

Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra

Barbara Chase-Riboud is an African American artist, poet and novelist, who was raised and educated in Philadelphia and now divides her time between Paris and Rome. Her long time fascination with Cleopatra VII of Egypt has resulted in six large scale sculptures, three mixed media wall pieces of a projected dozen, her poetry and several allusions in her novels. The result is not only a very personal reception of the historical Cleopatra, but also an intelligent and informed contribution to the ongoing dialogue about Cleopatra's nature. Although Chase-Riboud exercised her literary and artistic license, there is at the core of her reception a very Plutarchian Cleopatra.

This paper will analyze her treatment of the Queen in her long poem *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra*. New York: Morrow, 1987. It has been reissued as part of a larger collection of her poetry, entitled *Every Time a Knot is Undone, A God is Released: Collected and New Poems 1974-2011*. New York: Seven Stories Press (2014) 57-128. That poem is a very personal portrait of Cleopatra. She depicts her as shaven headed, never calls her beautiful or black, but frequently insists that she is African. Chase-Riboud calls the work a 'Melologue', i.e. a recitation with musical accompaniment. It is a fascinating piece, although the surrealistic and anachronistic portions are challenging for literal minded classicists. It is based largely on Plutarch, including quotes from the 1579 North translation and largely, but not entirely, free from the influence of English Drama and American Film.