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IN WATER

Press Release

Elizabeth Catlett: *Wake Up in Glory*

28 November, 2017 – 3 February, 2018

Elizabeth Catlett's art cries out in protest, proclaims solidarity, celebrates survival.¹

Catlett's mobilizations of desire become more than assertion, belief, need and hope. They become will. In her sculpture, Catlett wagers that desire activated by and embodied in a language of organic form can be an engine of history.²

Burning in Water - New York is pleased to present **Elizabeth Catlett: *Wake Up in Glory***. The exhibition will focus on the evolution of Catlett's sculpture, featuring a diverse group of works drawn from across the seven-decade span of the artist's career, including work in bronze, wood and marble. The show begins with Catlett's stately *Negro Woman* bust. The most recent works in the show were created shortly before the artist's death in 2012 at the age of 96.



Elizabeth Catlett, *Torso*, 1978.



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Born in Washington, DC in 1915, Elizabeth Catlett forged a singular artistic career as a sculptor and printmaker. During the course of her long life, Catlett was profoundly influenced by a broad array of artistic genres and traditions, including the Harlem Renaissance, European Modernism, African art, American Regionalism, the Chicago Renaissance, Pre-Columbian art, Mexican Muralism and Post-Revolution Populism and the Black Arts Movement.

Rather than simply emulating or reacting to these diverse influences, Catlett synthesized disparate visual idioms to develop a highly-individual style. Catlett's work was also profoundly shaped by a lifelong engagement with social and political concerns. While avoiding overt didacticism, Catlett developed a remarkable facility in using pared-down forms to convey powerful messages regarding the topics that mattered to her most: freedom, race and ethnicity, feminism and maternalism. Ultimately, Catlett rejected any distinction between the aesthetic and sociopolitical elements of her work. "I believe that art should come from the people and be for the people," she commented in 1952. "I believe that art is important to the extent that it grows out of and affects the society of its time."³

Catlett studied at Howard University in the 1930s - a period when the art department was suffused with a highly-charged atmosphere of "cross-cultural modernism."⁴ At Howard, Catlett absorbed elements of both traditional African art and European modernism that served as touchstones throughout her later career. At the University of Iowa, Catlett was mentored by the painter Grant Wood. In accordance with his regionalist ethos, Wood exhorted Catlett to focus her art on "what she knew." Catlett adopted this principle even as she transformed it; rather than a geographic focus, Catlett grounded her art in the terrain of her own experiences as a woman and an African American. Working with the Russian modernist sculptor Ossip Zadkine, Catlett further elaborated her characteristic approach: an on-going engagement with formal experimentation within the context of an enduring focus on African American womanhood.



Elizabeth Catlett - 1948



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In 1942, Catlett moved to Mexico, where she would live and work for the last fifty years of her life. Catlett joined the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* artist collective, whose members considered it to be a “workshop against imperialism...and a workshop for the liberation of all peoples.” The graphic artists of *Taller* saw their artwork as an instrument for promoting liberationist ideals and redressing injustice. Supported by a community of like-minded populist artists, Catlett further elaborated her skill in communicating social and political messages to a broad audience with an economy of form. Of her time at the workshop, Catlett commented that, “I learned how to put art to the service of the people.”

Catlett had incorporated forms inspired by Central and West African art since her days as a student at Howard, frequently utilizing a particular angularity of facial physiognomy, a pronounced horizontal bridge line and “coffee bean-shaped eyes” evocative of Baule masks in her sculptures. Increasingly, she came to interpret the forms of African art in abstract terms, noting that, “After all, abstraction was born in Africa.” Catlett’s experimentation with abstraction rooted in African forms is represented in the exhibition by the sculpture *Magic Mask* (1970), which is perhaps her most non-representational work. In Mexico, Catlett was similarly influenced by Pre-Columbian sculpture, which she studied under the guidance of Francisco Zuniga at the *Escuela de Pintura y Escultura*. Her attention to Pre-Columbian and African art over the course of decades, Catlett noted, taught her to “communicate feeling through form.”

In forging her own distinct approach to sculptural form, Catlett drew deeply from three primary sources: Central and West African art, Pre-Colombian sculpture and European Organic Modernism. As Herzog has noted,

[Catlett] took the sculptural methods and language she had learned in the United States and either merged them with or reshaped them according to the look and syntax of African and pre-Hispanic art. As a result, her sculptures could evoke modernism but not feel modernist.⁵

Despite its affinities with the forms of European modernists such as Brancusi, Arp and Moore, Catlett’s sculpture is fundamentally distinguished by its subject matter and its highly-engaged posture towards sociopolitical and historical circumstances. Fulfilling Wood’s mandate to depict what she knew, Catlett maintained a focus on the subject of African American womanhood throughout her career. Though her sculptural forms were often highly-abstracted, Catlett imbued



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her works with a profound sense of narrative shaped by both her intensely personal experience and identification as an African American woman (along with her acquired *mejicanismos*) and her broader, abiding concern with principles of justice, freedom, dignity and resilience. Catlett's sculptures exude a profound, if ineffable, sense of strength, agency and will. Lowery Stokes Sims describes the strength and agency in Catlett's women in contrast to the more languid female forms of Zuniga:

*Catlett's women reach upward, fists raised, arms folded over their heads, stretching to the sun in an assertive power of their womanhood. They have, in the words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes, "power in their haunches" and express the "power of a woman's body when it is animated from the inside."*⁶

Catlett's singular manner of depicting feminine strength - of spirit, body and character - is aptly demonstrated by several works in the current show. *Walking Woman* (1987) and *Stepping Out* (2000) both proudly convey such qualities in depicting women mid-stride, while even her radically pared-down *Torso* works suggest a robust "animation from inside."

Considering Elizabeth Catlett's work in historical context reveals a complex, even contradictory relationship to the European Modernism. In addition to specific stylistic affinities with European Modernism, Catlett's work comported with the drive towards reduced, essentialist forms. However, a fundamentally anti-modern strain persists in Catlett's work, in so far as her works defiantly remain on a continuum with African and Pre-Columbian sculpture. Whereas European modernists freely borrowed forms from African art without regard to meaning or cultural specificity, Catlett directly inculcates such cultural and historical precedents into her sculpture. With her unbowed adherence to populism and idealistic view of the potential of art to reach broad audiences and further sociopolitical causes, Catlett established her own trajectory - employing formal elements of modernism only to the extent that they suited her cause. In comparing Catlett's art with European modernist organic abstraction (particularly Brancusi's sculpture), Michael Brenson concluded the following:



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Unlike Brancusi's sculptures...Catlett's communicate the importance of personal and social history. They retain the stamp of psychological encounters, the drama of race and class differences, the longing both for privacy and solidarity. The past is ever present in Catlett's figures. So is the affirmation of the reality and necessity of struggle.⁷



Elizabeth Catlett, *Political Prisoner* (detail), 1978.

Elizabeth Catlett: *Wake Up in Glory* is on view at **Burning in Water - New York** through February 3, 2018.



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Alice Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012) was born in Washington, DC. She studied at Howard University, principally under the direction of James Porter. After graduation, she served as a public school art teacher in Durham, NC, where she also worked with Thurgood Marshall on a campaign against racial disparities in teacher salaries. Catlett subsequently studied art at the University of Iowa under the mentorship of the painter Grant Wood and became the first student ever to receive an MFA. Her thesis project sculpture, *Mother and Child*, was awarded first prize at the 1941 American Negro Exposition in Chicago. After a period in New York when she studied under the Russian sculptor Ossip Zadkine and taught at the radically progressive George Washington Carver School in Harlem, Catlett moved to Mexico in 1941. She joined the *Taller de Gráfica Popular* artist collective in Mexico City. She also studied sculpture at the *Esmeralda Escuela de Pintura y Escultura* with ceramicist Francisco Zuñiga and wood sculptor José L. Ruíz. In 1959, Catlett became head of the department of sculpture at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. The city of New Orleans commissioned Catlett to create a ten-foot sculpture of Louis Armstrong for the city's Bicentennial celebration in 1975. Solo exhibitions of Catlett's work have been mounted at the The Modern Art Museum, Mexico City (1970), The Atlanta Center for Black Art (1972), The Howard University Gallery of Art (1972), The Studio Museum in Harlem (1972, 1994), Southern University (1974), Scripps College (1975), the Malcolm Brown Gallery (1981), the New Orleans Museum of Art (1983), the African American Museum of Dallas (1984), Spelman College (1985), the *Museo Diego Rivera* in Guanajuato, Mexico (1987), the Neuberger Museum of Art (1998) and the Bronx Museum (2011). Elizabeth Catlett's work is in the permanent collections of numerous museums and institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Library of Congress, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Iowa, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in Mexico.

Burning in Water is a New York gallery and project space featuring an innovative curatorial program that highlights the work of living artists with reference to broader issues confronting society. Founded in 2015 by Barry Thomas Malin, the gallery frequently collaborates with nonprofit and community-based organizations in presenting its projects.



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¹ Herzog, Melanie Anne, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico*, University of Washington Press, 2000.

² Brenson, Michael, "Elizabeth Catlett's Sculptural Aesthetics," in *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture: A 50 Year Retrospective*, University of Washington Press, 1988.

³ As quoted in *Elizabeth Catlett: Prints and Sculptures*, The Studio Museum of Harlem, 1972.

⁴ Morrison, Keith, *Art in Washington and Its Afro-American Presence: 1940 - 1970*, Washington Project for the Arts, 1985.

⁵ Brenson, Michael, "Elizabeth Catlett's Sculptural Aesthetics," in *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture: A 50 Year Retrospective*, University of Washington Press, 1998.

⁶ Stokes Sims, Lowery, "Elizabeth Catlett," in *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture: A 50 Year Retrospective*, University of Washington Press, 1998.

⁷ Brenson, Michael, "Elizabeth Catlett's Sculptural Aesthetics," in *Elizabeth Catlett Sculpture: A 50 Year Retrospective*, University of Washington Press, 1998.