

## Article

# To Touch Time: U.S. Black Feminist Modernist Sculpture in the 1970s and 1980s

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**Abstract:** Modernist propositions long have been understood as atemporal—somehow outside of time—or insistently hailing the future. This temporal framework suppresses the contributions of those excluded from modernist canons, particularly Black women. In this article, visual and material analysis of sculptural works produced in the 1970s and 1980s by U.S. Black women artists Beverly Buchanan, Senga Nengudi, and Betye Saar reveal how Black feminists have engaged with modernist protocols in order to redress cultural erasures of Black women. These practices exemplify *Black feminist modernisms*, or creative practices that unsettle the racist and sexist logics of dominant cultural institutions. Each of these artists utilizes haptic surfaces as a method for defying institutional modernism’s obfuscation of the past. The analysis focuses on Buchanan’s defiance of memorial erasures, Nengudi’s reenactment of labor, including in its historical forms, and Saar’s adaptation of generational memory-making processes. Ultimately, these artists’ rejection of a “timeless” modernism demands that viewers understand the present moment in relationship to a still-evolving past. In this way, Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar position the present as an accumulation, rather than transcendence, of historical occurrences.

**Keywords:** contemporary art; sculpture; Black feminism; modernism; haptic; collective memory; memorial; handicraft; autobiography; artistic labor



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## 1. Introduction

Beverly Buchanan’s (1940–2015) site-specific environmental installation, *Marsh Ruins* (1981), once stood five feet tall (Figure 1). Now, its three boulder-like mounds sink into the wetland banks of the Marshes of Glynn in Brunswick, Georgia (Figure 2). The boulders exist in a state of irreversible decay. Deep cracks line their surfaces. The ruined mounds index the punishing passage of time since their construction.



**Figure 1.** Beverly Buchanan, *Marsh Ruins*, 1981, Concrete and tabby, Marshes of Glynn, GA. Photograph by author, 2023.



**Figure 2.** Beverly Buchanan, detail of *Marsh Ruins*, 1981, Concrete and tabby, Marshes of Glynn, GA. Photograph by author, 2023.

The pantyhose with which Senga Nengudi (b. 1943) constructed works in her sculptural–performative *R.S.V.P.* series (~1975–80) bear the marks of their past (Figure 3). Nengudi collected the nylons used to construct some of the sculptures from a community of women of color who previously wore the pantyhose. Her engagement with the malleable material and the works’ occasional activation through dance thematize the traces left by laboring bodies. With her use of pantyhose, Nengudi forged a visionary modernist sculptural practice that centered the experiences of women of color.



**Figure 3.** Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P. I*, 1977/2003, Pantyhose and sand, 10 pieces, overall dimensions variable. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds, and The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art. 857.2011.

In her intimately scaled assemblage works, Betye Saar (b. 1926) evokes keepsake practices, such as scrapbooking (Figure 4). She arranges mementos—photographs, lace, gloves—in compositions that intertwine handicraft and documentary. The works suggest that family history gets shaped by hand and, further, that these stories, taken as a whole, constitute a vital and evolving archive. In contrast to Buchanan and Nengudi, who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, Saar was a middle-aged woman reconstructing her family’s past in relation to national and Pan-African inheritances.



**Figure 4.** Betye Saar, *Friends and Lovers*, 1974. Mixed-media assemblage, 18 × 14 × 1 ¼ in. Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York, NY; Courtesy of the Artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar each turn to the haptic—a bodily, touch-based approach to the material world that exceeds the visual—as a tool for folding the past into the present (Collins 2002). For these Black women artists, the haptic hails the past. It enfolds historical practice into the present moment and knots together a lineage of artists whose existence has been denied by normative art historical discourse. In this article, I argue that Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar engage with haptic sculptural practice in order to critique normative modernist temporalities. So often, modernist propositions were presumed by critics in the twentieth century to be atemporal—somehow outside of time—or framed as insistently hailing the future (Fried 1967; Meyer 2013; Grabes 1996). While artists themselves rarely entirely renounce history as a framework for their practices, these three artists stand out for their strategic repudiation of this tendency within modernist discourse. Each of them utilizes haptic surfaces as a method for defying institutional modernism’s obfuscation of the past, and links that obfuscation to the relentless erasure of Black women’s cultural contributions from wider public view. Consider, for instance, how the decaying surfaces of Buchanan’s *Marsh Ruins* flaunt the demands of monumental memorialization to instead situate itself in the path of time’s ravages. As I will show, this defiance of a “timeless” modernist conceit demands that viewers understand the present moment in relation to a still-evolving past. In this way, Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar position the present as an accumulation, rather than transcendence, of historical occurrences.

These practices exemplify what, elsewhere, I have called a Black feminist modernist practice. The term *Black feminist modernisms* describes creative practices that unsettle the racist and sexist logics of dominant cultural institutions in part by engaging with modernist idioms. Black feminisms constitute a constantly negotiated terrain of work that centers the experiences of Black women with the goal of upending oppressions rooted in race and gender especially, as well as in class, sexuality, ability, and nationality. These practices—and

attendant debates—span activist, artistic, and scholarly work, including those rooted in policy reform, protest, and acts of care (Cowan 2022, p. 21).

Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar engage with modernist protocols in order to redress cultural erasures of Black women. Their deployment of post-minimalist, conceptual, and collage idioms is intentional, direct, and strategic. To put it bluntly, their modernist investments are integral, not incidental, to the activism that motivates their art.

I use the term “activism” to refer broadly to practices that place pressure on the socio-political status quo—in this case, the anti-Black racism and sexism that shape foundational U.S. cultural narratives. For instance, Saar constructs hand-scaled assemblages that honorifically commemorate the lives of Black women, who so often are sidelined in institutional histories. She embraces the autobiographical and handiwork as rubrics for intervening in white supremacist ideologies as well as in cultural hierarchies that minimize women’s artistic contributions. While the socio-political commentary of Buchanan’s and Nengudi’s works sometimes remains oblique, Saar’s practice has generally been understood as ideologically motivated, thanks in part to her reclamations of racist caricature. All three artists’ oeuvres help to reveal continuities between modernist and activist practices of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

These artists’ integration of modernism and activism runs counter to a binary that haunted art world narratives in this period. In the 1970s, they encountered the widespread notion that modernist abstraction was antithetical to Black Americans’ struggles for liberation (Jones 2006, p. 24; Sims 1990; English 2016). While art historical narratives increasingly recognize the continuity of aesthetic and activist concerns in many artists’ practices, this binary persists in popular accounts of Black women’s artistic practices. Consider, for instance, the widespread bifurcation of Howardena Pindell’s career into a period before 1980, in which the artist’s predominantly abstract practice supposedly concentrated on process without serious regard for politics, and the period afterwards, when she allegedly became an outspoken critic of art world discrimination and transformed her practice to support her activist aims.<sup>1</sup> While reflective of an actual shift in Pindell’s practice and helpful for distilling a dynamic artistic career for a broad audience, this narrative also reifies a distinction between the modernist engagements and activist labors of artists of color, particularly women. The expansion of historically narrow art historical canons requires greater acknowledgement of how modernist and activist practice continually inform one another.

Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar launched their careers amid an unprecedented, if uneven, institutionalization of Black feminisms. By understanding their modernist engagements and Black feminist projects as having coevolved, I challenge an outdated, if still occasionally invoked, vision of modernism as a shared global aesthetic engagement without dissent. In fact, modernisms cannot properly be understood without serious consideration of how artists both operate at its center and defy its supposed limitations. Each of these three artists found modernisms useful to their artistic practices, even as they defied expectations of the 1970s that Black women would not do so. Through modernist idioms, such as post-minimalist sculpture, assemblage, and abstraction, they investigated questions about U.S. history and individual memory, about collective experience and autobiography. Their deployment of modernist paradigms helped them to assert the relevance of their practices to leading conversations about contemporary art.

In their haptic sculptural practices, Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar developed temporal frameworks—whether memorial, ritualistic, or diaristic—that defy modernism’s supposed timelessness. My analysis focuses on Buchanan’s defiance of memorial erasures, Nengudi’s reenactment of historical forms of labor, and Saar’s adaptation of generational memory-making processes. Each of these three artists developed her distinct Black feminist modernist temporalities in a different context. Saar, for instance, participated in a robust community of Black artists in Los Angeles and enjoyed institutional recognition early in her career. Nengudi at times was sidelined by peers who viewed her abstract art as too far removed from the concerns of “Black art” amid the Black Arts Movement (Hammons quoted in Jones 2011, p. 52). Buchanan pursued her career for the most part in Macon,

Georgia, and struggled to sell her work. However, these artists shared experiences of historical erasure as Black women in the U.S. Their sculptural practices intervene in the mutually compounding suppression of Black women's stories in national histories and in modernist narratives.

## 2. The Haptic and the Sculptural

For Black American women, the stakes of handling historical memory cannot be overstated. Anti-Black institutions and sexist ideologies wield power through the construction and suppression of historical narratives (Trouillot [1995] 2015). The haptic combats processes of silencing by registering historical occurrences in material form. In artworks, it indexes a past presence. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick views this index as relational (Sedgwick 2003). Haptic marks constitute traces of human touch that generate distinctive viewing experiences (Bradley 2022; Spillers 2018; Marks 2000; Vourloumis 2014). In this way, the haptic represents an important point of connection to historical cultural experiences for people in marginalized groups. For Black feminist artists in particular, the haptic offers a strategy for situating one's own artistic labors in a lineage of Black women's cultural practices, thereby charting an artistic genealogy in defiance of modernism's suppressions. Saar, for example, connects her assemblages to the keepsake traditions of her specific ancestors and of African diasporic women more generally (Schriber 2020).

While Black women modernists have engaged with the full range of mediums and materials, sculpture represents a particularly salient mode of generating haptic surfaces. In this essay, I use the term "sculpture", or, more often, "sculptural", broadly, to refer to three-dimensional art objects. This expansive view of sculpture serves to challenge hierarchies of material, technique, and venue that conventionally exclude the "low". Some of the artworks under consideration depend on institutional frameworks; others, like Buchanan's, eschew the white cube for a site-specific environment. Some of them were developed in a space that doubled as an artist's studio and home, while others received major financial support from external sources. Many works by these sculptors rely on everyday materials, such as pantyhose, while others use industrial products, including concrete. Buchanan's, Nengudi's, and Saar's sculptural practices share concerns for textured surfaces that invite tactile curiosity.

Black feminist art historians have identified sculpture as a particularly salient medium for Black women artists in the United States. For instance, in their exhibition *3 Generations of African American Women Sculptors*, curators Leslie King-Hammond and Tritobia Hayes Benjamin ask what accounts for this perceived proclivity. The curators propose both gender-based and ancestral explanations. Women's socially assigned roles as nurturers, they suggest, generate tactile acts of care and "sensitivity" (King-Hammond and Benjamin 1996). Further, art historian Roslyn Adele Walker explicitly links U.S. Black women's sculptural practices to West and Central African masks, carved figures, and bodily adornment (Walker 1996). Black women's sustained engagement with sculpture, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is all the more remarkable, Benjamin argues, given U.S. women's general reluctance to work in the medium then associated with masculinity—in part due to the physicality required of sculptural practices in an era when women's bodies were constrained by Victorian protocols. Further, sculptural practice historically required specialized and expensive materials such as metals and marble (Benjamin 1996, pp. 18–19).

Read today, the essays in *3 Generations of African American Sculptors* occasionally veer into essentialism. For instance, the notion that women, as de facto caregivers, are inclined to work with tactile materials, involves a set of assumptions about "natural" behavior based on socially assigned roles. The scholars who contributed to the catalogue in 1996 sought to combat the near total exclusion of U.S. Black women artists from art historical canons. Their scholarship represents a prolonged, fruitful effort to expand art historical narratives beyond the stories that relegate Black women artists to footnotes. This work importantly asserts the significance of U.S. Black women's sculptural practices on their own terms—that is, not in subordination to Euro-American conventions.

In fact, the prevalence of sculpture in U.S. Black women's artistic practices relates to its ability to convey experience beyond the visual, particularly through haptic surfaces, rather than resulting from artists' racial and gender identities. Put differently, many Black women artists have embraced sculpture and the haptic as a strategy for combatting the limitations of a racist and sexist visual realm. As Black feminist critics such as Michele Wallace have argued, the visual operates as a site of disparaging stereotype for Black women, whose representations have been subjected to caricature. By working in haptic, sculptural ways, Black women have labored to defy these Euro-American scopic regimes (Wallace 1990, pp. 41–45; Collins 1991; Fleetwood 2010; O'Grady [1992] 2010). The haptic represents a strategic choice rather than an unconscious inclination.

Black women artists have deployed the haptic in order to assert Black women's cultural contributions and counter their constant erasure from institutional narratives. Poet Arna Bontemps and curator Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps note that Black women have used haptic perceptions to preserve cultural memory since the Middle Passage because the extra-visual might "survive the trauma of enslavement" better than visual artistic elements could (Bontemps and Fonvielle-Bontemps 1980, p. 12). Art historian Huey Copeland builds on the insights of Lowery Stokes Sims and Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis to theorize that Black women have long "turned to the haptic as a resource for self-fashioning and for the preservation of memories otherwise lost to history" (Copeland 2010, p. 490; Sims 1996; Tesfagiorgis 1997; Plummer 2020). Put differently, Black women have recognized in the haptic the potential to evade forms of visual surveillance that support white supremacy (Aranke 2020).

Because tactile know-how has been a cornerstone of U.S. Black women's cultural practices for centuries, the act of claiming everyday textures as an artistic resource contributes to a self-defined genealogy of African diasporic women artists. Tesfagiorgis theorizes that contemporary artists' incorporation of "vernacular" materials into their practices provides "evidence of historical, material, and aesthetic links to the history of African American fine arts in the United States, and links to the past/African heritage" (Tefagiorgis 1997, p. 86). In the 1970s and early 1980s—the context in which Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar developed the practices under consideration—the haptic played a particularly prominent role in Black women's efforts to reclaim institutionally marginalized cultural practices.

Many Black women artists used the haptic as a method of situating their practices at the intersection of Black American material culture and women's handicraft traditions. For example, Pindell, a friend of Buchanan's and Nengudi's, viewed haptic craft practices as a potential bridge to suppressed African diasporic cultural inheritances. In "Afro-Carolinian 'Gullah' Baskets", a handwritten essay published in a 1977 issue of *Heresies*, she grieves her family's loss of "African" crafts (Figure 5). By contrast, she argues, the contemporary Gullah people of the Sea Islands, off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, maintain a living connection to ancestral cultural resources through the production of coiled baskets. In her own family, African diasporic practices were supplanted by crafts that Pindell viewed as "Anglo-American", such as crochet and knitting (Pindell 1978, p. 22). She sought to redress this loss by incorporating textures she encountered in Ghanaian textiles into her all-over abstract paintings (Cowan 2020).

Handiwork played a particularly prominent role in Black feminist artistic efforts of the 1970s. (Of course, it also featured in the feminist art movement more broadly as a strategy for defying the sexism of modernist aesthetic hierarchies.) Because handiwork often leaves marks of the artist's hand, it carries explicit associations with the haptic and evokes the autobiographical. For example, Saar exploited craft's ability to convey the presence of a laboring person and, through her invocation of antique keepsakes, to point beyond an individual artist to generations of Black women. Nengudi uses a craft method to generate abstract sculptures in her hand-knotted works. These artists and Buchanan expanded the normative terms of modernist practice to point back in time and across communities. The hand-worked surfaces of their sculptures generated a haptic challenge to modernism's atemporality and the exclusions that its supposed timelessness authorizes.



Figure 5. Howardena Pindell, “Afro-Carolinian ‘Gullah’ Baskets”, 1977. From *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* 4 (Winter 1977–78).

### 3. Memorial

Buchanan’s photographic documentation of *Marsh Ruin*’s installation shows a far sturdier, more physically cohesive sculptural proposition than the one now slowly succumbing to the mud, the water, and the increasingly frequent and powerful hurricanes that visit southeastern Georgia. The artist planned for her work’s decay and, in her decision not to mark the ruins with an expository sign or place them more prominently, she courts obscurity (Buchanan papers n.d.). Up close, the three mounds of *Marsh Ruins* evoke post-minimalist sculpture with their irregular, textured surfaces, their repetition of form, and their vacillation between abstraction and representation. Their direct placement in a landscape and their engineered deterioration participates in a Land Art sensibility exemplified by Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. But, I argue, Buchanan’s work also defies that idiom’s tendency to suppress local history and its colonialist impulse (Cheetham 2018; Roberts 2004). *Marsh Ruins* uses the rubric of “ruin” and “decay” to mark the enduring presence of the local area’s histories of colonialism, enslavement, resistance, and memory-making (Campbell 2016; Groom 2021; McArthur and Burris Staton 2015). It rejects the monumentality normative to public memorials. Its active decomposition undermines the pursuit of a timeless perspective from which to view the past, instead bearing witness to the passage of time. Further, Buchanan’s intervention into Land Art challenges the erasure of artists of color from the field. In the United States, Black artists in particular are often understood in relation to urban spaces or a romanticized rural South. Buchanan’s revelatory reclamation of a site on the margins of a small city forces a reconsideration of white male artists’ dominance of the Land Art canon.

In 1977, Buchanan, having launched her artistic career in New York City, returned to the South, where she was raised. Buchanan initiated a site-specific practice in Georgia, situating her sculptures directly in the local landscape of Macon, where she lived for a number of years. She placed sculptures in both official and unofficial sites, producing works for institutional commission and ad hoc, obscure commemoration. *Marsh Ruins* represents a culmination of Buchanan’s investigations of history-laden Southern landscapes through post-minimalist idioms.

The site-specific work was the most logistically and physically strenuous project of Buchanan's career, and she undertook it with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship. Buchanan hired a local team of concrete manufacturers and installers in Brunswick, the coastal home of the Marshes of Glynn, to build the work over the course of two sweltering days in July 1981. On the first day, the group carried wheelbarrows of wet concrete from an on-site cement mixer to build up three mounds. On the second day, the crew covered the mounds with a layer of tabby—a densely textured material made from a mixture of lime, water, and sand. This material coated the concrete forms like a skin ([Buchanan papers n.d.](#)).

Historically, tabby formed the foundations of local plantations. The material appears in sidewalks and building walls throughout Southeast Georgia. Tabby ruins can still be found on St. Simons Island, which lies across a river from *Marsh Ruins* (Figure 6). Enslaved Indigenous and African-descendent people performed the grueling labor of producing tabby from oyster shells. This arduous process required high temperatures and the handling of glass-sharp shell fragments. For a source of lime, European colonizers and their descendants mined the heaps of discarded oyster shells found at settlements of Mocama Timucua and Guale peoples, who had inhabited the southeastern coastal lands for several centuries (Figure 7). These mounds, called middens, accumulated over millennia. Shellfish were a dietary staple of Mocama Timucua and Guale people. Buchanan's ruins, coated in tabby with visible pieces of oyster shell, evoke these middens ([McArthur and Burris Staton 2015](#), pp. 9–19; [Groom 2021](#), p. 49).



**Figure 6.** Tabby foundation at houses of enslaved laborers, Hamilton Plantation, St. Simon's Island, GA, 2015. Photograph by Jud McCranie from Wikimedia Commons.

In the construction of *Marsh Ruins*, Buchanan and her team recreated the labor-intensive process of creating tabby from oyster shells. This reenactment centered on conceptual and material resonances rather than on precise historical accuracy. For instance, Buchanan sourced shells from a local seafood restaurant, rather than middens ([Buchanan papers n.d.](#)). She benefitted from the availability of power tools, paid assistance, and the comforts of modern life. Most significantly, of course, in contrast to enslaved tabby makers, she labored on her own behalf, as an artist granted authorship over her creation, which she designed and for which she was at least occasionally remunerated. All the same, she undertook a physically intensive process, rather than relying on industrially produced concrete.



**Figure 7.** Discarded oyster shells at recreation of Timucuan dwelling, The Timucuan Ecological Historic Preserve and Fort Caroline National Memorial, Jacksonville, Florida, 2011. Photograph by Ken Lund from flickr.

By reinhabiting a particular form of labor so intimately connected to slavery, Buchanan activated a critical memorial temporality in *Marsh Ruins*. The work sutures present-day acts to historical human presences. In this way, they place the area's histories of enslavement and colonization in proximity to the contemporary without collapsing the distance. Buchanan enacted a memorial ritual that honorifically gestures to the people who historically labored in the region. Her environmental sculpture surfaces, if abstractly, those whose lives have been suppressed within local memorial landscapes.

The *Marsh Ruins* intervene in a series of particularly heavily freighted historical sites. They face St. Simons Island, which, during the late eighteenth century, gained renown for the cotton grown by enslaved laborers on its numerous plantations. The labors of those African, African-descendent, and Indigenous people undergirded the entire regional agricultural economy, producing immense wealth for those who claimed ownership over them. Their descendants have formed the Gullah Geechee cultures that Pindell admires in her *Heresies* essay.

In 1803, seventy-five Igbo people, kidnapped and imprisoned in southeastern Nigeria, arrived on the coast of Saint Simons, bound for enslaved labor. This group of people had survived the Middle Passage and faced auction in Savannah. In transit from the city, the Igbo staged a rebellion, sending their white enslavers overboard their small boat. Upon landing, the Igbo refused lives of enslavement by walking into a creek, where they drowned (Goodwine 1998).

For more than two centuries, Igbo Landing, as the site of this uprising is known, lacked state recognition even as it figured prominently in African diasporic histories. The rebellion is memorialized in countless works by U.S. Black artists, including Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust* and Carrie Mae Weems's photographic series *Sea Islands* (1991–92) (Collins 2002, pp. 64–98). Despite its significance, the state of Georgia had not established an official memorial to the uprising when Buchanan set to work. In fact, the state did not recognize the site as a landmark until 2022, when a coalition of local advocacy groups, including a public high school ethnology club, successfully applied for official commemoration. The groups dedicated a marker near the site in May 2022 (Payne 2022). Georgia's longstanding silence about Igbo Landing participated in broader processes of historicization that have extolled white Southerners' achievements and suppressed public memory of courageous actions undertaken by Black people in the South. These memorial erasures protect the state from recrimination for its fundamental investments in human bondage.

In the face of longstanding governmental neglect, the *Marsh Ruins* quietly has offered its presence to the memory of those who died across the river. After their construction, Buchanan returned to the mounds to hand paint the white tabby with a brown acrylic stain (Figure 8). Her notes from the time indicate that this was a formal choice, intended to harmonize the sculpture with the landscape (Buchanan papers n.d.). Of course, the coloration also carries overt racial resonances. Over time, the hue has been lost to the sun and saltwater. As they succumb to their environment, the *Marsh Ruins* have become a metaphor for the pernicious whitewashing that patterns Southern and, more broadly, U.S. public memorial practices.



**Figure 8.** Beverly Buchanan staining tabby on *Marsh Ruins*, 1981. Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, GA.

The *Marsh Ruins* honorifically mark a place of passage and tend to an ongoing loss, as in mourning. They critique conventional models of commemoration by inviting intrepid visitors to remember, and through their active disintegration, to reflect on historical and ongoing acts of cultural amnesia. In other words, the sculptural installation memorializes enslaved people *and* the violent acts of memory suppression that undergird white supremacy. *Marsh Ruins* enacts what Christina Sharpe has theorized as “being in the wake” of slavery. Sharpe writes that “to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (Sharpe 2016, p. 14). Put differently, the work reveals slavery and colonialism not as past events, but as ongoing crises. Its durational temporalities acknowledge not only what slavery *was*, but what it *remains*.

Buchanan enacts this durational property through the physically disintegrating, densely haptic surfaces of her sculptures. She surfaces the memorial undertones that haunt so much minimalist sculpture (Chave 2014; Friedman 1995). The cracks and missing pieces of the mounds attest to the passage of time without widespread institutional engagement with the region’s lost lives.

Buchanan’s reenactment of historical labor poignantly intervenes in the temporal elisions that characterize both normative memorial time—which tends to locate the past squarely outside of the present moment—and modernist claims to timelessness (Nance 2020; Sharpe 2016, p. 62). Through the intensively haptic practice of creating tabby, she kneads together historical and contemporary acts. Her act of recuperation attempts to reach out and touch the past, both shoring up historical presences—enslaved laborers, Igbo prisoners—and illuminating the acts of erasure that perpetuate, without mourning, their deaths.

#### 4. Ritual

Like Buchanan, Nengudi turned to historical forms of labor in her conceptualization of a Black feminist modernist practice. She also positioned aspects of her artistic labor in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to work historically performed by enslaved people. Nengudi began working with pantyhose as a sculptural material in 1974, after the birth of her first child. She viewed the material as a way to think through the elasticity of the human body. Nylon mesh, like pregnant bodies, expands to accommodate the life inside of it. Both are indelibly marked by this elastic expansion. Further, Nengudi explicitly framed her own pregnancy in relationship to a history of Black women's laboring bodies, drawing inspiration for her sculptures from her reflection upon "black wet nurses" (Goode-Bryant and Philips 1978, p. 46). The artist, who was born in Chicago in 1943, connects her own pregnancy experience with that of women who labored in intimate ways on behalf of white people who, in some cases, claimed ownership over them.

This comparison raises fraught questions about the contemporary treatment of historical experiences. Who has the right to reinterpret historical subjugation? What does it mean to fold these experiences into one's contemporary artistic practice? What kind of ethical framework might account for material historical development without relying on platitudes about social progress? (Carroll 2023; Bowles 2016, p. 408).

Further, the parallel Nengudi draws forces audiences today to ask what it means to theorize Black womanhood across historical contexts. How do historical conditions shape identity formation? To what degree can racial and gender identities be understood as transhistorical in the face of a hegemonic social order's shifting forms? Ultimately, Nengudi asserts a shared thread of experience across a chasm without purporting to collapse that historical distance. She gestures honorifically to earlier generations. In this way, Nengudi's practice exemplifies how artists in the 1970s pursued a Black feminist cultural practice that could acknowledge, elevate, and draw upon a history of Black women's often devalued labors, even if that meant occasionally wading into an ethical thicket. Like Buchanan, she reenacts a form of historical labor associated with Black women in order to activate a memorial temporality that ties past moments into the present. Both artists invite viewers into a shared site of historical transmission through indirect channels of haptic abstractions.

In their sculptural practices, Buchanan and Nengudi critique modernist atemporality by reenacting historical labor. Each of these artists worked in tactile ways that echo the labor of African diasporic ancestors, many of whom worked under conditions of enslavement. These reenactments operate implicitly; they are not depicted, but rather conveyed through material choices. Buchanan and Nengudi undertook haptic engagements that resonated with them individually and that situated their contemporary practices in relation to a lineage of acts. They created historical contexts for their works in the face of institutional modernism's erasure of Black women cultural producers past and present.

Nengudi generates a specifically ritual temporality in her pantyhose works through haptic gestures that hail historical acts of labor and thematize everyday movement. This repetitive timescale is further heightened by her recreation of her own works over the decades. In the sculptural-performative works of *R.S.V.P.*, Nengudi's most well-known series, she attends to a Black women's material history through the quotidian idiom of clothing. She collected pantyhose from her friends in New York—a community of women of color—and weighted them with sand. Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. I*, created originally in 1977 and then remade in 2003 for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, consists of ten pairs of pantyhose filled with sacs of sand tacked to two perpendicular gallery walls. The pendulous gestures of the sculptural forms thematize bodily stretch, confinement, and labor (See Figure 3). They are expressively bound as arcs and droop in weighted sacs.

With her use of the material, Nengudi introduced to modernist American sculpture a radically expanded formal and conceptual vocabulary. Her use of a material so responsive to a performer's touch harkened to kinetic sculpture, while the reduced color palette of the industrially produced elastic fibers bridged post-minimalist sensibilities. Nengudi overlaid these formal concerns with the emphatically feminine, "low" associations of the feminine

undergarment. Ultimately, this reimagining of sculpture positioned women of color at the center of a modernist proposition.

Although emphatically abstract, the sculpture invites bodily metaphor. The pantyhose straddle two walls. Their “legs” are pinched tight by the strain of the sand’s weight. Some of the sand sacs rest on the ground while others hover mid-air, suspended by the improbably strong pantyhose anchored to white walls with nails. They seem to dance, but also can evoke violent acts of bodily mutilation. Shadows cast by the sculpture repeat its bulges and lines, doubling its sculptural presence. The pantyhose display a variety of brown and tan shades, colors typically marketed as “skin tone” to women of color.

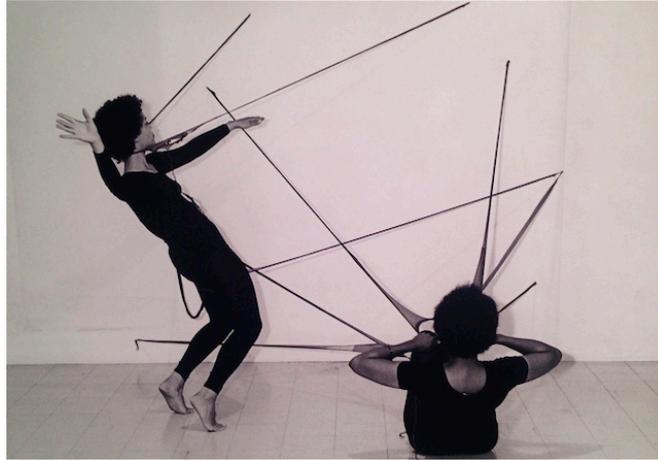
Pantyhose are racially coded. The hosiery industry has used the term “nude” to refer to tones associated with racial whiteness since at least the early twentieth century. This misnomer indicates an ongoing incommensurability between human experience and the prerogatives of a white supremacist capitalist culture (Hide 1977). Since their emergence on a mass consumer market, pantyhose have been available in colors black and white, which are not true skin tones, as well as a wide range of warm-hued, “neutral” tones meant to mimic, but also to cover and improve, the tone of the legs beneath them. Nylon in particular, developed as a material for hose during WWII to reduce U.S. dependency on Japanese silk imports, also comes in a variety of opacities, allowing consumers to choose how much they would like to conceal or reveal (Handley 1999, p. 35; “\$10,000,000 Plant to Make Synthetic Yarn” 1938; Meikle 1995, p. 133; “Castor Oil and Coal” 1938, p. 211; Smith and Kiger 2004, p. 112).<sup>2</sup> With pantyhose, Nengudi explored a found material charged with a racialized femininity.

Nengudi ensured that her pantyhose sculptures would respond to their sand-filled weights and to dancers’ movements by using previously worn garments. Warm, human figures loosened these fibers as they carried them between intimate, domestic spaces and public offices, churches, and schools. In general, pantyhose are meant to travel—as they cling closely to thighs and bag awkwardly between toes. Their movement between spaces makes them a kind of outerwear—a garment donned in anticipation of exposure to wind, cold, and public gazes—even as they come into contact with their wearers’ most intimate parts.

In the 1970s, pantyhose reached the peak of their popularity and became a prominent part of feminine-coded professional and leisure uniforms. Particularly with the popularity of the mini-skirt, they became a standard sartorial feature, worn daily by many women and regularly by others (Deitrick 2013, p. 97; Smith and Kiger 2004, p. 110).<sup>3</sup> The unintuitive choreography of putting on and removing pantyhose, often taught to young girls by their elders, and the efforts required to avoid snags and mend them when they occurred, formed a “feminine” ritual. Daily bodily movements accumulated over weeks and years to create a repetitive, collective choreography. By enlisting a community of women of color to supply her signature artistic material and sculpting a chorus of repeating forms, Nengudi gestures to collective and serial forms of embodiment (Bowles 2016). Her series’ somatic sensibility operates through a ritual temporality defined by everyday repetition.

Trained in dance as well as the visual arts, Nengudi’s work often combines an examination of physical space with an exploration of the capacities of human bodies. Many of the works in the series are stationery installations, but they become “activated” through performance (Figure 9). In these instances, the fleshy presence of a performer replaces the pendulum formations of sand. The performer slips the pantyhose onto their head, arms, legs, or torso. Then, they undertake several minutes of choreographed movements drawn from Japanese dance such as Kabuki and Noh, yoga, and “African total theater” (Buchanan papers n.d.; Tani 2021). Performers manipulate the hose, stretching and bending the nylons. The works’ activation through performance amplifies the sculptures’ haptic concerns as well as their ritualistic undertones. More recent performative iterations, such as Nengudi’s untitled *R.S.V.P.* sculpture presented in the exhibition *Radical Presence* (2012–15), incorporate audience participation and live music generated by sound bowl or violin and thereby generate an explicitly collaborative work. By intertwining their bodies with the

sculptures, the performers literalize the pantyhose's insertion of nonwhite figures into the white box of the gallery. However, even works such as *R.S.V.P. I*, which is not activated through dance, thematize the haptic, particularly through relationships between human figures and manufactured goods.



**Figure 9.** *R.S.V.P.* sculptures activated by Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger in *Performance Piece—Nylon Mesh and Maren Hassinger*, 1977. Photograph by Harmon Outlaw, Pearl C. Wood Gallery. Courtesy the artists, Sprüth Magers and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.

Nengudi has restaged some of the works in her *R.S.V.P.* series in recent decades, including performances at the Denver Art Museum and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. By reactivating her sculptures, she defies the supposed originality of the modernist act. The repetition also heightens the series' ritual time and rejection of atemporality. With each iteration, the works open to new historical dynamics. For instance, pantyhose's popularity has declined drastically in the decades since Nengudi originally configured her sculptures, ousted by power suits and business casual. At the same time, new markets have emerged for nylons. In the 1990s, major hosiery producers began introducing lines marketed specifically to men (Smith and Kiger 2004, p. 114). With the increasing cultural visibility of drag, pantyhose symbolize a feminine performance rather than a shared "biological" relationship. The series' stretch across time opens new possibilities for imagining feminine collectivities.

Pantyhose hold it in; they create their telltale regular surface through compression. They squeeze the waist and impose on the entire bottom half of the body a seamless, regular surface, a beauty that is fully artificial. Pantyhose stretch. They stretch the truth—covering blemishes, tinting legs. This relationship to the surface of the human body, a kind of second skin, reveals the mutability of the body as a public good (Bradley 2015). Pantyhose also flex and move. Their mobility is part of what attracted Nengudi to the material in the first place. As an upstart artist living in New York, she could carry in her purse everything she needed to make her capacious installations. Nengudi teases out the dynamic tension in pantyhose between transformative possibility and restrictive confinement. In other words, she investigates the haptic—a touch-based way of experiencing the world that draws individuals into contact with objects and with one another.

Nengudi's title further emphasizes reciprocity, or mutual response, as a sculptural strategy. She has commented that "This idea that people can brush up against sculpture, have a sensual experience with it, is really attractive to me" (Nengudi quoted in Finkel 2011). While modernist prohibitions against touch prevent these kinds of literal encounters from taking place, the works invite a bodily response. They ask their audiences to consider how our bodies shape the clothes we wear, like the pantyhose on display, and how our garments, among other cultural artifacts, shape us. Pantyhose are as susceptible to the force of the human body as that body is to the elastic skin of hose. Flesh and nylon exert power over each other. The body leaves its mark on pantyhose, stretching and deforming the

nylon mesh, putting “runs” in the ostensibly inert material. Through this haptic exchange, Nengudi advances a vision of modernism as repetitive and collaborative—a ritual collective formed over time.

### 5. Memento

Betye Saar, in her assemblage works of the 1970s, generates haptic surfaces through which to exchange acts of touch across generations. In contrast to Buchanan and Nengudi, she explicitly engages with the protocols of autobiography and keepsakes. Through her intimately scaled, three-dimensional works, she evokes the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory for which Pindell longs in her *Heresies* article. For instance, Saar’s *Friends and Lovers* (1974) emphatically draws on memento-making practices, such as scrapbooking (See Figure 4). In the assemblage, the artist collages a handwritten letter, photographic elements, and medallions. While the loosely symmetric composition and the combination of unrelated historical materials defy the conventions of the family scrapbook, the work nonetheless generates a biographical frame through which it memorializes its subjects.

The historical resonances of Saar’s sculptural works extend far beyond her individual family histories. She combined personal and found materials in her assemblages, so that their subject-level content includes unknown Black Americans. Saar sourced many materials for these works, such as photographs and figurines, from flea markets. In this way, the works attest to Black Americans’ efforts to document and celebrate their individual, family, and community histories in a repressive cultural context (King-Hammond 2002). They also embrace a historicizing frame that counters modernist appeals to atemporality.

Saar explicitly engages with the biographical, as well as the autobiographical. Through her works, she generates individual, distinctive personas whom she positions in historical context. In doing so, her works also defy modernist notions of universality. For example, in *Bitter Sweet (Bessie Smith)* (1974), the artist juxtaposes a Playbill image of the resplendently dressed singer with a popular postcard of the early twentieth century depicting two Algerian women (Figure 10). These collage elements appear across from one another in a small wooden box, perhaps for cigars, so that Smith and the women face one another. If the box were closed, their images would be in intimate contact. By placing Smith’s image across from the two young women, who share an embrace, Saar references the singer’s romantic relationships with women. Further, Saar’s title alludes to Smith’s meteoric rise to fame and the subsequent tragedy of her untimely death—suggested by a stopped watch below her portrait—and her encounters with racism and struggles with alcoholism (Weiss 2005, p. 106). These collaged elements surface biographical facets of Smith’s life often left unspoken. Saar constructs a dynamic portrait of a Black woman whose life defied heteronormative celebrity narratives.

Art historians have proposed a range of terms to describe how Saar’s works intertwine individual and collective histories. Photography historian Deborah Willis identifies the historical collages as a “collective autobiography”. While this phrase elucidates the integration of unknown people’s family mementos into the autobiographical frame, it also suggests that Saar speaks, or seeks to speak, on behalf of a community implicitly defined by its Blackness. The artist of course thematizes Black identity in her assemblages, but the intimacy of her aesthetic—the works’ scale and evocation of the feminine-coded domestic—points to a shared set of memory-making practices rather than declaring a singular shared history, as implied by the genre of “collective autobiography”. More saliently, Willis posits the unknown photographic figures in Saar’s works as “instant ancestor[s]” (Willis 2005, p. 22). These strangers appear alongside items from Saar’s trove of family heirlooms, including those from a trunk of mementos she inherited from her Aunt Hattie in 1975. The concept of the “instant ancestor” more accurately reflects how Saar’s assemblages seem to start from a personal kernel and expand outward like the branching limbs of a family tree to include strangers to her.



**Figure 10.** Betye Saar, *Bitter Sweet (Bessie's Song)*, 1974. Mixed media assemblage in wood box, 14 7/8 × 20 1/8 × 2 inches. Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York; Courtesy of the Artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Ultimately, the works create a collaged sense of history, bringing together artifacts from a variety of sources in order to generate meaningful juxtapositions. They contextualize the individual in the more broadly social and they frame wide-reaching cultural facts through the lived experiences of depicted and implied individuals. Judith Wilson convincingly describes the result as a “surreal blend of autobiographical reference and cultural history” (Wilson 2002, p. 210). This analysis conveys the disorientation of placing one’s own life in historical context.

Saar’s work, particularly through her incorporation of the indexical medium of photography, pinpoints precise moments in the historical frame, sometimes evoking more than one epoch in a single assemblage. The photograph of Smith in *Bitter Sweet*, for instance, dates to 1926, and more generally to the singer’s lifetime. In this way, Saar folds particular histories into the broader stream of cultural memory. She grounds the concept of “collective memory” in the work of a family archivist who honors the lived experiences of individuals who posed for photographs, wore gloves, or handled trinkets. This interweaving of the individual and the cultural suggests that “collective memory” as such refers simply to the way in which families and family members bring their memories together. Memory, for Saar’s sculptural innovations, operates on the intergenerational scale. History is produced and conveyed in the pages of family albums.

Assemblage, a modernist sculptural medium, allowed Saar to recontextualize materials in order to subvert their original function and construct new narratives. Saar participated in a California-based assemblage movement in which found materials became fodder for critical responses to consumerist capitalism (Dezeuze 2008; Ellsworth 2010). According to art historian Richard Cándida Smith, recombined everyday objects, such as glass bottles, gloves, and car doors, “clearly stood metonymically” for the people who “had made, used, and enjoyed them”. The repurposing of cast-off materials illuminated how capitalism had rendered those products and the people who made and bought them “dispensable” (Cándida Smith 2005, p. 40). In other words, assemblage thematized the

churn of psycho-economic systems that extracted value from U.S. Americans and then discarded them.

However, Saar's flea market finds seem less preoccupied with consumerism than Cándida Smith's analysis would suggest. The objects' patina much more strongly evokes the weathering of well-loved family treasures than the glint of new products on a shelf. As a result, Saar's assemblages inject a sense of narrativization into inanimate objects. They may evoke reification—the process under consumer capitalism in which people increasingly relate to one another through objects, rather than directly—but more strongly veneration. Her materials become semi-sacred within the honorific frame of keepsakes. Rather than meditating on the constant churn of consumption—the way that consumerist capitalism folds the present into the past through planned obsolescence—Saar dilates the past. Her works open a window onto the people and objects who came before the present. As a Black woman, and as an American, that past includes ancestors who once were regarded as commodities by historic publics and legal institutions.

Saar developed her assemblage practice in art circles in Los Angeles in the 1960s, where the idiom arose as much from rebellion against state-sanctioned violence as from consumerist capitalism. The artist spent much of her childhood in South L.A. and joined a group of Black artists engaging with assemblage in the wake of the Watts Rebellion of 1965. Residents of the predominantly Black southside community protested decades of racist police brutality following a traffic stop that turned violent. Over the course of five days in August 1965, thirty-four people died and over four thousand people were arrested. Several blocks of Watt's shopping district lay in ruin. In the aftermath, artist Noah Purifoy led local students and other artists on an expedition to salvage materials from the wreckage, such as car parts and store signs. Their resulting artworks helped to launch a hyperlocal assemblage movement that has influenced artists across the country for decades (Jones 2017, pp. 67–138).

Following the rebellion, Purifoy mentored a generation of artists working primarily in assemblage, including Alonzo Davis, John Outterbridge, and Saar. These artists contended with the flotsam of urban unrest—artifacts attesting to decades of police harassment and governmental neglect. Their approach to assemblage also drew on a neighborhood landmark—the Watts Towers, a series of 17 interconnected architectural spires festooned with colorful shards of ceramic vessels, glass bottles, and shells. Italian immigrant Sabato "Simon" Rodia built the monumental art environment in his yard between 1921 and 1954. Saar's grandmother lived near the Watts Towers, and she regularly played in its shadows as a child. Over the course of the 1960s, the Watts Towers became a symbol of a culturally rich community that struggled for political and economic autonomy (Jones 2017; Del Giudice 2014).

Relative to her peers in California, Saar worked with assemblage on an intimate scale. Many of her artworks of the late 1960s and early 1970s measure no more than 20 inches along their longest dimension. The modest scale of her works heightens their domestic resonance. If assemblage by Californian artist Ed Kienholz evokes the junkyard and Outterbridge's assemblages resemble toolshed or flea market tableaux, Saar's collage-based constructions speak to the handheld scale of the private box of treasures stashed under a bed or in a closet. Many feminist artists in this era embraced the intimate scale of detail and rejected the monumental assertions of Land Art and minimalist sculpture as part of their broader efforts to challenge sexist aesthetic hierarchies (Castanis 1970). Further, in the mid twentieth century, assemblage became associated with masculinity and male artists (Cándida Smith 2005, p. 46; Carpenter and Saar 2003, p. 57). Saar's insistent domestication of assemblage, then, defies its prevailing evocation of spaces of industrial waste. She repositions the collaged sculptural mode in relation to domestic sites of everyday encounter scaled to the individual beholder's lap, hands, and eyes.

The intimate scale of Saar's assemblage works generates a haptic sensibility that operates on the level of the individual but across generations. A person had handled the feathers, buttons, and postcards in the works' frames. By so explicitly evoking the memento,

Saar creates a haptic intergenerational frame of reference. What one family member touched decades ago, can be handled today, and handed down to future generations. The small scale of the handheld and the broader temporal scale of the heirloom intersect in artworks that eschew institutional memory in favor of “family history”. In this way, Saar rejects modernist oppositions of the universal to the individual. Her vision of history exceeds this false binary. By handcrafting history in intimate, autobiographical, and personal terms, she proposes an archival timescale measured by the lifetimes of treasured loved ones. She redefines history as an accumulation of intersecting individual experiences.

## 6. Conclusions

Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar deploy the haptic in ways that both critique modernism’s signal notion of timelessness and forge alternative modernist temporalities. Rather than rejecting modernism outright, they retool it for their own purposes. Their haptic engagements with modernist surfaces activate durational temporalities, undermining a prevailing cultural amnesia. Buchanan creates an alternative memorial temporality that physically manifests the passage of time. Nengudi’s sculptures isolate a ritual time loop in order to generate a Black women’s collectivity. In her handheld assemblages, Saar restages history on the scale of the family tree, rather than the monumental. Each of them folds past moments into the present, emphasizing the passage of time rather than suppressing it. In this way, they ask who remains below the surface of cultural narratives that have adjudicated subjectivity.

These three artists defiantly bear witness to the lives of the Black women who came before them, to the significance of those lives, and the suppressed cultural contributions of those women. Through the haptic, they leave undeniable traces of their own labors in a world that has so often denied their authorship. By acknowledging this genealogy of Black feminist modernists, as well as genealogies of other women of color modernists, art history might better understand the continued relevance of modernist practice as a liberatory project. Buchanan, Nengudi, and Saar reenacted and reimaged haptic acts to draw out the cultural agency of Black women.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, Pindell’s most recent U.S. retrospective was divided into two parts, with a gallery dedicated to the year 1979 connecting them (Beckwith and Oliver 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> Du Pont began marketing nylon in the late 1930s. Nylon pantyhose, which necessitated the development of a process for twisting the fibers, first hit commercial markets in 1959. In 1938, the United States imported 90 per cent of its raw silk from Japan. Three-quarters of this supply made stockings (Handley 1999, p. 35).
- <sup>3</sup> Popularity of pantyhose skyrocketed after Twiggy appeared on runways sporting a miniskirt and the hosiery in 1965 (Deitrick 2013, p. 97).

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