Artist, novelist and poet Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939, Philadelphia, USA, works in Paris, FR and Milan, IT) has innovated across sculptural and literary forms throughout her seven-decade career. Chase-Riboud’s exploration of sculptural technique and materiality are defined by the interplay between folds of cast bronze or aluminium and coils of wool and silk which are knotted, braided, looped, and woven. Through the recurring motif of the fold, and by combining materials with opposing qualities such as hard and soft, light and heavy, and tactile and rigid, Chase-Riboud creates forms that, in her own words: “not only relate to an art of the oxymoron, skilfully combining opposites, but reversing and upsetting the established order and hierarchy of parts as only a true revolutionary does.”

Featuring a focussed selection of large-scale sculptures alongside works on paper dating from the 1950s to 2021, *Barbara Chase-Riboud: Infinite Folds* marks the first UK presentation of some of her most celebrated works, along with several never-before-
seen pieces. These include the artist’s early figurative bronzes cast with found materials; geometric sculptures in aluminium; and grand yet materially fluid fibre totems and obelisks that allude to real and mythical figures in her signature colours of red, black and gold. The newest works in the exhibition, completed in the past year, reveal Chase-Riboud’s enduring interest in examining the idea of monumentality.

Committed to foregrounding transnational histories and cultures, Chase-Riboud draws inspiration from her experiences of living, working and travelling across Western and Eastern Europe, West Asia, Africa, and South-East Asia. The artist’s encounters with classical architecture, sculpture, and historical artefacts from global traditions, have informed her ongoing fascination with the public monument. In her major series, *The Monument Drawings* (1996–97) – and across a selection of sculptures dating from the late 1960s, on view in this exhibition – Chase-Riboud imagines edifices and memorials that honour various historical, cultural, artistic, and literary figures. These include, among others, Malcolm X, Josephine Baker, Cleopatra, Marquis de Sade, Nelson Mandela, and the Queen of Sheba. These works consider notions of memory, legacy and power, prompting a consideration of which people and events are commemorated, and for whom. Set within the context of Kensington Gardens, where public statues frame the landscape, these works highlight the seminal yet often-unacknowledged figures or events that continue to shape our impressions of the past and present.
Confessions for Myself was made following Chase-Riboud’s travels to China, India and Egypt between 1957 and 1965, a period that informed a “big creative change in [her] work.” During this time, she developed a unique process of sculpting with sheets of pliable wax and casting objects directly in the foundry. Marking an important touchstone within Chase-Riboud’s oeuvre, Confessions for Myself marries abstract and architectural sensibilities. Folded strips and ribbons of bronze intersect around a triangular form, and then unfurl to meet woollen cords that hang towards the ground creating a pyramid. The work incorporates intricately knotted and braided fibres that are emblematic of the artist’s sculptures, indicating the influence of cultural objects that bring together hard and soft materials such as African performance masks carved in wood that combine raffia and reed.
On view here are a selection of works made during the late 1950s through to the mid-1960s, a period defined by Chase-Riboud’s relocation from the United States to Europe, and her subsequent experimentation with form, material and subject matter. Arriving in Paris in 1960, Chase-Riboud found herself among a diverse community of socio-politically engaged writers, artists and thinkers including James Baldwin, Alexander Calder, Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, Lee Miller, and Man Ray. Moreover, through extensive travels to Egypt, Turkey and Sudan, she deepened her knowledge and appreciation of global art and architecture, which continued to shape her artistic production from this point onwards.

Adam and Eve (1958), shown publicly here for the first time, depicts two figures intwined underneath a tree canopy and was created whilst Chase-Riboud completed a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. This work, alongside Walking Angel (1962) and Sejanus (1966), demonstrates the artist’s experimental approach to the centuries-old lost-wax casting process. In her use of the technique at the time these works were made, Chase-Riboud would forge figures in bronze from an assemblage of found animal bones and vegetable matter. Chase-Riboud’s ethereal figures recall the otherworldly and dream-like scenes that defined surrealist artworks in the early 1960s. Similarly, they share a formal language with the accentuated forms and expressive surfaces of fellow sculptor and writer Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), whom Chase-Riboud met twice, first in 1962 at his studio in Paris with the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, and a few months later in Milan.
In the preface to her first published collection of poetry, *From Memphis and Peking* (1974), Chase-Riboud said that poetry is “very close to a discipline both familiar and dear to me: drawing. Both are dangerous searches for perfection...drawings prepared me for the demands of poetry.” In tandem with her work in bronze, Chase-Riboud has produced an extraordinary body of work on paper.

This drawing depicts an illusionary space composed of architectural fragments, rock formations and carved stonework. Emerging from an expanse of black charcoal, the drawing recalls the ruins or archaeological sites of ancient civilisations that the artist encountered throughout her travels. Engaging with the continuous presence of relics of the past in contemporary spaces, this drawing highlights Chase-Riboud’s interest in public memory and commemorative forms. It can be seen as a pre-cursor to *The Monument Drawings* – on view in the exhibition – in which the artist depicts imaginary monuments to both seminal and underrecognised figures and events throughout history.
Following her travels to the People’s Republic of China, Shanghai, Inner Mongolia, India, and Cambodia, Chase-Riboud developed a new attitude towards not only her sculpture – which progressively moved towards abstraction – but also her literary practice, as she authored a number of poems which would later be published in the collection *From Memphis and Peking* (1974). In 1966, Chase-Riboud represented the United States in the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, and in 1969, she returned to the continent for the Pan-African Cultural Festival of Algiers. These visits, alongside experiencing a plurality of artistic production from across the continent, made a significant impact on her artistic development which would see the artist begin to challenge the hierarchies of material.

In this period, she also began to work with aluminium, initially with her first public commission for the Wheaton Plaza Shopping Center in Rockville, Maryland, and later, with works such as *Time Womb* (1967 and 1970) and *Bathers* (1969). By the end of the decade, Chase-Riboud began to challenge what she described as “the tyranny of the base” by fashioning elaborate ‘skirts’ that would hide the sculpture’s armature and seemingly defy gravity. According to Chase-Riboud, the fibre skirt “disassociates [the sculpture] from the ground and its surroundings [in which it becomes] an object of ritual and magic.”
Meta Mondrian Monumentale is a scale model of the artist’s first public sculpture – a fountain commissioned for the now-demolished Wheaton Plaza Shopping Center in Rockville, Maryland (built in 1960). Meta Mondrian Monumentale is constructed from polished aluminium with silk cords that cascade between the narrow steles to emulate water. Chase-Riboud constructed the fountain at Wheaton Plaza to exist outside, where running water filtered between the stamped aluminium and produced music as it fell between the two panels. Chase-Riboud continued to create public works throughout her career, in 1995 she was commissioned by the US General Services Administration to realise Africa Rising (1998), a large-scale bronze memorial dedicated to the free and enslaved Africans interred in the African Burial Site in Lower Manhattan, New York City. The sculpture is now installed permanently in the lobby of the Ted Weiss Federal Building, adjacent to the burial site.
“In the early pieces, I had used bronze in a fluid, liquid way, while the wool was static. So, there was this paradoxical transfer of power from the bronze to the silk or wool. It really looked as if the wool was holding up the bronze. The fibre became a column that literally seemed to hold up the bronze. So, the wool became the strong element – let’s call it, for argument’s sake, the male element. And the bronze became the soft, or female, element. I liked the impossibility, the contradiction of that.”

This gallery brings together a selection of works made in the 1970s which highlight the artist’s skilfulness in combining and playing with opposites. In the series Zanzibar, inspired by the artist’s poem Why Did We Leave Zanzibar? (1969–70), the totem-like forms, constructed from strips and ribbons of bronze with cascades of wool and silk, draw on the artist’s travels to East Africa. Both the poem and the sculptures consider the history of violence, subjugation and resistance on the island of Zanzibar, which was the centre of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade between the 17th and 19th centuries. Chase-Riboud mirrors this interest in colonial histories in her writing, which developed in the late 1970s to shed light on the history of slavery and unearth the lost narratives of women of African descent.

Also on view here are works that showcase the artist’s continued fascination with monumentality, such as Pushkin (1985), which is dedicated to the poet and writer Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837): considered to be the greatest Russian poet and founder of modern Russian literature.
Defined by their verticality, the three works on view here bear a striking resemblance to obelisks. These tall, tapered structures are often found in classical architecture, such as those that are erected outside the entrances to ancient Egyptian temples to commemorate the dead. Chase-Riboud’s adeptness at weaving and juxtaposing materials in such a way that the soft fibres become rigid enough to support bronze elements is evident in *Standing Black Woman / Black Tower* (1973). Elsewhere, *Standing Black Woman of Venice* (2021) is an artistic response to Alberto Giacometti’s *Women of Venice*, a series of standing female figures he made for the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1956. In the 2021 exhibition *Standing Woman of Venice/Standing Black Woman of Venice* on view at Fondation-Giacometti, Paris, Giacometti’s works were displayed alongside Chase-Riboud’s, highlighting the dialogue or confrontation of styles between the artists – where the former’s works are figurative and employ a minimum of means, Chase-Riboud's are abstract and expressive.

Taken together, the works on view here highlight the evolution of Chase-Riboud's sculpted creases, pleats and folds, which become more intricately detailed and stylised over time, expressing her exploration of touchstones of the Baroque: grandeur, dynamism, contrast and deep colour.
Chase-Riboud drew on her fascination with Egyptian art and Chinese antiquities, both encountered during her travels in North Africa and Asia. In the 1980s, she returned to her experience of viewing the Han Dynasty burial tomb which contained the bodies of Prince Liu Sheng and Princess Dou Wan. Both were encased in traditional ceremonial suits constructed from delicate jade plaques and sewn together with gold wire. *Cleopatra’s Wedding Dress* (2003) and *Cleopatra’s Bed* (1997), both on view here, employ similar techniques by composing objects from thousands of bronze squares, each intricately sewn together with red thread. In these works – part of a discreet series dedicated to the queen of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt (c. 69–30 BCE) – Chase-Riboud evokes the power, energy and desire associated with Cleopatra through objects that seemingly could be found either in her long-lost tomb, or within the contents of her home.

Chase-Riboud’s interest in exploring “power as wielded by women” can also be found in works within her *Tantra* series from the 1990s, an example of which is on display here. These works allude to the goddess Shakti, the female consort to the god of Shiva, who is said to represent cosmic energy, fertility and female creativity, alongside exploring the interconnectedness of the spiritual, poetic and sexual experience.
Despite the artist’s physical distance from the US, Chase-Riboud has remained deeply engaged with the politics of her home country since the 1960s, when she expressed her solidarity with the civil rights movement as well as the African independence movements. In 1965, the African American Muslim minister and human rights activist Malcolm X (1925–1965) was assassinated. Deeply affected by his loss, four years later Chase-Riboud decided to dedicate a series of sculptures to his remembrance, stating that “it was a matter of memory, of doing a monument – not to his philosophy, but in the Latin sense of *memoria*."

It was during this series, to which she would later return in 2003, 2008 and 2017, that Chase-Riboud described using “silk like you would clay, sculpting it.” The three ‘Malcolms’ on display here not only show how Chase-Riboud grappled with physically manifesting his memory, but how by returning to him over the course of 48 years, she expressed his profound significance to herself and the transformation of society at large.
The subject of remembrance is also the focus of Chase-Riboud’s series of works on paper – made in the late 1990s and titled *The Monument Drawings* – which, through imagined monuments, commemorate political, cultural and artistic figures and places with legacies that have transcended the ages. Executed in ink and charcoal, the delicate cross-hatching and marks depicting ropes or cords that emerge from organic matter find echoes in the artist’s sculptures. On view here, several drawings from the series include tributes to the French nobleman, politician, philosopher, and writer best known for his erotic work, Marquis de Sade (1740–1841); the Italian Roman Catholic bishop and cardinal, Giovanni Ricci (1498–1574); the father of Austrian philosophical writer Robert Musil, Alfred Musil (1846–1924); anti-apartheid activist and the first president of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela (c.1994–1999); Consort Zhen (1876–1900) concubine of the Guangxu Emperor of the Qing Dynasty in China; and the Queen of Sheba (c. 10th century BCE), a figure first mentioned in the Hebrew bible.
According to the artist, red in three-dimensional form is the most seductive colour in the spectrum. It evokes a powerful emotional response in the viewer and inevitably the eye is drawn to this luscious hue. Chase-Riboud was captivated by the use of the colour in the art and architecture of Beijing's Forbidden City where architectural features such as roofs and columns are constructed of red tiles or lacquered in red respectively.

In the La Musica series (1990–ongoing), Malcolm X #16 (2016), All That Rises Must Converge (2008) and Numero Rouge (2021), the bronze is stained through a patination technique that involves applying a thin layer of chemical compounds (patina), resulting in red, crimson and scarlet hues across the sculpture’s surface. In Mao’s Organ (2007), red cords occupy crevices of gilded bronze, and red stretches from edge to edge in a discreet series of three drawings titled Africa Rising, Sarah Baartman Red Drawing #2 and Sarah Baartman Red
Drawing #3 (all 1997). These works on paper relate to Chase-Riboud's public sculpture *Africa Rising* (1998), which commemorates Sarah Baartman, the Khoikoi woman from Southern Africa who was put on display in London and Paris in the 19th century under the name 'Hottentot Venus'.
Continuing Chase-Riboud’s exploration of “the concept of women ruling the earth and shaping society in immutable ways”, La Musica Josephine Red/Black (2021), which towers at two-metres, honours the American-born dancer, singer, actress, civil rights activist and World War II agent Josephine Baker (1905–1975). She is the first Black woman to star in a major motion picture and to enter the French Panthéon. Chase-Riboud has said that she feels she has a parallel existence to Baker – both American women who made Paris their home and contributed significantly to its creative and cultural milieu. In 1975, Chase-Riboud attended Baker’s last performance at The Bobino, the most famous music hall in Paris. The sculpture’s articulated black bronze is punctuated by undulating red cords which embodies the grandeur, energy and dynamism of Baker, whom Chase-Riboud vividly remembers as being “transformed before my very eyes into a celestial being towering ten feet tall crowned in a beaded feathered headdress as she glided on stage.”
Barbara Chase-Riboud: Infinite Folds is curated by Yesomi Umolu, Director of Curatorial Affairs and Public Practice, Serpentine, with Chris Bayley, Assistant Curator, Serpentine

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*Wheaton Plaza Fountain, 1960. Courtesy the artist. © Barbara Chase-Riboud*


*Barbara Chase-Riboud, Numero Rouge, 2021. Bronze with red patina, silk, wool and synthetic fibres with steel support. 212 × 60 cm. © Barbara Chase-Riboud*

*Barbara Chase-Riboud in China, 1965.*

*Barbara Chase-Riboud, La Musica Josephine Red/Black, 2021. Black patina bronze with red cord. 150 × 130 × 190 cm. © Barbara Chase-Riboud*
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