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First an Outcast, Then an Inspiration

By CELIA McGEE

IN the fall of 1932, fresh out of high school, Elizabeth Catlett showed up at the School of Fine and Applied Arts of the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, having been awarded a prestigious full scholarship there. But she was turned away when it was discovered that she was “colored,” and she returned home to Washington to attend Howard University.

Seventy-six years later, the institution that had rejected her, now Carnegie Mellon University, awarded her an honorary doctorate in recognition of a lifetime’s work as a sculptor and printmaker. By then, after decades of living and making art in Mexico, she had become a legendary figure to many in the art world, to the point where some were even surprised to learn she was still alive.

But not everyone, and certainly not the far younger, primarily African-American artists included along with her in the show “Stargazers: Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation With 21 Contemporary Artists,” on view now at the Bronx Museum of Art. “A lot of people like her are just kind of myths,” said Hank Willis Thomas, whose gold-chain and cubic zirconia nod to both the abolitionists of the 19th century and to rappers, “Ode to CMB: Am I Not a Man and a Brother,” is in the show and shares with much of Ms. Catlett’s work a concern with the history of slavery and “the black body as commodity,” he said. “A lot of her work,” he added, “especially from the ’60s and ’70s, could pass as art of today.”

Ms. Catlett, now 96, is known for her work’s deep engagement with social issues and the politics of gender, race and deprivation. She started down this road during the Depression, when she participated in the Federal Art Project, and followed it consistently into the era of the activist Black Arts movement in the ’60s and beyond. Which is not to say she has focused on message at the expense of form: she prepared for her M.F.A. under Grant Wood at the University of Iowa (“he was so kind,” she recalled recently, and he always addressed her as “Miss Catlett”) and also studied in New York with the Modernist sculptor Ossip Zadkine and at the Art Students League, developing her own brand of figurative modernism in bronze, stone, wood, drawings and prints.

Though that style has often been compared to Henry Moore's, her work has always been grounded in her perspective as a black woman and artist, ruminating on communal struggle, pride, resistance, resilience and history, particularly through her depictions of the female form.

The curator of the Bronx Museum show, Isolde Brielmaier, has juxtaposed 31 of Ms. Catlett's works with pieces by 21 other artists — less to point out her direct influences on them, Ms. Brielmaier said, than to explore resonances between the older artist and the younger ones. The idea, she added, was to make the show about “what all the artists are thinking, and to look at the past and the future.”

Ms. Catlett herself, who is back in New York this week for a panel discussion about “Stargazers” at the museum on Friday, demurs about her influence on later generations. (She is, however, clear about the most important advice she can offer an artist, she said during her previous visit to the city, in the fall: “Never turn down a show, no matter where it is.”) She has lived much of her life, after all, on the margins of an art history she and other artists of color were not invited to help write for a very long time.

In 1947, while on a fellowship in Mexico, she married the artist Francisco Mora, whom she had met through the Taller de Gráfica Popular printmaking collective. Their left-wing political associations did not endear her to the State Department, which declared her an undesirable alien when she took Mexican citizenship in 1962. This, on top of Ms. Catlett's race, contributed to her relative obscurity in the mainstream American art world.

The photographer Carrie Mae Weems, a generation older than most of the other artists in “Stargazers,” recalled encountering Ms. Catlett “through reading on my own,” in the late 1960s. “She wasn't taught to me in class, as most black artists were not taught to me in class, and most women artists.”

The show gets its title from Ms. Catlett's black-marble “Stargazer” (2007), a reclining female figure that manages to feel just as powerfully assertive as her standing red-cedar sculpture “Homage to My Young Black Sisters” of 1968, with its black-power salute. The reversal of the traditional passivity of the odalisque figure, said the Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi, who upends the convention in her own work, “is definitely something I quote.” And Ms. Catlett's more militantly upright sculptures seem to reappear in Sanford Biggers' monumental woodcut “Afro Pick” (2005), and in Roberto Visani's recycling of guns and other weapons into works that are street-wise, loaded with history and totemic.

In keeping with Ms. Brielmaier's aim for the show, the impact is not always a matter of visible influence. Mickalene Thomas, for example, said her intricately bedizened paintings

and pattern-happy photographs do not draw on Ms. Catlett's work in any obvious way, but that "she's been very inspirational."

"I like how her draftsmanship and sculpting have informed the political impact of images she created," Ms. Thomas said, allowing work created with a specific ideological bent to nevertheless "take the African American experience and make it universal."

Another artist in the show, Xaviera Simmons, also talked about her intense admiration for Ms. Catlett's formal skills, and for the fact that she is "still working in her 90s, and making art that's so technically savvy and stunning."

"That's kind of diva," Ms. Simmons said.

Ms. Simmons is friends with Ms. Catlett's granddaughters (one of whom, Naima Mora, is known to students of another discipline as a winner on "America's Next Top Model"). When Ms. Brielmaier decided to include her large-scale photograph "One Day and Back Then (Seated)," which shows Ms. Simmons sitting in the type of rattan chair made famous by Huey P. Newton and wearing little more than black paint and an Afro wig, "I was a little afraid of offending my best friends' grandmother," she said. But then again, she thought, Ms. Catlett "has her nudes" — and ultimately, "we all work in the same tradition."