BETTY BRANCH
THROUGH THE CROW’S EYE, A RETROSPECTIVE

SEPTEMBER 17 TO NOVEMBER 21, 2009
CURATED BY AMY G. MOOREFIELD, MUSEUM DIRECTOR
THE ELEANOR D. WILSON MUSEUM
AT HOLLINS UNIVERSITY
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Curated by Amy G. Moorefield, Director of the Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University

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CONTENTS

King of the Crows by Betty Branch

Betty Branch: Through the Crow’s Eye by Amy G. Moorefield

Heart of Stone, Wings of Bronze: The Paradoxical Work of Betty Branch by Deborah McLeod

Exhibition checklist

Artist biography

Acknowledgments
THERE'S AN AWESOME DIN IN THE MEADOW... THE CROWS ARE MOURNING THEIR KING. THEIR BULLET CRIES LODGE IN MY HEAD.

I KNEW ALL ALONG THAT PREJUDICE WAS LICENSE TO KILL. I KNEW IT WHEN I EXPLAINED TO BILL & TOM WHY I NEEDED A GUN TO SHOOT CROWS.

I KNEW IT THE FIRST TIME I RAISED THE GUN FROM THE KITCHEN WINDOW AND BONNY WAS SITTING IN THE DINING ROOM (THAT TIME—BECAUSE SHE WAS THERE – I COULD NOT PULL THE TRIGGER.) BUT THE GUN WAS THERE A TARGET TOO WE HAD SPORTED A BIT FROM THE LONG BENCH ON THE FRONT PORCH AT DUSK- TO SEE WHO COULD HIT THE BULLSEYE. THE GUN WAS NOT THE GREATEST—NOR WE AS MARKSMEN—NO ONE SCORED HIGH EXCEPT BY ACCIDENT WE PRETTY MUCH AGREED.

Bill carried the gun in his car a few times to the mailbox and back or out on Sunday morning to 6:30 Bible Study, but he didn’t kill any crow.

THIS MORNING gloriously alone quiet, still, silver sun on patio I lay down to peace and THE RAUCOUS SOUND OF CROWS NOT IN THE MEADOW, NOT IN THE FRONT YARD BUT IN THE SANCTITY OF MY FENCED LOCKED SUNLIT TERRACE. ENRAGED, I WENT FOR THE GUN

THE SLAMMING DOOR DISLODGED THE CROWS FROM BACK TO FRONT AND I IN HOT PURSUIT. Down the yard & out of range they flew stopped. BLACK—UGLY—UNGAINLY ANTAGONISTS ON THE FRONT SLOPE. Into the car, gun & I Down the drive for better aim & FIRE! THE BIG BLACK CROW FLEW UP THEN FALTERED AND FELL BACK. I AIMED & FIRED AGAIN THE PELLETS HIT THE STIFF BLACK FEATHERS – ABSORBED, OR FELL AWAY THE CROW HALF HOPPED HALF DRAGGED HIMSELF DOWN THE HILL. ME FIRING & HEARING THAT DULL DRY FEATHER THUD of pellet still the crow would not fall. THERE WAS NO SOUND IN THE MEADOW AND NO WAY FOR ME TO FINISH WHAT I’D BEGUN

Betty Branch, 1988
Betty Branch claimed her artistic nature at the age of forty—by way of the mythical phoenix—a creature that casts off its old life to begin anew. She did not close the door completely but instead sloughed off the fetters of the ordinary and traded it for the extraordinary. In translation, her devotional approach to artistic pursuits is done with a zealot-like tenacity. Branch’s force of will in carving out a unique place in the larger art world has served her well.
This exhibition showcases over thirty years of the celebrated artist’s work from sculptures and drawings to performance documentation and works influenced by the land. It is not a conventional retrospective. It highlights decades’ worth of experimentation and perseverance by the artist and is the physical manifestation of the primordial ideal of life’s constant recreation of itself. Displayed in a non-chronological format, the exhibition calls attention to Branch’s fluidity throughout her artistic career between naturalistic and abstract modes of expression. She is constantly reinventing herself.

Branch has stayed resolute to lifelong tenets that define her work: the body, rites of passage both traditional and unorthodox, the intersection between land and form, and the Crow. Her media is diverse; she sculpts with marble, clay, bronze, porcelain, terra cotta, earthenware, and straw. Each medium is a talismanic touchstone for her art; Branch ferrets out the essence of every one of these for exploitation. Her first foray into the medium of clay transpired in an introductory pottery course. In a cathartic moment, Branch felt its attraction and henceforth began her lifelong love of the tactile medium. She states, “Once I touched the clay, a powerful force came over me ... I knew what I had to do, what I was compelled to do.”

Branch looks to impressive Cycladic Greek fertility goddesses and other sources of feminine genesis to form complex and substantial sculptural works that exude power and energy. Paying homage to the multiple generations of sculptors before her focusing on that subject, Branch pulls on that rich history to form work that is joyous and earthy as displayed by her series Maternitas. In the marble work Maternitas (1987), the pregnant torso swells and dips to a vulvate epicenter. She takes advantage of the marble form by carving into the block to emphasize the veining over the swollen belly. Her female forms’ proportions vacillate between the lush and the lissome, channeling artists of the Belle Époque Art Nouveau era such as Camille Claudel and Gaston Lachaise, evident in the swelling thighs of Branch’s variegated alabaster Mountain Woman (1987) or the twisting torso of the black-hued Fire Dancer Nero (1988).

Her relationship to the Crow is paradoxical. Is it a spirit guide or metaphor? Branch describes her initial relationship with the Crow in her poem “King of the Crows”:

“This morning gloriously alone quiet, silver sun on patio I lay down to peace and the raucous sound of crows not in the meadow, not in the front yard but in the sanctity of my fenced locked sunlit terrace Enraged, I went for the gun.”

Originally perceived as an antagonist, the Crow became through its death a metaphor for Branch: a nagual. In its physical sacrifice, the Crow became one with the artist. Haunting Branch, the Crow has revisited her through the years as the subject in majestic work such as Raven’s Gate (2005), Survivor (1999), and the monumental Honor Guard (2004). When questioned about the symbiotic relationship, Branch also refers to the Crow as an archetypal image for aging. In looking to find subject matter in her work to mirror her own aging process, Branch sought solace in the ideal of the Crow.

Rites of passage have always interested Branch, particularly ceremonies addressing subjugation and death. Liminality—when one is on the threshold between two existing planes—is a strong catalyst played out in her work Mothers (1984) and the performance Ritual Fire. In Mothers, nine earthy burlap straw-filled forms hover together forming a cluster that looms protectively over the viewer. When the temporal forms began to decay, Branch set the Mothers aflame in a quarry inspired by the Hindu Sati tradition in which widows would immolate themselves on their husbands’ funeral pyres. In turning the patriarchal Sati tradition on its end, Branch found a fitting conclusion to her dying Mothers. In All Fall Down, porcelain cylinders are formed into prepubescent faceless figures made helpless sans hands and feet. Referencing an act of brutality committed against a woman.
Survivor, 1995
Bronze, 13 x 13 x 5 inches
Collection of J. David and Mary Ann Wine
in 1983, Branch translates the contemporary horror into a poignant tableau of universal victimization in which the figures are mutilated, helpless, and yet aware of the act.

In sculpting the land, Branch uses the native topography as a medium and its decaying residue for impetus. She creates work that interacts with a selected environment; however, the residual appearance of the effected landscape is left unscathed. This subtle nuance is at odds with other relative land works by artists such as Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) or James Turrell’s progressive work *Roden Crater* (1979-present day) that leave a permanent eroding residue on the land. Branch’s environmental sensitivity in leaving a site unblemished is crucial to understanding her artistic aesthetic. Translated to the exhibition, several of Branch’s works will be placed *in situ* on Hollins University’s historic campus. In particular, *Double Spiral* (2009) a site-specific monumental land work created from straw emphasizes Branch’s inextricable relationship to the surrounding landscape.

In Branch’s capricious found works, she culls through the detritus and discovers inspiration. In *Spring* (2006) and her other readymade works, she delights in the found (think Marcel Duchamp) and in the act of creating whimsically humorous objects that showboat her brevity. In the works *Weighty Matter*, *No Yoke*, *Bo Bo*, *Double Axe*, *Mary Queen of Scots*, *Omphales*, *Burp*, and *Little One-Eye* (2008-09), Branch finds merriment in experimenting through the process of discovering the discarded and abandoned treasures then creating pedestals (imagine Brancusi) that complement them. One finds discarded banister spindles topped by tarnished spheres and Lucite cubes with odd rusty weights to name a few.

Through this exhibition, Branch illustrates her tenacity and strength via her spiritual animal—the Crow. Honoring a lifetime of creativity and reinvention, one admires Branch’s sense of determined purpose. In essence, it may be said that Branch perceives the best of life “through the crow’s eye.”

1 Quote by artist during meeting, March 2009
2 Excerpt from poem “King of the Crows” by Betty Branch

**BETTY BRANCH: THROUGH THE CROW’S EYE**

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*Found Sculptures, 2000-09 (Weighty Matter, No Yoke, Bo Bo, Double Axe, Mary Queen of Scots, Omphales, Burp, Little One-Eye)* Mixed media, various dimensions Collection of the artist

*Raven’s Gate*, 2005 Bronze, granite, steel 112 inches and 84 inches Collection of the artist
All Fall Down, 1983
Grouping of five
Various sizes
Low-fired porcelain
Collection of the artist
Fire Dancer Nero, 1988
Black Belgian marble
Collection of Sybil and Bob Fishburn

Maternita Rustica, 1987
Portuguese Rose marble
23 x 14 x 8 inches
Courtesy of Larry and Sally Mann
It’s not surprising that Betty Branch would settle upon a crow as her motif for a lifetime’s outlay of vibrant, metamorphic, and keenly insightful work. With many seemingly conflicting attributes, the crow is one of the archetypal embodiments of creation mythology: the dark-winged daily messenger of illuminated awareness and shadowy interstice. He feeds on mortal transience and offers it flight.
That essentially describes the inherent nature of Branch’s work when it is considered in its entirety. What the viewer will discover in this thoughtfully assembled retrospective collection of sculpture—and a few implicated works on paper—is a compassionate portrayal of the human condition translated through gesture, form, and skin, airborne through imagination and intensification, theatre and theodicy.

Betty Branch’s journey toward becoming a nationally renowned, internationally celebrated sculptor is an inspiring story for those sensing in themselves a long-sequestered voice. It was an unanticipated, curved trajectory that conveyed her to this extraordinary gathering of artwork (thus perhaps not quite as the crow flies). Betty was a young wife, a mother of eight, and a faithful adherent to the beliefs of her upbringing, who kept a journal to record her private poetry. Within these matrices of social propriety, she found in herself an undeniable calling for a more substantive physical and emancipated psychic outlet.

So seeking her own renaissance, she entered Hollins College in 1974, at the age of forty, to pursue art. Hollins cleared the low-hanging branches from her path and she was soon off to find and share her exceptional ability.

A postgraduate apprenticeship at Miles and Generalis Sculpture Services in Philadelphia and work in Nicoli Studios in Carrara, Italy, originated many of Branch’s early creations in marble. Included in the exhibition, Gaia is an unconventional bas-relief Madonna work of somewhat Byzantine flavor. It is the artist’s first effort in the highly challenging medium.

The works of this developmental period would, during several residencies in Carrara, torque the spine of Branch’s particular fascination for a particular subject. The Madonna or the Goddess—sometimes portrayed as a fetish object, other times as an elegant sylph figure slipping through the wind, or a fecund odalisque, or in the eloquent virtue of a still torso—all continued to emerge from within the stone as the artist improvised on a variety of art historical styles through the figure. In seeking new forms of truth from the mysteries of human and particularly feminine beauty, Branch instilled in her sculpture a silent glimpse into the omniscience that hides inside art; perhaps this is her own argument for the complex evidence of temptation, labor, purpose, faith, and design. It’s the drama that Branch adds to the argument that breathes such life and belief into it.

From formal contemplations on late-19th-century French Art Nouveau aesthetic—except in a feminist counterpoint—to the satiny volupté of Maillol related instead in the first-person voice informed by eight pregnancies, to a more contemporary response to a violent incident nudged into penetrating form via Pre-Columbian
Interlude, 1985
Bronze, 24 x 13 x 7 inches
Collection of Walter and Sally Rugaber

Samurai, 1988
Spanish Bardelio marble
31 x 13 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist
ceramics, such construals are observed throughout Branch’s oeuvre as she plucks resoundingly from these eras, exploiting their original terms in real, autobiographical time.

Looking closely at some examples in the retrospective, consider an important early sculpture. *Mothers*. A series of towering prehistoric-seeming effigy forms, methodically wrapped in burlap, gather together as protectors and power figures. They exude a warm pungent scent in unison: a wordless aromatic chant. They also provide evidence of a physical dichotomy that Branch regularly explores as she switches between additive and reductive sculpture. *Mothers* began construction through the artist’s ritual swathing process with the raw fabric. *Mothers* existed intact for a period of two years before all but two of them underwent another ritual, the documented event of their immolation on a barge in a nearby quarry. This new transformation bears witness to a reductive progression.

Branch’s ceramic work in general seems to demonstrate her interest in message-making through an additive approach, while her ongoing stone carving (and subsequent bronze castings) suggests a removal of the extraneous, a search for purity of intention and essence; of less accessible inner substance.

The figural sculpture thus offers a wide range of temperaments. Some *Mother* works might hold dominion over viewers, such as mentioned above, or summon them through the marble’s cool film and into its glowing, burgeoning womb. Lyrical marble forms like *The Dancer* (1988) and *Fire Dancers*, which were cast in bronze from marble in 2007, express fluid movement to the figure, inferring a release of consciousness, an opening of the mind, a revelation of the veining of the stone therein. Or the artist imbues it in the quiet stateliness of a concave spine as in *Maternita Rosa II* (1987).

And *The Crow*. For many summers he taunted noisily from the trees near Betty Branch’s home. One day, she went out to put an end to his menace. But instead of cleanly dispatching him with a bullet that morning, she witnessed as he suffered. In drawing *The Crow* she found the cosmos’s mirth, its capacity for self-critical humor. In sculpting him she ultimately created *Icarus* with tender metaphorical comprehension for her subject’s greater collective story. Many recounts of creative aspiration and faith are affixed one by one as feathers that compose all idealists’ outspread wings. The plight of Branch’s *Icarus* being almost a crucifixion, however, implies an ascending conclusion, rather than the parable’s well-known descending one. It may not be a simple matter to find mirth in such a seemingly dire outcome, unless one sees it from the viewpoint of the omnivorous crow.
Mountain Woman, 1987
Alabaster
12 x 24.25 x 8.5 inches
Collection of Karen Waldron and Shawn Ricci

Mother of God, 1990
Verona Red marble
26 x 12 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist
Gift Bearer, 1987
Hydrocal on steel
94 x 36 x 32 inches
Collection of the artist

Passage, 1994
India ink on tracing paper
48 x 60 inches
Collection of the artist
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All Fall Down, 1983
Grouping of five
Various sizes
Low fired porcelain
Collection of the artist

Avatar, 1988
Black Belgian marble
43 x 17 x 18 inches
Collection of the artist

Crows
Laughing Crow, Passage, Guard Crow, Red Eyed Crow
1994
Suite of four drawings
Various sizes
India ink on onion skin/tracing paper
Collection of the artist

Dancer II, 2008
Study after The Dancer
Bronze
Collection of Janice R. Moore

Dragoti Tirth, 1985
Installation, various sizes
Terracotta, low fired porcelain, earthenware
Collection of the artist

Family portraits
Billy, Polly, Tom, Bonny
1978-79
Hydrocal (Billy and Tom) and clay (Polly and Bonny)
Various sizes
Collection of the artist

Fire Dancer Nero, 1988
Black Belgian marble
Collection of Sybil and Bob Tielbourn

Gaia, 1987
Carrara marble
12 x 43 x 15 inches
Collection of the artist

Gift Bear, 1987
Hydrocal on steel
94 x 36 x 12 inches
Collection of the artist

Honor Guard, 2004
Bronze and steel
9 x 4 x 4 feet
Collection of Ross and Beth Myers at American Infrastructure, Worcester, PA

Icarus, 1991
Installation of five
Bronze: 12 x 14 x 4 inches
Collection of the artist

Interlude, 1985
Bronze: 24 x 13 x 7 inches
Collection of Walter and Sally Rugaber

Jogger 1, 1996
Bronze: 29 x 10 x 6 inches
Private collection of Dr. Richard Grayson

Little Mountain Woman I, 2008
Bronze: 12 x 5 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist

Macondo, 2003
Bronze: 17 x 20 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist

Maternita Rosa II, 1987
Portuguese Rose marble
38 x 17 x 13 inches
Collection of the artist

Maternita Rustica, 1987
Portuguese Rose marble
23 x 14 x 8 inches
Courtesy of Larry and Sally Mann

Mother of God, 1990
Verona Red marble
26 x 12 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist

Mothers, 1994
Burlap and straw
12 x 4 x 2 feet
Collection of Virginia Western Community College

Mothers III, 1984
Bronze: 14 x 6 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist

Mountains and More, 1988
Alabaster
12 x 24 x 5 x 8 inches
Collections of Karen Waldron and Shawn Ricci

Nero Ombre, 1994
Belgian Marble
28 x 18 x 8 inches
Collection of the artist

Ombre: 1987
Portuguese Rose marble
38 x 17 x 13 inches
Collection of the artist

Out of the Box I, 2003
Bronze: 13 x 12 x 4 inches
Collection of the artist

Road Show, 2006
Bronze: 28 x 12 x 18 inches
Collection of the artist

Samurai, 1988
Spanish Bardelio marble
31 x 13 x 6 inches
Collection of the artist

Sport, 2006
Found materials
100 x 36 x 14 inches
Collection of the artist

Survivor, 1995
Bronze: 13 x 13 x 5 inches
Collection of J. David and Mary Ann Wine

The Box, 1996
Bronze: 12 x 12 x 1 inches
Collection of the artist

Trophy Crow, 2006
Bronze: 18 x 7 x 17 inches
Collection of the artist

Studies, c.1989
(Ombre, Maternita, Small Goddes, Striding Woman II, three studies for Fire Dancer)
Bronze, various dimensions
Collection of the artist

The Box, 1996
Bronze: 12 x 12 x 1 inches
Collection of the artist

Found Sculptures
2000-09
(Wigley Matter, No Take, Be Be, Double Air, Mary Queen of Scots, Omphals, Burp, Little One- Eye)
Mixed media
Various dimensions
Collection of the artist

Double Spiral, 2009
Hay, dimensions variable
Site-specific installation
ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Education
1979 Hollins College. Roanoke, Virginia.
1980 Apprenticeship at Miles and Generalis.
1985 Award for "Dragons Teeth." Brooklyn, New York.
1984 Warm Springs Gallery. Warm Springs, Virginia.
1987 Performance piece Woman Whirl.
1988 Award for "Dragons Teeth" in traveling exhibit.
1998 Allied Artist Award. Board of Directors of AIA Blue Ridge.
2007 YWCA Woman of Achievement in the Arts.
2008 Sally Fishburn Crockett Award. Planned Parenthood of the Blue Ridge.

Solo Exhibitions
1984 Warm Springs Gallery. Warm Springs, Virginia.
1994 Sculpture by Betty Branch. duPont Gallery.

Selected Group Exhibitions
1988 Over the Blue Ridge II.
1990 Women and Children: Difficult Truths.
1991 Hollins College Faculty Art Exhibit. Hollins College. Roanoke, Virginia.
1993 The Box: Remembering the Gift. Terma Company. Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Awards and Recognitions
1981 Hollins College Faculty Art Exhibit. Hollins College. Roanoke, Virginia.
2001 Hollins College Faculty Art Exhibit. Hollins College. Roanoke, Virginia.
2002 The Box: Remembering the Gift. Terma Company. Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Your Breath Away." Betty Branch: Artist Whose Work Takes Your Breath Away."
ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

2000

2002

2003

2004

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009

Selected Collections and Commissions
Roanoke Public Library. Roanoke, Virginia.
City of Roanoke. Virginia.
Radford University Art Museum. Radford, Virginia.
City of Radford, Virginia.
Pfiffer College. Meisenheimer, South Carolina.
Chapel Hill Public Library. Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
SunTrust Bank. Roanoke, Virginia.

Selected Bibliography
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Williams, Arthur. Sculpture: Technique, Form, Content (1994).
All along the way there have been good and stalwart friends in many lands who have given me their hearts and hands, assisting and encouraging and teaching me what they knew and I did not. I am forever grateful.

I thank my beautiful big family, patient and loving, cheering me on and in many instances participating in the making of the art. I am grateful for good health and high energy and for the acres of woodland and green that keep me sane.

BETTY BRANCH