I think—and we'll get to how interesting it is that you wrote a book about a court trial and then ended up in a court trial.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Ended up, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: But what first interested you in *Echo of Lions* as a narrative, or the story of Cinqué and going back to Africa? What piqued your interest about it?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, because it was the first civil rights trial, and Cinqué defended himself, and then John Quincy Adams got into the act [01:02:01]. And Cinqué—

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BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —had already gone through an African trial, and so I had this symmetry between the trial that he went through in Africa, which was very similar to the trial that he went through in New Haven. And so, for me his reasoning, you know—you always think of African slaves as having no kind of legal or kind of jurisdictional—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —civilization, but as a matter of fact, the Mende had a whole system, [laughs] jurisdiction system, which Cinqué was very familiar and which he used.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, you have this dichotomy going on between these two trials, and then you have the ambiguity of Adams, who, as president—although he himself was an abolitionist, he presided over an America which was *esclavagiste*.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:01:57]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And what this—and that was—you know, what this did to him, you know, and what this did to his wife was extremely interesting for me, because he had to live this contradiction, and at the same time, America was living this contradiction. And so, for me it was quite a monumental, heroic story which nobody knew about, because nobody had written about it. There was one children's book, you know, which was more or less factual, but which had none of the nuances that, you know, *Echo of Lions* had, and it was for kids, for children. And what happened was that—how can I put it? Dustin Hoffman wanted to play John Adams [laughs], and so he—when he found the book, he bought the rights, and three years down the road or four years down the road, he dropped the option. But in the

meantime, the screenwriter had produced a script based on my book.

ERIN GILBERT: For DreamWorks under Steven Spielberg [00:04:01]?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, for the—he wasn't working for Spielberg then. He was working for Dustin Hoffman.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And then when Dustin Hoffman dropped the whole thing, he had a script, but he didn't have any rights—that he didn't have any rights to. And so, he offered it to Spielberg, who probably knew that Dustin Hoffman—which was Punch Productions—had already made a script of it. Debbie whatever-her-name-is—I never know the—I keep calling her Debbie Reynolds [laughs]. I've called her Debbie Reynolds all my life. Deborah [ph] whatever-her-last-name-is, if I can remember it correctly, had somehow, at Howard University, discovered not the actual trial, but had discovered a magazine called the *Amistad*.

ERIN GILBERT: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. College magazine.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and—which had nothing to do with anything—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —you know. It was the name of a literary magazine. And she claimed that, you know, she had discovered in the womb, really, the *Amistad* story, but [laughs] she had just bought from Franzoni, and, you know, without the rights [00:06:13]. Well, when I—and, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: And just for clarification, do you mean Debbie Allen—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, I mean—

ERIN GILBERT: —the dancer?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —Debbie Allen.

ERIN GILBERT: Debbie Allen. Just wanted to confirm.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, no—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I mean Debbie Allen.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] But I keep calling her Debbie Reynolds. Debbie Allen. And so, when I found out what—when I read Variety, and there was a description of this new movie that was being made starring Morgan Freeman, and I had had dinner with Morgan Freeman [laughs] in the next room and had told him I wrote this—yeah, "I wrote this book for you," and I had invented the Morgan Freeman character which they used in the film—and so, when I read Variety, and I realized that the character was the same, I wrote to Spielberg saying, "Excuse me, but, you know, this character is not yours. It belongs in another script." But I thought that he had stolen my first script, which I had gone to Hollywood and showed him.

[00:07:57] So, the—and it—which had a different title. It was called the North Star, and that that was—so that it was Amblin Productions, not DreamWorks. But as a matter of fact, that script was never—that script never went anywhere. That was the script that Franzoni had written for me and then just sold to Spielberg. Spielberg thought that he was making his Holocaust movie again in Black.

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, when he just—when I told him, you know, what had happened, and he had made all these plans that this was going to be an original screenplay, and it was going to win the Oscar that year, all he had to do was say that the script was an adapted screenplay from my book. That's all I was asking, plus the money [laughs], but that's, you know—he could have gone forward like anything. For some strange reason, and I still don't know why he did this, he decided to stonewall.

[00:09:54] And so, we went to trial, and I sued him, and it—you know, it was a year trial, with all kinds of headlines and all kinds of, you know, *tournant.* And in the end, he had to pay anyway because it finally came to light that Franzoni had stolen the script—had written the script, and his original script had been called *The Other Lion*. I mean, even the title [laughs] —and Spielberg wanted this as an original screenplay, and he decided, you know, to go ahead, and so we went to trial.

ERIN GILBERT: And in the results of the trial, they found 172—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —similarities—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —just to augment how—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Okay, so—

ERIN GILBERT: —very [laughs] specifically the script was copied—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —and not necessarily that it was adapted—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —but that it was really copied.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, of course. Well, anyway, he couldn't—he didn't want to give me credit for an adapted screenplay because he wanted the Oscar as an original screenplay. He had already made up his mind.

ERIN GILBERT: So, in 1991, after an 18-month court case, you win a counterfeit claim in Sally Hemings. [00:11:59] So, to look back at this moment in your life [laughs], you have—you are entering into one court case around Echo of Lions—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, well [laughs]—

ERIN GILBERT: —and you're entering—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I got four—

ERIN GILBERT: —another court case—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —for Sally Hemings.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: I mean, it's just—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: It's quite—I think—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Quite extraordinary.

ERIN GILBERT: It is extraordinary in the sense that we have discussed your—the adjectives —

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —that are generally—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well—

ERIN GILBERT: —come to describe you.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —think of this as a feminist.

ERIN GILBERT: Exactly, exactly. So—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: "We can steal from women because they don't count."

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Either adapted or original whatever. You know, "If we decide we want something, and there's a woman standing in the way, well, just kill her. That's all."

ERIN GILBERT: Well, I think what I was thinking of is how in the most contemporary moments as you've been described, you've been described as a radical, you've been described as controversial, you've been described as, you know, lifting invisible characters from history—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and it has not been without fight—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —that you've been able to do so and lay claim to having done so.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Well—

ERIN GILBERT: That, in fact, in every situation, you have also gone to court [laughs].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: And won. But you've got to court.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you know, I'm a very stubborn lady and known for being fearless. And so, once you decide that you have no fear—

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —it's easy. [00:14:00] It's just a matter of knowing that you're fearless. And what can happen to you otherwise?

ERIN GILBERT: Yeah.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: They could kill you, and [laughs] they almost did. But it's—and I think the whole situation came from a very early experience in that when I was about three or four and had this bout of meningitis and almost died and was put in this little aluminum tombstone, you know, with 40 or 50 other kids that were all dying, and I managed to emerge, but I had one phobia which I never got over, was the fact that I could not stand to have tight bedclothes around me. I couldn't stand to be tucked in and not being able—not to be able to move. And so, my mother made these pajamas, you know, and with little gloves and with little socks, so that I could sleep without covers.

[00:15:54] And this one time, I remember, it was my aunt who was babysitting, and she came in, and she opened the windows, and then she covered me up. And I said, "My mother doesn't cover me up," and she said, "Don't be ridiculous. I opened the window, you know. You're going to become cold, and so you've got to stay under the covers." And so, she tucked me in, and she went out, and she turned out the lights. I kicked the covers off, of course. She came back in; she saw the covers were kicked off; she did it again, you know.

She kept the window open, and I kept saying, "My mother doesn't cover me up." The third time she did it [laughs], she came in, I gave her a punch in the nose, and I said [laughs], "I told you, my mother doesn't cover me up."

And so, you know, there's this legend about this 3-year-old, you know, who punched her, you know, grand-aunt in the nose because she was contrary, you know, because I believed my mother, that my mother had said, you know, "You can sleep like that, you know, because I know you can't stand the covers over you." And so, I was trying to explain it to my aunt, and my aunt was not listening to me.

ERIN GILBERT: So, clearly the fighting streak—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, clearly—

ERIN GILBERT: —is not limited to—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —people who steal from you.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] Right.

ERIN GILBERT: It goes as far back as anyone who just doesn't listen.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay, there it is. [00:17:56] This practice of writing that is parallel to, in terms of timeframe in many instances, your practice of sculpture; in 1990, you begin a series called La Musica, the La Musica series. La Musica?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, La Musica. Okay.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], that series. Do you want to talk a little bit about how that series came about in the midst of all this writing and court-casing?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it's one of the longest series that I have. I just counted it up; there's 16 or 17 La Musicas, and they all go back to the idea of musical instruments and the combination of the silk and the bronze. And there a lot of small sculptures, a foot or a foot and a half, and then there are enormous sculptures which are the Parkway/Marian sculptures and a couple of Marian Anderson sculptures that are, you know, as tall as that door, or as tall as the ceiling. And it's simply—the name is simply Italian for music. So, they could very easily be called Music.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And "La Musica" is simply prettier. [00:19:44] And this—sort of being able to work again with the bronze and with the silk cord in a small size, because otherwise there—the steles, which, you know, are monumental—so, to have kind of medium-sized sculptures using the silk and the bronze, and also using the red bronze and the red silk—you know, it's an ongoing—it's still ongoing.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, La Musica begins, and you are also establishing a second home in Italy in Capri.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: In Capri. That was just—that was really an impulse buy, you know. [They laugh.]

An impulse buying. I was in Hollywood, and I was—was I by myself, or was Sergio with me? No, I was by myself, and I was having dinner with several producers, and one of them said to me that he had this property in Capri, and he couldn't build on it because the Italian belle arti was impossible, and he was fed up with fighting with the Italians. And he said, "Who wants to buy a garden on Capri?" and [laughs] I said, "I do," and so I bought it sight unseen.

ERIN GILBERT: You had not been to see it. What happened when you got there? Did you ever go?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was the most gorgeous place on Capri. [00:22:00] It was full of

trees. It had belonged to the Coup [ph] family.

ERIN GILBERT: The Crute or Crupe?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The Coup family. It was magical, and [laughs] when we saw it, we almost fainted because it was perfect. It had kind of—but the only thing built on—in there was a colonnade of columns that went down to the sea, and if you went down to the sea, you would see the big, you know, rock that's so famous in Capri right before your eyes, you know. And then it was one of the only places in Capri that had trees. And so, we started a whole thing of trying to get the belle arti to let us build something on this belvedere, which we—you know, we fought for what? Almost 20 years. We bought it—I don't know whether you have the date there.

ERIN GILBERT: The date that I have is 1990.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, it was—

ERIN GILBERT: March 27, 1990. March 27th.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: 1990.

ERIN GILBERT: March 27, 1990.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We sold it in 2008.

ERIN GILBERT: You—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We kept it all that time.

ERIN GILBERT: And never were able to build.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And were never able to build on it. [00:24:00] We had more correspondence with the belle arti because it's a national park, Capri, and so in order—and you—nobody can build anything on it. You need so many permissions, and then you need the permission of the Italian government, the belle arti's. Then you need the permission of the mayor and, you know, the deputy of the province, et cetera, et cetera. And, you know, Capri was so overbuilt, and it's a tiny, tiny island, until, you know, it was just impossible to build it. So, we had to leave it as a garden, and that's what we did. And finally, in—it's even more than 2008. I've forgotten exactly, but around 2008 we finally sold it to a couple of homosexuals who wanted—who made it into a marriage—

ERIN GILBERT: Destination event—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —wedding venue.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] Right.

ERIN GILBERT: Because it's—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: It's picturesque.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, this beautiful scene, you know—it's gorgeous, you know, and the people get married there now. You know, they have a—but all they can put on there—they have to bring everything in. [00:26:01] All they can put on there is a fold—you know, something that's foldable and only in plastic or something that—or tissue, like an awning. That's practically [laughs] all they can do. And so, you know, these guys do these wedding receptions on our belvedere. That's all they can do, and they just bring everything up, you know, and make the dinners and make the, you know—make the festivities and so on. And—

ERIN GILBERT: I had no idea.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.]

ERIN GILBERT: I had absolutely no idea. So, you are now at this moment, again, still without representation, but you have acquisitions by museum institutions. So, the Metropolitan Museum purchases *All That Rises Must Converge*; you were presenting the *Shelf Sculptures* in new spaces; and you are also proposing the *Middle Passage* monument. So, what was the *Middle Passage* monument, and to whom did you make that proposal?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There's a scale model there on the—yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Oh. Amazing.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's a scale model for an enormous, you know, double obelisk with a kind of bridge and a long chain that goes—oh, this is one that doesn't have the chain. [00:28:02] There's a long chain that goes around this bridge here. Let me show you a photograph.

ERIN GILBERT: I think I have one.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Okay.

ERIN GILBERT: But let's see. In the photograph—you can continue to describe it.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I don't think it's—

ERIN GILBERT: Or not.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's not—

ERIN GILBERT: I think I—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in the chronology.

ERIN GILBERT: I certainly have seen it, though. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But you've seen it.

ERIN GILBERT: I've definitely seen it. I definitely seen it, that the chains come from the center all the way down, and essentially, it's—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, here it is.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So—

ERIN GILBERT: And the proposal was made to the White House, is that correct?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Clinton wasn't interested.

ERIN GILBERT: So, that's who you made this proposal to.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There it is.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It says, "The *Middle Passage* memorial honors the 11 million victims and the 30 million deportees of the African diaspora, 1492, 1865, and 1888." Then it says, "The *Middle Passage* monument would be the first and, at present, only existing memorial in the world commemorating this part of world history. It would become a symbolic meeting place and means for all Americans to mourn this tremendous miscarriage of justice and inhumanity in a symbolic meeting place, a vast space of ignorance, anger, misunderstanding, and historical amnesia would be filled. In this way, we as a nation can relegate a human catastrophe to the past and move forward. [00:29:59] The key concept here is collective memory.

The event or series of events which the memorial embodies changed the history of the United States and of the entire New World from 1492 onward. Without a doubt, the Middle Passage was the greatest migration, forced or otherwise, in human history. This migration is a world-class manifestation that rivals and parallels the discovery of America itself. It is this cosmic and perfectly assimilative aspect of the Middle Passage which would be expressed in this memorial. And then, again, the inscription would read, "The Middle Passage memorial honors the 11 million victims and 30 million deportees of the African diaspora, 1492, 1865, 1888." And that's the last paragraph of this proposal, which is dated April 1994.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. It's really good, huh [laughs]?

ERIN GILBERT: Oh, it's amazing. I mean, from the perspective of pure truth—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and, again, to this notion of the monument and memorializing, it's true that there is no such memorial.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, and it is—

ERIN GILBERT: The numbers are all accurate.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: And, again, it falls in line with [laughs] even having made a film or made a—written a book about Amistad, and having done the research about the Middle Passage, it makes perfect sense to me—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So—

ERIN GILBERT: —that you would want—mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so, how was the proposal met?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, we're in, what? 2019?

ERIN GILBERT: '19.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And there are still [laughs]—there are a couple of—

ERIN GILBERT: Everything else [laughs]. There are.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But, of course, this is what? Eight or nine or 10 stories high. [00:32:01]

ERIN GILBERT: And where did you envision it being placed?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: Where did you envision that it would be placed?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I—my first idea is that there would be more than one, and that they would be placed in various and sundry cities across the United States. Anybody who wanted one and had the money to build it could have it.

ERIN GILBERT: It's very interesting to think about the removal of Confederate monuments, particularly in the South, at this particular moment in American history and what those should be replaced with or whether or not they should be replaced, and this proposal to have built something that, in size and in presence, would eliminate the need to remove anything else, but simply hold accountable both sides of the history.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Do you think that it was circulated beyond the White House? Did anyone else ever speak to you about having seen or read the proposal?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No. I thought that it should have been something done by the federal government because the federal government is responsible for that situation.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I—but, I mean, I would have been very happy to accept anybody's money if it had been forthcoming. You know, this kind of project takes a lifetime and takes all your air and all your energy and all your oxygen. [00:34:00] And at a certain time, you have to decide what you're going to dedicate your life to or not, and I decided I was not going to dedicate my life to building this monument, raising the money, being, you know, defamed and [laughs] abused and maybe never having—never being able to complete it. But I was hoping, you know, that somebody would come along, because it's just a matter of money, and would do it, but nobody has.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, I do think—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And the interesting thing is I was sure that somebody else would build something, you know, similar to it by now. You know, in '94, that's 30 years ago.

ERIN GILBERT: We've established that you're at least 30 years ahead of your time—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —so—no, I do think that, to think about that Confederate monuments parallel again, once those are being removed, as many of them should be, that this impetus to replace them will raise the question of what should replace them, and perhaps this will enter into the public domain with regard to conversation about possible—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you know—

ERIN GILBERT: —replacements.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —the last big competition for a monument that of Martin Luther King—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —which I lost. [00:35:58] So did David Adjaye and so did [laughs] a lot—so did several other people, and, you know, to something which really looks like Disneyland. I didn't know whether it would ever be built or not. If you look at the first little catalog there—no, no, no, go back to where the books are, to where the books—there. Yeah, that one. So, you probably saw this.

ERIN GILBERT: Oh, I did see it. I saw it in the press, but as you say, you applied, David Adjaye applied. Yeah, [inaudible].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And so, that one also—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —needs to be built. It's one of my favorite pieces of sculpture, as a matter of fact.

ERIN GILBERT: And just for those who may not be able to see it, it is called *The Empty Pulpit Monument*, and in terms of dimensions, how high is—was this proposed? It's gold, rectangular—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you can see the proportions from the—

ERIN GILBERT: —steel.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —proportions of, you know—it's about 15 stories high.

ERIN GILBERT: It says, "My memorial dedicated to Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King is made of light, stone, and bronze. [00:37:58] The truncated stone pyramid represents their mission and collaboration, and the searchlight beacon represents their message from atop the mountain they climbed together. The memorial is inspired by a 17th-century carved wooden pulpit, likely resembling the pulpit of the first Martin Luther, which I saw in Vienna in 2014. The extraordinary object gave me the idea of conceiving an empty pulpit to symbolize Martin Luther King, Jr.'s silenced voice. Empty, from the Greek Adonis, meaning 'freedom

from fear.' From the empty pulpit, a searchlight beacon pierces the darkness. The Indian granite serves as homage to Gandhi's nonviolence movement.

Inside the passageway is engraved the historic lineage of the diaspora, beginning with the founding of the Mali empire in the 15th century and ending with the presidency of Barack Obama in the 21st. The floor under the arch repeats the iconic 'We shall overcome' slogan; on the back of the monument, carved out of the bronze, in full view is their most powerful quote: 'I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.'" It says, "Surrounding my memorial will be a series of undulating landscaped waves, green rolling hills amongst which the public can roam and wander. Additional MLK and CSK quotations will be strategically placed, embossed on bronze plaques embedded on the green slopes and vales of the hills." And so, this competition ended last year.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes, and there's still nothing built [laughs]. I will believe it when I see it. But there was a lot of controversy about the remaining two sculptures, and now it's Hank Willis's—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hands [00:39:58].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —Disneyland hands that—you know, and I looked at—when I saw, you know, the other monuments, I thought, "Yeah, it's going to be Disneyland," and I was right.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, I think that there's still time to have the memorials and monuments that are to very specific individuals be established, but you did win a commission, and in 1995 you won a commission for a monument that has been realized, and that's the *Africa Rising* sculpture that's in the U.S. General Service and Administration building.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. Have you ever seen it?

ERIN GILBERT: Not in person, because I haven't been able to [laughs] cleared for security to go in and see it.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly. [They laugh.]

ERIN GILBERT: That's—the FBI won't let me in. I'm not quite sure why.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: But do you want to talk a little bit about *Africa Rising* except—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well—

ERIN GILBERT: —for the fact it can hardly be seen?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —it's a great sculpture. It's one of the great American monumental sculptures, period, and nobody understands why. And we were trying to move it; we were trying to get it moved to a public space where the public can see it, because not only can't you get in to see it, but the fact is that there's no way even to see it now through the plate-glass windows where you used to be able to, you know, see it. [00:42:00] And so, that is one of my projects that I hope to achieve before I leave this planet: to move *Africa Rising* to a public space.

ERIN GILBERT: And do you want to describe the structure of *Africa Rising*? Because there is the visage, and then there is the abstracted body. And so, this sculpture brings to—fuses your skill in both working with bronze—you said it's three different parts. Do you want to describe this sculpture at all?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Stop.

[Audio break.]

[END OF chase19_2of2_sd_track02.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —[in progress] and the *Winged Victory* and the original Statue of Liberty.

ERIN GILBERT: The one that's here—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Which was—

ERIN GILBERT: —in Musée d'Orsay? That model?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, the real one.

ERIN GILBERT: In New York.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: In New York [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The real one in New York, which was originally called *Africa Carrying the Light to Asia*.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, if you know the story, then you can just tell it yourself. But that was the inspiration, and that was the basis of, you know, *Africa Rising*, plus it is, you know, the mother of all Black portraits, because the Nike is Sarah Baartman.

ERIN GILBERT: I think you should tell the story of how the architect who designed the Statue of Liberty went to Egypt and began to think about this light-carrying—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah—

ERIN GILBERT: Everyone doesn't know that story.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —well, I can't do that tonight. I'm too tired.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We have to do it tomorrow.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I think we—actually, I think we should stop. But we'll have to do it —

[END OF chase19_2of2_sd_track03.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [In progress]—which was a commission from the U.S.—[laughs] it's gone out of my head.

ERIN GILBERT: General Services—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Where is—

ERIN GILBERT: —Administration?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Where is my—stop for a minute.

[END OF chase19_2of2_sd_track04.]

ERIN GILBERT: So, it's now June 11, 2019, and I am at the home of Barbara Chase-Riboud in Paris, France, for the final segment of our oral history. And we'll begin with the year 1995 and a discussion of the commission for *Africa Rising* at the U.S. General Services Administration.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, *Africa Rising* was a commission from the United States Federal Service Administration. A competition of 600 sculptors to go into the federal building at Foley Square, which they were building on the grave of the slave population cemetery, which was on the other side of Wall Street in New York. And it was done at the Mapelli Foundry, my classical foundry. It is almost eight feet tall. It's eight—I'm sorry, 18 [laughs] feet tall, in cast bronze with a silver patina. And the idea—it is almost the mother of the Black model. I mean, if Sara Baartman was not, you know, the mother of Black models, I

don't know who was. [00:01:58] Because she was exhibited in London, in Paris, as an anomaly. A kind of freak, you know, circus and freak show by her husbands in the late 19th century. And it was her role—sort of an evolution was that she was the link between, you know, a human and, you know, a subhuman.

And actually, she was a South African Khoikhoi woman, extremely small, with this characteristic big butt, which was considered a mark of beauty. And she died of tuberculosis in Paris when she was 27 years old. And the great French naturalist sort of dissected her, and then she was—and her skin was made into a wax model which was on exhibition at the Museum of Natural History until 1964. [00:04:04] I saw her in her glass cage at the museum. And at a certain point in the '70s, they took the exhibition down, but—and put her in the cellar somewhere, and it wasn't until Nelson Mandela asked the French government to send her back to South Africa that she was sent back to South Africa.

And this happened in 2008 or 2009. And when that did happen, I decided that I would write *Hottentot Venus*, which I did do. And at the same time, I had used her body in abstraction as the Nike on the top of *Africa Rising*. She had a face which was half Natalie—[laughs] half Natalie Campbell and half Sara Baartman in abstraction. And that's the story of *Africa Rising* except that it is now in a place that it's closed to the public, and she's guarded by two or three, you know, armed guards, policemen. [00:05:59] She has an electronic door all around her, and nobody can get into or out of the space that she was designed for. So, what we are trying to do at this point is to move her out of the federal building and onto a public space where she will be seen by the public. And this will probably be one of [laughs]—if I do it, if I'm successful in doing this, this will be one of the last things I will do art-wise, is to make sure that she has a place somewhere on public view before I quit this planet.

ERIN GILBERT: And go to the next—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —and hang out. Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: [Laughs.] And go to the next one—

ERIN GILBERT: Go to the next one where the—I'm thinking about this way in which you have monumentalized Saartjie Baartman or the Hottentot Venus both in sculpture and in the writing of the novel about her life. And so, again, this word "monument" is just pivotal to the way we understand your practice. In 1996, you do the monument drawings, and so they're 24 charcoal-and-ink drawings. It was a huge year, but do you want to talk about that set of drawings and how even Foley Square plays itself out in many of the sites you've chosen for those drawings? [00:07:54]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it was for a show that—Anthony Jansen, who wrote the classic textbook—art textbook that's used in all colleges, decided he wanted to do an exhibition of mine. And we had a big discussion about the fact that the drawings and the poetry were related or not. And my—in my point of view, they were completely separate. There was poetry which I wrote, and there were the drawings, and there was no connection between the two. Anthony Jansen, you know, took the other side that there was an enormous, you know, relation between the drawing and—you know, the drawing and the poetry, and the exhibition was proof that he was right, and I was wrong.

And so, the drawings have automatic writing, which is also poetry, that's intranslatable because it's in a language that no one understands except me. And they were done over an etched paper which was etched in—with one element, and then I drew around the element so that in each drawing there is the etched element, which is the stable part of the drawing, and then the rest of the drawing flows from that. [00:09:58] And so, there's a combination of the etchings, of the writing, of the poetry, and of the draftsmanship all on one sheet of paper.

ERIN GILBERT: And did those drawings have any way in which—I mean—and it would be lovely if we could name some of the people for whom these drawings were made.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, they were drawings for monuments for people who should have monuments but do not.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The invisible [laughs] monuments, I call them. You know, the invisible people that pass through history, making history, but never being noted as such. And the last big show—well, the last show, actually, of the drawings as an ensemble was in 1999 at the Metropolitan Museum, and it was one of the only, you know, one-man shows. It was in the Paul Klee gallery, and it was one of the only female American artist shows that the Metropolitan has ever done. And certainly the only Black female artist who has ever done, you know, a one-man show at the Metropolitan. And the staff of the Metropolitan was not happy. [00:11:58] And they did everything they could to minimize or sabotage the exhibition.

So, I'm hoping that this time around, if I do include those drawings in a survey show, that they will get the attention that they deserve. It is a suite of drawings that is almost intact. There's only one drawing missing from the suite, which is 22 drawings.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And they are all in the catalog that was made for the exhibition that originated—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. So—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —just all 22 of them, even though—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —the one is now missing.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. And so, in terms of people, again, Émile Zola, a monument; a proposed Shaka Zulu monument; Tomasi di Lampedusa. How did you choose some of these figures?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Off the top of my head, out of my own poetry, from history books, whatever. My favorite people in the world.

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It just depended on how I was feeling that day and what I was doing. And since they were done in a very short period of time, maybe three months or not even, they have not only a kind of classic beauty, but they have a kind of spontaneity that holds them together. There's this bond of timing, you know, as I go from one drawing to the other, or maybe I'm working at three drawings at the same time or two drawings at the same time. [00:14:05]

ERIN GILBERT: They are phenomenal drawings. So, you made the drawings in 1996; they were shown in '98 and '99.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: But in '96, you also have a few major exhibitions, *Explorations in the City of Light*, which looks at African American artists in Paris, which is at the Studio Museum in Harlem among other venues. This exhibition, *Three Generations of African American Women Sculptors: A Study in Paradox*; *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*. You also are receiving a third honorary doctorate, and you are at this point knighted by the French government as a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. Can we talk about that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah—

ERIN GILBERT: —how that felt?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —that was given at a ceremony at the book fair of that year. So, that was a very funny kind of coming together of, you know, writing and of drawing and of sculpture all in the same year.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that, too—there is no other woman artist who has been knighted by the French government.

ERIN GILBERT: And it is also highly unlikely, and I will want to check this also for our records, if there has ever been another American-born woman—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: American-born woman.

ERIN GILBERT: —living in France who's been knighted in this way by the French government. [00:15:57]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, there's a very funny—there's a very nice story about being known as an American-born woman, because I have a sister-in-law who's the great-niece of Tagore, the great noble Indian poet, who's married to one of Marc's brothers, so she's my sister-in-law. And they had refused—when Jean was made the head of Schlumberger Oil. In principle, they had to live in Texas, and Jean said [laughs], "Krishna is not going to live in Texas. You know, she's a woman of color, and this is just an environment that she's not going to, you know, submit to." So, he said, "I will run the company, but I will run it from Paris." So, they settled in Paris, and Jean had this brilliant idea of never referring to Krishna as Indian as a kind of, you know, colonial brown person from [laughs]—you know, from New Delhi or wherever she is. He would refer to her as being born in India, and so people would sort of refer to her as being Indian-born or born in India instead of an Indian, which has a negative—

ERIN GILBERT: Connotation.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —context. [00:17:59] And so, Marc decided that that was a very good idea [laughs], and so he began referring to me as American-born instead of what? African American, Black, or, you know, woman of color, whatever. And he—and so his family and all his friends and finally all of Paris would refer to me as being American-born. And finally, it got to be L'Americaine, without the "born" part in there [laughs]—l'Americaine—and then finally, because I was so young as far as the family was concerned, and as far as the kind of ages were around, I was la petite Americaine, the little American [laughs]. And that was my family name, and that was my family connotation. But it was Jean's idea, and it was brilliant. And so, I'm waiting, you know, for African Americans to lose the hyphen—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and be referred to simply as American-born. That's what we are. That's the USA. Born in the USA.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that's really—living in Paris, of course, you get to see the comportment of your compatriots in a different way than if you see them every day and, you know, every hour of every day. [00:19:59] And so, I can tell a born-in-America person [laughs] from very far away as they're walking towards me. It's the walk; it's the talk; it's the attitude. It's, you know, it's everything that makes them born in America.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, the French certainly have embraced you both personally and professionally, and so French—American-born, and yet having a strong sense of a French identity as well. I'm thinking about what was a strong presence that you had in the U.S., even without a gallery, for many years after the death of Betty Parsons. And having had the Met exhibition, you have a book now published in 1999 by Harry Abrams, and this is the first major—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This is the first monograph—

ERIN GILBERT: Yeah.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and this is the famous Jansen book, Anthony Jansen and Peter Selz book—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —where, you know, Jansen goes on and on about the poetry and the drawing.

ERIN GILBERT: And you then have an exhibition at Muller Fine Art in New York. And then in terms of your European presence, this series, Cleopatra—the *Cleopatra's Marriage Contract* is acquired by the British Museum. What does that mean for you in that moment?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: That was an enormous honor, and a surprise, because it was their big Cleopatra exhibit, enormous exhibit. [00:22:00] And I was the only contemporary thing in it; drawing, sculpture, whatever. I was—and, you know, they sort of put that in the beginning of the catalog, thanking me for having done this, you know, *Cleopatra's Contract*. And, of course, it was the same year or the year after that they found a real Cleopatra's marriage contract, which I have—which has her signature on it. And so, it's almost like, you know, a Sally Hemings story because you imagine it, you make it, and then it comes true.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, you have this historical document, which is very beautiful. And then you had in the show, which was incredible, an imaginary document, the marriage contract which never existed. But I also invented, you know, a signature for her, and it looks like [laughs] the real signature. It was—you know, it was real. It was really very funny, that whole story.

ERIN GILBERT: That's amazing, and to be in the British Museum with all of the antiquities that you've been referencing and thinking about and seeing from Egypt—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Have—

ERIN GILBERT: —and from West Africa.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Have you ever seen the catalog?

ERIN GILBERT: For that exhibition?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: No, I have not. I've seen the piece, but I've not seen it in the context of the entire catalog. [00:24:04] I've just been to the British Museum and walked through the British Museum, which is why—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, I'll show you—

ERIN GILBERT: —I can imagine—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —the catalog.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's a gorgeous catalog.

ERIN GILBERT: I can't wait to see it.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Absolutely. You know, it's [laughs] thick. It's four or five pounds, and it's got everything in it.

ERIN GILBERT: And you're the only contemporary—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —in the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The only contemporary thing in there.

ERIN GILBERT: So, that's 2001. And in 2002, you are working and presenting in Detroit and Chicago with Gallery N'Namdi. And I would imagine this is a moment of relationship with a different kind of audience, both because they are not necessarily New York and not necessarily European, but these are midwestern spaces—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, this came about—

ERIN GILBERT: —and this is an African American gallery.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This came about because the British Museum's exhibition came to Chicago—

ERIN GILBERT: Art Institute of Chicago. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and they cut me out [laughs]. They cut out the—

ERIN GILBERT: *Marriage Contract*?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. And I was so furious, I picked up the telephone [laughs], I called N'Namdi, and I said—

ERIN GILBERT: "I want to show."

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. "You want to do this at the same time?"

ERIN GILBERT: Oh.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And he said, "Sure."

ERIN GILBERT: So, you called George directly, and that's how—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —how the show happened.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, that's how it happened [laughs]. I called him up, and, you know, I was furious, and I said, you know, "They have cut out, you know, *Cleopatra's Marriage Contract*. Do you want to show it at the same time [00:26:02]?" And that's what he did.

ERIN GILBERT: A-ha. So, in a way, the show—[they laugh]—was expanded, and no one really from the Art Institute of Chicago had to sign off on it. You were still showing at—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And then it went to—

ERIN GILBERT: —the same time—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —Detroit.

ERIN GILBERT: —same place.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was there, you know.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It was there in Chicago, so then it went to Detroit.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did you have any particular kind of interaction with the audiences in those spaces? Because G.R. N'Namdi Gallery had specialized in African American art, both sculptural—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, but I wasn't—

ERIN GILBERT: —and painting.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —there.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you didn't go?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No.

ERIN GILBERT: Yeah, you didn't go. Just wondered if you—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I wasn't there. I was—and I wasn't in Paris either. I've forgotten

where I was. I was, like, someplace like China. I was very [laughs] far away. I must have been in Russia or North Africa or—I don't know where the hell I was. But anyway, I was not there.

ERIN GILBERT: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So, the next year—perhaps you were in Milan, because —

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —the next set of Malcolm X sculptures are being cast at this moment.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: And so—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, maybe—yeah, maybe I was just in Milan [laughs]. I don't know. Probably, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. So, this is a moment in which the series, which [laughs] one had thought was complete years ago—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right.

ERIN GILBERT: —is now being expanded. So—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: —this 2003 moment, you were making four new—and do you remember what was the impetus to make them now? Why, in 2003, did you decide to make another four?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I don't remember.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:27:53]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I think it was simply because I was—they were evolving into more brutalist forms. A little bit more futuristic in their configurations, and I wanted to—and, of course, at the foundry, I had sort of evolved the technique to such perfection that I wanted to see how far I could go. And I thought, you know, "I will take these steles as far as they will go to the extremities of undercutting and baroqueism."

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And that's what I did.

ERIN GILBERT: So, this is also the year—and you've talked about this already—that the Malcolm—I'm sorry, that the *Hottentot Venus* is published finally. And you have a solo exhibition in Rome the next year, and you—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And *Hottentot Venus* also won a prize from the American Library Association for fiction.

ERIN GILBERT: In the same year?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: And is there anything else you want to say about the novel as opposed to—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No—

ERIN GILBERT: —the narrative around her?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —it was just very nice [laughs]—it's always nice to get literary prizes. I love—

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —literary prizes [laughs], so when they come my way, I'm always

very happy. [00:30:02]

ERIN GILBERT: And you're quite deserving of them. Speaking of awards, in 2007, you win the Women's Caucus for Art award by the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes—

ERIN GILBERT: —California—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —for that I came back—

ERIN GILBERT: You did come—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —to the States.

ERIN GILBERT: —to New York.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And is there anything memorable about that moment or about the talk that you gave or—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Not especially, no. I—it was kind of—I was kind of greeted like a heroine returning from—I was treated like a veteran, a returning veteran—[they laugh]

ERIN GILBERT: Veteran of war.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in the women's movement, because I had been so far away for so long.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And speaking of China, as you did a few minutes ago, this is when you went to China. So, you went to China and began to think about and write this *10,000 Kilometers of Silk*—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —travelogue.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay. What was this second trip to China?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I decided—but why did I go back? No, I think—yes, the book came before the trip, because I wanted to write the book and—which meant that I had to go back to China and sort of retrace my steps. And at the same time, you know, exploring—it was a time when Chinese modern art had exploded. [00:32:00] And so I wanted to see all the stuff and see, you know, what they had come up with. And that's why I decided, you know, to go back—

ERIN GILBERT: To go.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —to—

ERIN GILBERT: And do you want to talk a little bit about the idea behind *10,000 Kilometers of Silk*?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, it was simply a memoir, you know, a combination memoir/travel book, simply because I was curious to know how far they had come, you know, in those 40 years or—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —however long it was.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And you cannot imagine how far they had come. You know, stepping off the plane into this incredible airport was just the beginning of, you know, going

to Shanghai and thinking that I was in *Blade Runner*. It was so beyond anything I could have imagined that would happen in China—

ERIN GILBERT: And that—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in such a short—in a relatively short time.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, Shanghai is probably—well, let's put it this way. It's one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and one of the most modern cities in the world. And behind this kind of modernism is the old China, all red lacquer and what-have-you. And so, you have this double-faced city. You have all this shit on the outside [laughs], you know, the overpasses and the underpasses, you know, the bullet trains, the skyscrapers and so on. [00:34:03] And then you have all these back alleys, you know, with the lacquered doors and the golden—you know, the golden—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —whatever, lions, beside the door.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, what—it seems as though you are, in this moment, being very reflective of the previous 50 years and all the travel that you've done, because this is also the time when you begin to collect the letters to your mother from 1957 to 1991.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, in this set of reflections, what was the impetus to collect this set of letters, and what is happening with the letters since you've collected them?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I don't know whether it was really a conscious thing that I wanted to collect them at that particular time. It just happened that I had an assistant who was capable of taking these letters and transcribing them, you know, into a computer because they were practically illegible. They were scrawled on this pale blue air—

ERIN GILBERT: Air mail paper.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —airplane letter paper that you could—yeah, it was so thin, you know, you could see through it. And so, it was—and it was written, you know, all in the columns. It was written—there was no margin [laughs]. [00:35:55] And so, she—you know, in a kind of frenzy of dedication, let's put it that way, she managed to almost translate these letters into, you know, printed English that, you know, that you could read. And once she did that, I still waited. I still hesitated. She—once she had done it, and she put everything in a loose-leaf book, and she sort of handed it to me, and, you know, I said—I—she said—she put a little note in the book saying how much she enjoyed reading the letters. And how fabulous they were, and how she wished she had a mother like mine, and how she cried, and how she laughed, and how she—and, you know. So, I was really very hesitant to read them even then. And actually, I put the book away again after, you know, 50 years or whatever. And I didn't read them until the night that Obama was being elected president of the United States. And I took them [laughs] down from the library where they had sat, you know, for a couple of years, and I don't know why. I was so nervous; I was so tense; I was so anxious. I was so moved that this was happening. Until I decided to calm myself down, I would finally read these letters. [00:38:00]

ERIN GILBERT: That's how you calmed yourself on the night of the election?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I calmed myself down. I started early in the evening, and by dawn, I had gone through the 600 letters.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you were watching from Paris—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hmm?

ERIN GILBERT: You were watching the election from Paris—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Of course.

ERIN GILBERT: —and you are in—ahead of time.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: We're—

ERIN GILBERT: We're six hours—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —six hours ahead.

ERIN GILBERT: —head.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. I was six—

ERIN GILBERT: You were anticipating this, so—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —you're really watching—you're really reading for about 12 hours?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, for about 12 hours.

ERIN GILBERT: As we're sitting in Chicago—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —waiting to see if this monumental election—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, was really going to—

ERIN GILBERT: —is going to shift the course of American history.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Right, right.

ERIN GILBERT: And so, you were really—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Exactly.

ERIN GILBERT: —reading the last 50 or 60 years—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —of your own personal history, thinking about your mother's history, and this kind of migration globally.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you're making it very dramatic. It—well, it was dramatic. It was monumental. It was a kind of stupendous moment, at least for me. And then I—when I realized what I was reading and laughing and thinking, "Who the hell is this girl [laughs], and what does she think she's doing in life?" You know, it was, you know, transformative. It really was. And then dawn came, you know, and I finished the letters, and Obama was the 44th president of the United States. Think of that.

ERIN GILBERT: The dawning of a new day in a—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —metaphorical and [laughs] very—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Something that I never thought I would see in my lifetime. [00:39:52]

ERIN GILBERT: I pointed this out because in reading about why you determined that you would collect these letters, and not understanding everything that was happening around your reflection on your life the night of the election, I do think that it is for everyone who watched that election that night—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —especially those who'd lived through the Kennedy assassination and the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —Malcolm X assassination, it seems to be all of that playing itself on its head to then see Barack Obama being elected and all of the emotions you described—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —the anxieties, the tensions.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: So, this notion of having calmed yourself by looking at the historical narrative is—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you know, now that I say it, I've never said that before, but that's what happened. I mean, it calmed me down completely. And by the time dawn came, I was a very serene lady. Now, whatever was going to happen, you know, was going to happen—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and, you know, I would be there as a witness to this historical event, like many that I had written about.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so, did you decide in that moment that you would publish the letters, or did you—did that come to you later, or did you know that night after having read them that you also—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, I knew—

ERIN GILBERT: —wanted to publish them?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —I would publish them—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and I knew I would publish them without editing them. I knew they had to be published intact, the way they were written, and not excerpted as if I were looking at the past and kind of arranging it to my satisfaction [00:42:15]. So, the letters are totally unedited; that is, nothing is cut. Either the letter went into the book or not, because there were too many of them.

ERIN GILBERT: I was going to ask. It's 597 pages.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There were 600 letters—

ERIN GILBERT: There's 600 letters.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and the book contains 300. I edited it down to 300.

ERIN GILBERT: So, there are 300 letters that are then not—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: There are 300—

ERIN GILBERT: —being published.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. There are 300 letters [laughs] that are not being published. I mean, come on. Give me a break [laughs]. It's—so it's—you know, somebody will do it one of these days. They'll go—you know, they'll go to Emory, and they will get the lost 300 letters—

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —and all about my kids and so on. And, you know, they'll do it.

ERIN GILBERT: Will there be photographs in this manuscript, in the letters to your mother, or is just the letters?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, when you have a manuscript that's 595 pages long [laughs], you know your editor is going to take one look and say, "I'm sorry, Barbara, but we

can't afford your photographs."

ERIN GILBERT: Right.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I'm hoping that, you know, there'll be a few pages, but—

ERIN GILBERT: Primarily the letters.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I have a few pages especially, you know, of my ancestors, which would be nice. And my houses, which, you know, I'm really attached to [00:44:03]. Otherwise, you know, the rest—there are other things—the rest are chronologies. They're, you know, catalogs; they're articles; they're all kinds of other things.

ERIN GILBERT: So, what feels like it happens in this moment, too, is you collect the letters, you decide to publish the letters, and you, for the next few years, are publishing and researching and writing. And in—I would like to talk about *The Great Mrs. Elias*, which you put pen to paper in 2011. But to go on to say in 2013, you also have *Helicopter* and *Every Time a Knot is Undone, a God is Released*, your poems from 1974 to 2011—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and a melologue called *Pannonica & Thelonius*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: All of this happens in less than five years.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. I was writing, and my agent dropped me over the Hannah Elias book, and so—and I was not publishing the poetry because I was pissed off at my poetry editor, who would not bring out a paperback of *Knots of Every Time*. And so, I was just—I was writing them, and I was putting them in the drawer and thinking, you know, eventually, yeah. [00:45:58] But it seemed that—it seemed really that it wasn't all that necessary to publish them at that particular time.

ERIN GILBERT: But just to get them out of your system, to write them.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But—yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: [Inaudible.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: But they had to come—they had to be written.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: So, you know, you have—I—and I work better with a deadline. And so I would give myself an imaginary deadline, and I would just get them out of the way and then just put them in the drawer, or put them in the folder, or put them in a box, and put them in the library. And—which means that I now have, you know, six collections of poetry that are unpublished, and so I've got to do something. You know, I've got to do something about that. But I will wait until the letters are published, and I may publish one of the longer poems, which is *My Wasteland*, you know, before, what? 2020.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Can you tell me a bit about a few of them? *Pannonica & Thelonius*; what's that the story of?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: *Pannonica* is Pannonica Rothschild, who was Thelonius Monk's lover. And they lived together for some 13 or 14 years until he died at the end of his life. [00:48:04] She divorced her husband and abandoned her children for him, and they met in Paris, and they remained together until he died. And they lived in New Jersey. They lived for a long time in the Stanford Hotel in New York. And, you know, he would have his gigs every night in Harlem or downtown in Chelsea, and she was his muse. She was his savior in a lot of ways. And the two women, because he was married with a child—and the two women at the end of his life came together in some kind of way over his existence. I mean, they both recognized that he was a genius and that he had to be taken care of, and so there was a part of him that belonged to Pannonica, and there was the other part of him that belonged to his wife, and they managed. They managed to live this kind of triangle together. [00:49:50]

ERIN GILBERT: And so, this particular work is a melologue. It is not a play or a monologue—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No.

ERIN GILBERT: —and it is not a novel. It's multiple—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's not a novel [laughs]—

ERIN GILBERT: —soliloquies.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —it's not—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's not a play. It's closer to a movie script that anything else, as a matter of fact, but I—it's not written out—it's not written as a movie script. It's written as an epic poem. And so, it belongs to a series of poems that are three different couples. And the first couple is Cleopatra and Antony, the second couple is Pannonica and Thelonius, and the third couple is Modigliani and Akhmatova. And three incredible [laughs] and impossible couples, and all of them in their own way monumental. The story of Pannonica and Thelonius that nobody knows about, or very few people know—musicians know about it, but the general public doesn't.

ERIN GILBERT: How did you come to know about it, and did you reference any kind of letters or—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I sort of—

ERIN GILBERT: —anything from them?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I sort of stumbled on it in the hairdresser [laughs]. I—and I read this little article in a kind of, you know, women's magazine, a two-page article. [00:52:02] And they're talking about, you know, Pannonica Rothschild who, you know, gave up everything for this jazz musician, et cetera, et cetera, followed him to Paris, and then they came back to New York, got disinherited by their family, but there was so much money they couldn't really disinherit her [laughs]. She had her own money. But, you know, I mean, the whole thing, the drama of it all. And then the liquor, the drugs, and the music, and the fact that they lived in this glass house in New Jersey overlooking the Hudson. And the house is still there.

ERIN GILBERT: Did you go to it?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, I did. Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you've been to these famous spaces. I mean, these—you went to Monticello—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —you went to—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I've been there, done that [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: You go to all of the spaces about which you write. I find that so exciting.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah, been there, done that. I begin a little documentary that—I don't know whether I showed it to you or not. I did? Okay.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And there is a poem that's called *Been There, Done That*. Well, [laughs] I've been there, and I've done that. It's—and the house itself is magical. There's an old musician who lives in it, you know, who—when she died, she left it to one of the—one of his musicians, and so I don't know what is going to happen to it when he dies. Probably the family will get it back or whatever. But—

ERIN GILBERT: But this is the house in which they lived together—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: This is—

ERIN GILBERT: —in New Jersey.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. [00:54:01] In New Jersey, yeah. And then they would take—it's very—it's almost at the mouth of the Holland Tunnel, so they would take the Rolls-Royce [laughs] every night around about midnight, and they would drive, you know, into New York to whatever gig, whatever place that he was playing, et cetera, et cetera. And then in the early morning they would drive back home, and they did that for many years.

ERIN GILBERT: Wow. I think, in the interest of thinking about leaving something for those will read these novels and perhaps see these manuscripts play themselves out in film or movie, I would love for you to introduce a little bit about how you came to *The Great Mrs. Elias* without necessarily—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, where to—

ERIN GILBERT: —telling us the entire story so that we can leave a little something for the—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Hannah. Okay. Hannah is a historical person. She really existed in the early—in New York City in the early part of the 20th century. She was a sex worker or courtesan, depending on [laughs] your point of view, who was arguably the richest Black woman in the United States at the time [00:56:04]. And she made her fortune—she began her fortune with sex, but she made her fortune with real estate. And she owned a good portion of New York City [laughs]. And there are still buildings that she was a former owner of, one which sits on the top of the Lenox subway station at 125th—

ERIN GILBERT: 25th.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —Street—

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —wherever it is. It's one of her buildings.

ERIN GILBERT: That's near the hotel where there was—that intersection of 125th—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and Frederick Douglass Boulevard—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —is the same intersection where Malcolm X was stabbed? Martin Luther King was—there was—that's the same building.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's the same—

ERIN GILBERT: That hotel.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Interesting to think of a Black woman having real estate at that time.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes. And not only did she have real estate [laughs], but she had 129 bank accounts in every major bank in New York, which means at every merchant bank in New York. Because, of course, she didn't leave her money in ordinary banks. So, one of her bankers was J.P. Morgan, for example. [00:57:53] And so, between real estate, real estate investment, and her *bordels*, she was extremely rich. And one of the things she did with her money was to build herself a mansion in the style of *The Great Gatsby*, which is why the title is *The Great Mrs. Elias*. Because her fantasy was that she was descended from Cleopatra, and so she should live like a queen, which she did.

ERIN GILBERT: I feel like there's this amazing through-line in the women that you have monumentalized both in sculpture and in your writing and thinking about Cleopatra, Saartjie Baartman—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —Sally Hemings—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —Harriet Hemings, the great Mrs. Elias, even your mother in the context of the writings about her and to her. I look forward to seeing this and the other publications that you have mentioned manifest in various ways in the coming years. But, again, to go back to this parallel practice, in the end of 2013, after this set of five books had been written, you have an exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art featuring the Malcolm X steles, and at this point there are even more than there were in the beginning. At this point, five from the series are being shown, but how many are there total?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: The total now is 20. The total now is 20.

ERIN GILBERT: So, you went from an original four—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —to 20—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: To 20. Mm-hmm [affirmative] [00:59:59].

ERIN GILBERT: —over a period of about 30 years.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: And so, what happened for you in this moment of this exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art? Because in thinking about the few things that have happened since, there was, I think, an expanded understanding of—in this context.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I think that it was a kind of apex of my sculptural practice. Those last Malcolms were the realized in the end, although the Malcolms that came before are very beautiful. They were softer, they were more manageable than the last five, which sort of came in to being in the same way that *Helicopter* is probably the last poem I'm going to write, or—it's not the last poem I'm going to write, but it's the last poem I'm going to publish. And there's this—there's a kind of realization in the last five, and a kind of definitiveness about them, that makes me think that there will never be number 21. But maybe there will be number 21. Never can tell.

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs.]

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You never know. But for me, I think the series is finished. [01:02:00]

ERIN GILBERT: Well—and for the most part, we were able to see them—

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ERIN GILBERT: —come together in 2017.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: I think the last four were completed in 2016, and in 2017, 19 of the 20 were shown in an exhibition—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —in a gallery exhibition in New York—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: In—

ERIN GILBERT: —at Michael Rosenfeld.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's a gallery exhibition, but they've never been shown—

ERIN GILBERT: In a museum.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —in a museum exhibition—

ERIN GILBERT: Right.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: —which I hope will occur next year in the Louis Kahn Space in the British Center at Yale, because it's a wonderful space, and it's—and the steles really belong to that space. So, I hope it's going to happen.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, as a graduate of Yale, there's every reason to welcome you back to that space. So, what happens, again, in this moment after the Malcolm X steles are realized as a group of 20, there are exhibitions in which you are included that are concurrent with our collective thinking around the impact of the '60s on the contemporary moment. And so, there's *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* that happens at the Brooklyn Museum; there's the exhibit *The Color Line: African American Artists and the Civil Rights in the United States*, which happens at—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —the Musée du Quai Branly. There's *Circa 1970* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2016, and then in 2017, concurrent with the exhibition gallery show at Michael Rosenfeld, you have *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985*, which is really a culminating view on how the relationship between artistic practice and activism manifested itself in various kinds of film and photography and performance and sculpture and drawing. [00:02:10] And how does it feel to you to have been positioned at this moment as not just a feminist, but a civil rights activist and as one who has, though the works themselves are not politicized, but has a statement within this larger political moment? What does it feel like to you?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you said all that [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: Well, tell me what—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: As I told Elie, I am not radical, I am not a revolutionary, and I am not a woman. And I am not Black; I am born in America [laughs].

ERIN GILBERT: So, this title, *We Wanted Revolution: Black Radical Women*, just didn't apply to you at all?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It just didn't—I didn't see the combination at all, you know [laughs]. I didn't see the reference.

ERIN GILBERT: Well, and I suppose that's an important point, is that you didn't insert yourself necessarily. People requested—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No.

ERIN GILBERT: —your work from the gallery—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —and the gallery said yes—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —because by now, right? In 2014, you become represented by Michael Rosenfeld—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —for the first time in over 20 years to have representation. So, these requests are not coming to you. These requests are coming to the gallery—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yes.

ERIN GILBERT: —and they are saying yes.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I—

ERIN GILBERT: Not that you were saying yes.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, I'm telling them to say no. They're saying yes, and finally I sort of give up, you know, because, you know, I have other things to do. So, if I'm suddenly an icon for feminism, you know, I know Gloria very well. We have enjoyed some very wonderful moments together. [00:04:03]

ERIN GILBERT: Gloria Steinem?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Gloria Steinem.

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: And I've written one or two poems about her, one very funny poem. And I—you know, I imagine me, you know, getting an honorary doctorate from Yale, standing between Carmen de Lavallade on one hand, the great ballerina, and on the other hand, Gloria Steinem, you know, the great feminist, et cetera, et cetera. So, I'm somewhere in between those two, you know, an artist who has also been sort of anointed as a feminist *malgre* her—*malgre*, too—despite everything, okay?

ERIN GILBERT: It's important to understand—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —because just reading how your work has been positioned in the last three years, one might not—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: —be clear on whether that had been your choice or had been guided for you by the galley or some other institution, so it's good to know where you stand on it.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Well, you know, as far as I'm concerned, you know, my reputation as a great abstractionist is quite enough for me, you know, and what else would I like? The Nobel Prize [laughs]? But other than that, you know—well, I would sort of settle for a Pulitzer in poetry. [00:06:01] But otherwise, you know, I think that I've done my job and left a body of work that's interesting enough for other people to follow, and you can't ask for anything more than that. And as I said, been there, done that, because the places I've seen and the places I've been have been unforgettable.

ERIN GILBERT: And before we close, I would love for you to—and this is by request also of colleagues at the American Art Museum at the Smithsonian—to read one of the poems that is related to a work, and it's the work in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection, *Zanzibar/Black*.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: And so, would you—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: "Why Did We Leave Zanzibar?"

ERIN GILBERT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: It's one of my favorite poems. It's one of my most powerful poems, and it's one of my earliest poems. It dates from the '70s; it dates from '71, '72. [00:08:00] You want me to read the whole thing?

ERIN GILBERT: Well, if—we would love for you to read the whole thing, but you read until you're comfortable. Read whatever portion you would like.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Let's see. What can I do? Because this is really—oh, yeah, I can do this, but let's take a break, because my—

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BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, well, why don't you read it [laughs]?

ERIN GILBERT: I think it's your voice they want to hear, not mine.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ERIN GILBERT: But what I will say is this is a recording of "Why Did We Leave Zanzibar," a poem written by Barbara Chase-Riboud and read, in part, by Barbara Chase-Riboud on June 11, 2019 in Paris, France.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Dark-hailed—okay. Dark-haloed sister, Penumbrae Jewel, burning in dry, tobacco leaf beauty, brittle and faking discontent, eyes damned with the stilt of disappointment, lodged and sheltered in the public housing, celled there, tapping in Morse code on the bars of the mind. The landscape of your nerve endings like orgasm; the landscape of your nerve ends like orgasm. Long-fingered and long-necked, delicate-wristed and ankled sister, wide-hipped and smelling of honey. Eyes echoing hollow words and unremembered places; fingers stuttering, tearing, and wrapping themselves around the essential question: Why did we leave Zanzibar?

Something in the line of the back spells the irredeemable exhaustion of trying to make ends meet. Those two butt-ends of our amputated history, cauterized on the hot iron of self-hate, lusting after self-destruction. [00:02:02] That we find in split vaginas, smeared with the mark of barbarians, birthing a race of orphans and madmen, when we could have stayed on the beach, heads severed, wombs filled with sand, clutching our ancestors, rejoicing in sterility, reveling in abortion, resplendent with infanticide, cursing the living with the last breath of strangled children. You say we had no choice. There's always one alternative to rape, and every woman knows it.

Dark-breathed sister, sinister survival worshiper, ready with the sword to smite the suicides, jailer for our prison-makers, grinding down our men with religion-pocked grins of satisfaction. Jesus saves, crushing our defenseless sons with the jawbone of that Jew's cross. Dazed and concussed, they stumble into the street to play stickball, driving their fathers mad with grief and shame, so that their rage is spent in our bodies or, better still, the wives and daughters of the enemy.

And how we both glory in it, smack our lips in rutting satisfaction, tasting curdled blood and milk, left standing in the sun too long by absent-minded missionaries. *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*. [00:04:00] Sassy, sweet-voiced sister, moon-browed and night mouth in deepest song, lying on your back in cathedrals, content that another night has passed without murder, lying on your back in cathedrals, masturbating with the true cross, sweet Jesus, while Black men thrash around with white flesh, listening for your hysterical screams resounding in the tabernacle and all—and, over all, Cleopatra's asp hovers, sliding between legs, the perpetual open route to power, posing the essential question on split tongue: Why did we leave Zanzibar?

Sweet, fragrant, mango-stenched beach. Breasts pressed flat against steamed sand, seeping through sieve-like flesh, carrying karats of ancestor dust, rattling like pearls in oyster shells. Sleek, earth-dyed sister, madness glistening at your throat, you could have stayed on that beach, clinging to the rocks like bats, refusing to move our wombs, scraping them with flint, soaking the continent with the holy blood of martyrs. Plum-lipped sister, sad and wild-eyed with my reflection, I touch one apricot breast, as you touch one brassy one. [00:06:01] And we gaze into each other's eyes like the criminals that we are.

Dark brown gull rising to the surface like oil on water, casting up that bottled-wrapped question, flung into the sea by some desperate hand, so many murders ago: Why did we leave Zanzibar?

Wow [laughs]. I haven't read that in a long time.

ERIN GILBERT: How did it feel? Thank you so much—

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: Oh, yeah.

ERIN GILBERT: —madame.

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: You're welcome, dear.

ERIN GILBERT: [Laughs]. Is there anything else?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: No, that's [laughs]—

ERIN GILBERT: No? You want your vocal chords back?

BARBARA CHASE-RIBOUD: I want my vocal chords back.

ERIN GILBERT: Okay.

[END OF chase19_2of2_sd_track07.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]