

# Park McArthur

Old photographs of San Francisco reveal a city once populated by tombstones. Opinion turned against cemeteries as land grew more valuable in the late nineteenth century, and in the following decades graveyards closed one by one and were moved to farmland a few miles south. The fee imposed for transferring headstones left many unclaimed; those that remained were broken apart and recycled for public works projects throughout the city, lining gutters, defining breakwaters, or forming the seawall along the Great Highway.<sup>1</sup> When historical markers have no foothold on the landscape, how does memory operate? And how do we determine—and who determines—what is embedded in the physical and psychic landscape for futures to come?

Forms of commemoration and the ways in which they articulate memory and signify meaning are the subject of *New Work: Park McArthur*, the artist's first solo museum presentation. McArthur is "interested in how lived experience informs artistic output and aesthetics"<sup>2</sup> and works with and through the social conditions of dependency. By examining museums, monuments, and memorials through the materials and processes frequently associated with them, she reflects on personal and social relationships with buildings and sites of congregation. Investigating how these places acknowledge care and access, she considers how the marks and signs used there emphasize the casual, recreational, and ceremonial connections that bind people and places to time.

As the history of gravestones in San Francisco reminds us, sites of remembrance are part of the social landscape and subject to shifting cultural concerns and political realities, retaining their importance to communities only as long as the ideals and values they represented at their founding remain vital and relevant. Created to display artworks made in the past, art museums act as repositories for memory and signification. Museum buildings articulate themselves as custodians of culture and convey a sense of permanence similar to that evoked by monuments and memorials. But just as histories are rediscovered and retold, museums are altered and expanded to make way for new collections, artworks, and ways of thinking.

McArthur's *Bohetta (for Beverly)* (2017) consists of black granite left over from the construction of SFMOMA's Mario Botta–designed building in 1995, cut into individual bricks that recall the hard-edged forms of Minimal sculpture.<sup>3</sup> Polished bands of this material lined the central staircase that was once a prominent feature of the piazza-like atrium, bridging the vertical distance between entrance and galleries and delineating a path up for visitors who could climb it. Some twenty years later, when the museum undertook an expansion designed by the architecture firm Snøhetta, the granite steps were removed as part of this manifestation of change. They

Left: Surplus granite and maple from the construction of SFMOMA, used in *Bohetta (for Beverly)* and *Designation* (both 2017). Right: *Overlook Park 5*, 2017

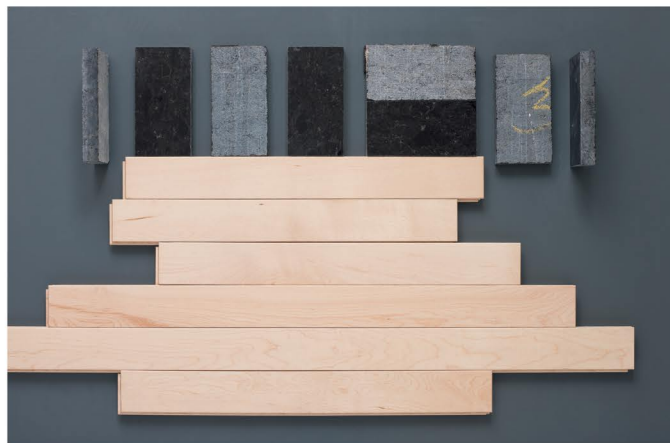
held within them the ideologies of a different era and the capacity of a smaller institution. Their removal speaks to broader processes of social transformation, among them the development of the surrounding neighborhood in recent decades. Imbued with the life and history of the museum, the bricks in *Bohetta (for Beverly)* lean against and support one another. This arrangement reveals the varying levels of finish on their surfaces, from highly polished to a flat, rough matte. Several are engraved with a message to the employees who shepherded the museum through its expansion: "Thank you for stepping up and building our future SFMOMA." McArthur's *Designation* (2017) similarly draws on the materials of the museum, using surplus maple floorboards of the type installed throughout the expanded building, where they visually unify the existing spaces with the new.

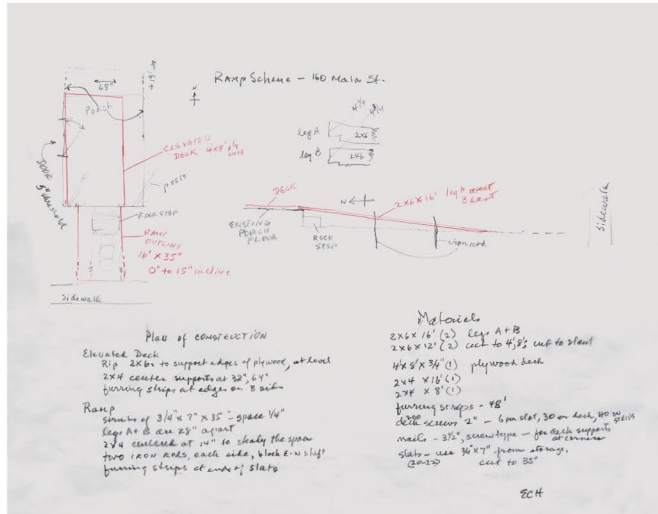
*Bohetta (for Beverly)* is dedicated to the American artist Beverly Buchanan (1940–2015), who understood how stones could embody more than geological time. Buchanan constructed earthworks in the South using poured and cast concrete that she often dyed rich hues of red, black, or blue. Her fabricated forms appear to be of the ground and vegetation that they emerge from, stand upon, or are consumed by. Designating sites of tragic loss that are otherwise left unmarked, Buchanan's handmade ruins confront the violent memories held within the landscape. Often reminiscent of gravestones, they bear witness to the incomplete narrative of slavery in the South, resisting and running counter to acts committed and rhetoric espoused nearby.<sup>4</sup>

Quarrying for stone and logging for timber have altered the surface of the earth and have shaped the patterns of human settlement. Entire towns have formed around these widely available natural resources. In preparation for this exhibition, McArthur visited Elberton,

Georgia, self-proclaimed "granite capital of the world" and producer of "more granite monuments than any other city,"<sup>5</sup> where she found pieces of the stone scattered throughout, on both public and private land. While granite evokes endurance, being capable of withstanding extreme weather and other environmental conditions, wood is subject to its surrounding elements, tending to crack and rot as time passes. Both materials have historically been used as markers. Column-like milestones lined routes throughout the Roman Empire's territories. Inscribed with the distance to Rome, they made visible where all roads led, physically and psychologically. Centuries later, in the Middle Ages, wooden posts at intersections directed travelers throughout Europe. Today, in the United States, material standards for street signage are defined in the Federal Highway Administration's *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices*. McArthur's *Softly, effectively* (2017) is based on the brown aluminum guideposts that indicate areas of interest, recreational sites, and cultural institutions on roads, freeways, and expressways around California. For this work she had forty signs fabricated in varying dimensions, all conforming to specifications included in the state's edition of the manual. McArthur's anodized aluminum panels are blank, however; devoid of symbols and text, they do not label what they mark. Employing a framework intended to indicate locations of significance in the landscape, McArthur shifts its meaning by positioning it within SFMOMA. Here the signs point not only to the museum as a cultural institution but also to prior histories of the site and surrounding area, both familiar and lesser known. The range of proportions suggests the many narratives that go unnoticed and honors otherwise insignificant moments of social life.

McArthur's photographs and works on paper included in this exhibition similarly explore places of insignificance and social sites that





mark our daily lives, such as the picnic tables that are often found in parks and public spaces, available for anyone to use. Typically made of wood, they wear and weather over time: moisture warps their structure, and people inscribe their boards. They commemorate meals eaten alone or shared with family and friends in often unremarkable recreational locations. McArthur's *Overlook Park* photographs (2017) examine these places of congregation. Taken as she circled a wooden picnic table, the images emphasize the histories embedded in its surface, as well as the edges and borders of this ubiquitous structure. Other works refer to sites from McArthur's life—a campfire at a summer art residency, the entrance to a family friend's home—and the modifications that were necessary in order for her to access them. In *How to get a wheelchair over sand* (2013), a makeshift path made of boards and a rattan mat covers the uneven ground. The focus on the transitions from one material to another echoes the *Overlook Park* images that frame the transitions between table legs, cement, and grass. *Ramp Scheme 160 Main Street* (2013) is a drawing made by McArthur's grandfather for a ramp he constructed so that she could enter a residence from the front porch. Detailed in the sketch are the structure, materials, and measurements required to span the distance over the building's rock step. By depicting passageways that called for adjustment, these works highlight our reliance, in our everyday movements, on sculptural forms that do not always acknowledge all the bodies that need them.

McArthur's inquiries into the relationships among sites of commemoration and congregation and the materials and forms associated with them expose and subvert frameworks of control and power in the built environment. They also question a system

that conflates signage with remembrance. If acts of commemoration can lead to the forgetting of other dimensions of historical fact, is it also true that the materials of markers and memorials—stone, wood, and metal—contain a progression of counter-histories that are left unacknowledged? Do they embody a process of destruction and erosion that leads to absence and loss? If we were to permit a distinct kind of access to emerge, one that would allow more voices to be heard and ultimately to decide who and what were remembered, what materials and forms would we or should we use?

Jenny Gheith  
Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture

#### Notes

1. For more on the history of cemeteries in San Francisco, see Jon Brooks, "Why Are There So Many Dead People in Colma? And So Few in San Francisco?" KQED, December 16, 2015, <https://www2.kqed.org/news/2015/12/16/why-are-so-many-dead-people-in-colma-and-so-few-in-san-francisco/>.
2. Park McArthur, faculty profile, The New School, <http://www.newschool.edu/lang/faculty/Park-McArthur/>, accessed February 23, 2017.
3. McArthur referenced Carl Andre's *Manifest Destiny* (1986), a sculpture comprising a stack of bricks stamped with the word "Empire," in an email to the author, November 4, 2016.
4. McArthur first read a description of Buchanan's earthworks in Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: New Press, 1983). For additional information on Buchanan's focus on the Southern landscape, see Andy Campbell, "'We're Going to See Blood on Them Next': Beverly Buchanan's Georgia Ruins and Black Negativity," in "Black Holes: Afro-Pessimism, blackness and the discourses of Modernity," ed. Dalton Anthony Jones, special issue, *Rhizomes*, no. 29 (2016), <http://rhizomes.net/issue29/campbell/index.html>; and Park McArthur and Jennifer Burris, eds., *Beverly Buchanan, 1978–1981* (Mexico City: Athénée Press, 2015). For more on the unmarked history of slavery in the South, see the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, <http://www.eji.org>.
5. City of Elberton homepage, <http://www.cityofelberton.net/>, accessed February 2, 2017.

# NEW YORK

**Park McArthur** was born in 1984 in Raleigh, North Carolina, and currently lives and works in New York. She holds a BA from Davidson College, North Carolina, and an MFA from the University of Miami. She participated in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine. McArthur has had solo exhibitions at Chisenhale Gallery, London; Lars Friedrich, Berlin; Yale Union, Portland, Oregon; ESSEX STREET, New York; and Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels. Her work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including *Whitney Biennial 2017*, Whitney Museum of American Art; *32nd Bienal de São Paulo: Incerteza viva*; and *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, New York. She is the coeditor, with Jennifer Burris, of *Beverly Buchanan, 1978–1981* (Mexico City: Athénée Press, 2015), and co-curated, with Burris, *Beverly Buchanan—Ruins and Rituals* at the Brooklyn Museum.

## Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York, unless otherwise noted.

*How to get a wheelchair over sand*, 2013  
Chromogenic print  
8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm)

*Ramp Scheme 160 Main Street*, 2013  
Graphite and colored pencil on paper  
8 1/2 x 11 in. (21.6 x 27.9 cm)  
Drawing: Emery Herman

*Bohetta (for Beverly)*, 2017  
Granite  
Dimensions variable

*Designation*, 2017  
Maple  
Dimensions variable

*Overlook Park 1–5*, 2017  
Chromogenic prints  
Each: 8 x 12 in. (20.3 x 30.5 cm)  
Courtesy the artist, ESSEX STREET, New York,  
and Lars Friedrich, Berlin

*Softly, effectively*, 2017  
Aluminum  
Forty panels: 15 x 9 in. (38.1 x 22.9 cm), 36 x 20 in. (91.4 x 50.8 cm), 24 x 36 in. (61 x 91.4 cm), 36 x 30 in. (91.4 x 76.2 cm), 72 x 60 in. (182.9 x 152.4 cm), 18 x 18 in. (45.7 x 45.7 cm), 24 x 24 in. (61 x 61 cm), 30 x 30 in. (76.2 x 76.2 cm), 60 x 30 in. (152.4 x 76.2 cm), 72 x 36 in. (182.9 x 91.4 cm), 18 x 10 in. (45.7 x 25.4 cm), 24 x 12 in. (61 x 30.5 cm), 30 x 16 in. (76.2 x 40.6 cm), 30 x 18 in. (76.2 x 45.7 cm), 18 x 12 in. (45.7 x 30.5 cm), 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm), 30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm), 96 x 24 in. (243.8 x 61 cm), 120 x 30 in. (304.8 x 76.2 cm), 42 x 15 in. (106.7 x 38.1 cm), 48 x 48 in. (121.9 x 121.9 cm), 84 x 48 in. (213.4 x 121.9 cm), 108 x 66 in. (274.3 x 167.6 cm), 132 x 84 in. (335.3 x 213.4 cm), 30 x 28 in. (76.2 x 71.1 cm), 48 x 40 in. (121.9 x 101.6 cm), 48 x 15 in. (121.9 x 38.1 cm), 8 x 12 in. (20.3 x 30.5 cm), 8 x 18 in. (20.3 x 45.7 cm), 8 x 20 in. (20.3 x 50.8 cm), 48 x 24 in. (121.9 x 61 cm), 48 x 30 in. (121.9 x 76.2 cm), 48 x 36 in. (121.9 x 91.4 cm), 128 x 42 in. (325.1 x 106.7 cm), 128 x 48 in. (325.1 x 121.9 cm), 128 x 54 in. (325.1 x 137.2 cm), 128 x 66 in. (325.1 x 167.6 cm), 42 x 12 in. (106.7 x 30.5 cm), 42 x 18 in. (106.7 x 45.7 cm), and 42 x 24 in. (106.7 x 61 cm)

This listing reflects the information available at the time of publication.

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Reverse, from left: *Overlook Park 2*, 2017 (detail); *How to get a wheelchair over sand*, 2013 (detail)

## Image Credits

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