



Kara Walker

UPON MY MANY MASTERS—AN OUTLINE

KARA WALKER IS A YOUNG, BLACK AMERICAN WOMAN who has emerged in the past two years as an artist with a powerful and singular vision and a striking command of her craft. Her work ranges from small, intimate, delicately executed drawings to expansive installations of sharply cut black-paper silhouettes. Three bodies of Walker's work are presented in this exhibition: five sets of small drawings, each titled *Negress Notes*, all of which are brought together for the first time; a suite of eight large-scale drawings on paper completed in the last year; and two cutout black-paper silhouette installations that have been joined in a single large gallery. The intention of this exhibition has been to make clear the close relationship between these bodies of work and to open a more complete understanding and appreciation of both the artist's process and subjects.

In the interview that follows, Walker discusses the development of her work, the sources and meanings of her images, and the psychological and cultural issues raised by them. The characters and stories that are portrayed are both alluring and highly disturbing, beautiful but often repugnant as well. She does not shy away from depicting taboo subjects: sexual, scatological, or violent. History and psychology meld, so that social relations and internal identity, desires and nightmares, cannot be separated. She renders figures and tells tales that have been imagined but suppressed, known but stricken from official histories. These are images that lurk in the subconscious, and in her art expose contradictions and tensions of race in America that have grown up over centuries of lies and insecurities, exploitation and vulnerabilities. Precocious and subversive, Walker's work provokes the catharsis achieved by public acknowledgement of these suppressed histories and their effect on the psyche.

To a great degree the formal and technical sophistication of Walker's work carries the weight of the stories that unfold, creating images that are sly and subtle with nuanced expressions of character and psychology but also forceful, robust, and tough. Formally her command of line and shading recall the Western tradition of old-master drawing, particularly the development of the cartoon as a preparatory study, a characteristic of Italian Renaissance frescoes for instance. Her drawings and her work in general equally recall the bawdy narrative of comic books, allowing the observation that these two streams of cartoons share a common root. In the cutout paper silhouettes, the artist's line is simplified to contour but retains an astonishing agility and detail; forms are woven together in complex counterpoints of negative and positive space. In sum Walker is an artist of remarkable originality who, fusing craft with content, expands aesthetic and cultural perception.

We are especially pleased to present Kara Walker's first solo exhibition on the West Coast. She is a native of Stockton, California, where she was born in 1969 and lived until the age of thirteen, having often been brought to SFMOMA as a child by her family. She attended high school in Atlanta and received a bachelor's degree from the Atlanta College of Art and then attended the Rhode Island School of Design, graduating with a master of fine arts degree. She lives and works in Providence.

We would like to thank Brent Sikkema of Wooster Gardens in New York for help in securing the artworks and assisting with the details of the organization of this exhibition. We gratefully appreciate the several lenders who have generously parted with works from their collections to be shown here. We extend our warmest thanks to Kara Walker, whose strength and grace of character are equal to the intensity and achievement of her art.

GARY GARRELS

Elise S. Haas Chief Curator and Curator of Painting and Sculpture



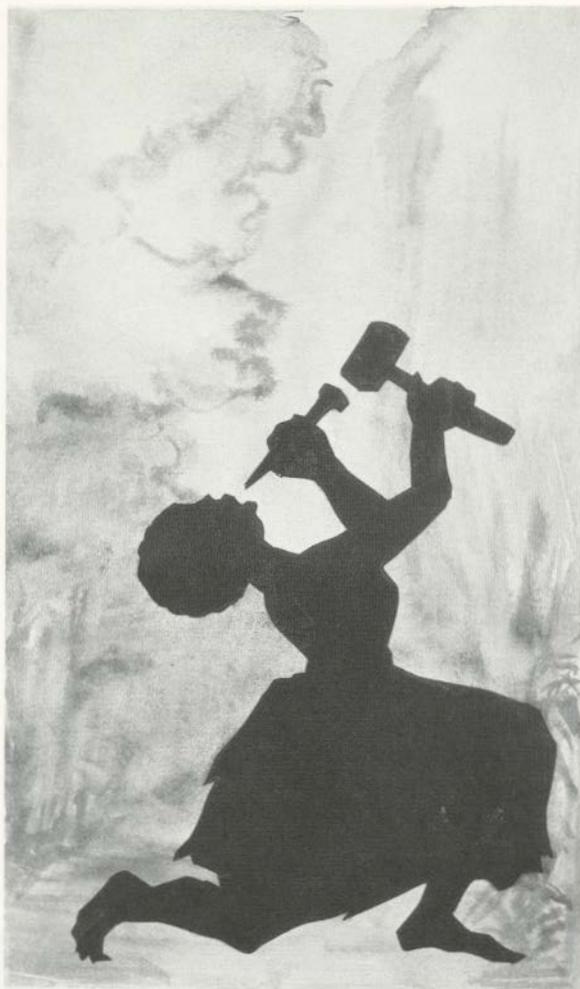
Untitled, from the series, *Negress Notes*, 1995



Untitled, from the series, *Negress Notes*, 1995

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Kara Walker



Untitled, from the series, *Negress Notes*, 1995

ALEXANDER ALBERRO: How did you first come upon your decision to make and exhibit the cutout silhouettes? Did you initially put them onto canvas?

KARA WALKER: Yes. In Atlanta I was still sort of timidly painting things. Then I began making little oval framed pornographic collages. I would cover up the juicy parts with silhouettes or paperback romance novel heroines. These aren't my favorite artworks but they were almost heading in the direction that I wanted to go. When I left Atlanta, I slowly abandoned oil paint altogether, weaning myself of its obvious seduction and looking for a format that seemed weak.... I suppose I consider the silhouette weak. I wanted to find a format that I could seduce. That seems to me to be in keeping with my mindset. Especially at that time, since I was concentrating a lot on the body of black woman as exotic seductress—purveyor of failed seductions particularly—desire, miscegenation, and all the complexities and historicity of all these things. Eventually, I started cutting silhouettes out of wood with a jigsaw. I first did this with a piece I called *Genealogy*. I added eyes, lips, tits—that looked like eyes—and blindfolds to some, and placed them on a wall in a manner that alluded to a family tree.

AA: What did your paintings look like?

KW: Well, the paintings were really big. I was trying to make up mythology, and deconstruct it at the same time. I was using classical iconographic things like swans alluding to Leda and the Swan, and hermaphrodites. And I was making hybrid animals as well. But I don't think any of that carried over into my collage work. It was strictly oil painting. Large oil painting, with thick and juicy brushwork.

AA: So there was quite a transformation in your work after you left Atlanta.

KW: Oh, yeah, it was a conscious change. I was determined to be better; to make

work that would actually stimulate others, and not just myself. I figured that if I succeeded in one radical transformation, then I could do anything. In a way, a lot of this has to do with my leaving the South. In Atlanta, I was very consciously trying to stay away from race issues. There it was hard to really see these issues since the culture is so extremely black and white. I mean, there are black artists doing work that deals with race issues in Atlanta, but I thought it all looked the same. I didn't want to be a part of that.

AA: Why the silhouettes, then?

KW: Somewhere along the way I,



The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven, 1995

like many other people, became interested in kitschy items such as Sam Keane's big-eyed children that you find on prints everywhere. So the silhouette images were popping up here and there but I wasn't really thinking of them as anything other than kitsch. I hadn't really investigated them as having a fairly rich history. I was thinking about blackness, and minstrelsy, and the kind of positions that I was putting myself in at home in Atlanta. I mean, I was testing the ground to see what kind of a person I was perceived as, or what kind of a person I was thinking of myself as. I mean, I saw myself as someone who was locked in histories, as a nebulous, shadowy character from a romance novel, but not a novel that anyone ever remembered.

AA: What did you see in the kitsch object that intrigued you enough to take it up in your work? What was it that attracted you to the Sam Keane objects and motifs?

KW: I think I liked the fact that they were just awful. I mean, I thought that if it's ineffective to make paintings of things that one loves and finds meaningful, then what happens when one makes pictures of things that one would never want to see a picture of? So I tried that for a little while. The big-eyed girl went over pretty well but it wasn't a lasting project.

But the silhouette children kept popping up. Initially just little sketches and tiny paintings here and there, but developing into something much more prevalent. In fact, they took on greater importance when I began thinking about minstrelsy and putting on the Other person and interracial desire—when I attempted to see from the other person's point of view: from the point of view of the white male master from American history. The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as linked. Of course, while the stereotype, or the emblem, can communicate with a lot of people, and a lot of people can understand it, the other side of this is that it also reduces difference, reduces diversity to that stereotype. I was kind of working through this in the tableaux and things that I've been doing, where the intention was to render everybody black and go from there. Go from this backhanded philosophy that blackness is akin to everything.

AA: But how do you get to narrative from the silhouette emblem?

KW: Well, from the moment that I started working on these things I imagined that some day they would be put together in a kind of cyclorama. I mean, just like the Cyclorama in Atlanta that goes around and around in an endless cycle of history locked up in a room, I thought that it would be possible to arrange the silhouettes in such a way that they would make a kind of history painting encompassing the whole room. This is once again informed in part by my thinking about accessibility. After all, the Cyclorama is also a broadly accessible fairground kind of artwork like the silhouettes.

AA: And yet whereas the Cyclorama is exhibited in a fairground environment, your work is not, or perhaps I should say, has not yet been. What kind of exhibition spaces do you anticipate for your work?

KW: To be perfectly honest, I think museum and gallery spaces are carnival-like, particularly in New York, or any large city which is so full of spectators. But for the most part, I like that varnish of authority that an art institution excretes, and the fact that folks walk in anticipating to look at life in a new way. The hard part,

of course, is getting them there.

AA: Your work is site specific then, designed specifically for the spaces in which they're exhibited.

KW: Yeah, I've made all of the wall drawings that have been done thus far on site. Which is like cutting the shadows of the room out of paper. When I go to cut out the silhouettes, I have my sketches on hand so that I know more or less what goes where, and what characters are supposed to do what. But it's not like I plan it all out in my studio and then just redo it in the exhibition site. And I do it all myself, without assistants. There is a certain element of improvisation and working out of the particulars as the piece is being cut that I don't think I could ever delegate to others to carry out.

AA: So your work definitely has a hands-on aspect to it throughout its production.

KW: Yeah, it's crafty, which I think is important. In fact the craftiness of the work kind of lends itself to the subject matter in a way that I find rather interesting. First of all, I draw like a madwoman. I doubt an assistant could find a line to follow. I'm also very sensitive to pent-up racist accusations of laziness. I'm subtly amused by those existing narratives by former slaves which begin with testimonials as to the literary integrity of the author—"written by Herself," and the like—and I often wonder if that same sentiment informs some of the folks who say they like what I do.

Besides, I'm actually pretty quick at cutting the shadows out. A typical installation will take maybe three days to cut out. Of course, it takes me a lot of time to figure out the operation of the room and how the whole narrative will be played out on the walls.

AA: Your work obviously employs humor to good effect. Do you use humor as a strategy of some sort?

KW: Actually, the humor surprises me quite a bit. When I started the work, I think I was afraid to make comments on race. What scared me was that I didn't know what these comments were going to be like. They were floating around in an unknown place in my mind. I just decided that the easiest way to figure out what was going on in my head was by free associating blackness...with my own self-impression, with situations I was in, with everything actually.

AA: So to what extent is your work developed consciously, and to what extent is it developed unconsciously?

KW: A lot of it comes directly from that kind of "play," if you will, that is the result of free association.

So you can see why a lot of the stuff that I do surprises even me. I mean, if this stuff is even in my head, it must be in other people's.

In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison looks at what she calls the Africisms, the blackness that occurs in literature, and examines what it does to the storyline, what the authors were or weren't intending by it. So I took that approach and developed it introspectively, so to speak, by allowing myself to go on a tangent and then stepping back and taking a look at what I had done. My assumption behind all of this, however, was that the whole unconsciousness of America is permeated with these condescending images of Mammy and pick-

aninny characters. And the pickaninny postcards and other bits of Americana that one could find in flea markets anywhere are always the stuff of toilet humor.

AA: Toilet humor?

KW: Yeah, what free association was before psychoanalysis. The kind of humor that black characters have been the “butt” of since Negroes were employed to fill a psychological gap. Every time I enter a flea market, I see something like a pickaninny with its head in a toilet. This association of blackness with excrement conjures up a very early memory. . . wondering what the color of my white friends’ shit was. Whoever made the original toy literally employed a toilet to his or her humor, ha ha. I find these bawdy/body associations extremely important, though. I relate through it as well. . . this black body. . . jiggling around and representing everything but itself.

So I use humor, but a type of humor that makes it difficult for myself or a viewer to decide just how hard to laugh. That uneasiness is an important part of the work.

In a way, to really understand my work, or what you referred to as the “strategies” underlying my work, you have to know a bit about the American South, and the totally bipolar attitudes there. You know, in Atlanta there’s a strong middle-class black community that goes to art shows that feature work made mostly by black artists. But art in that community has a totally different function than what happens say in the Museum of Modern Art or the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. For this community in Atlanta, the exhibition event is very much a social event—one that usually has more of a political edge than you find with a New York exhibition. There’s an annual show in particular that takes place every February or so in Atlanta. I forget what it’s called, but it features black artists. And this is the show that I despise the most. What I particularly dislike about it is that the art in this show goes out of its way to preach to the converted. But that’s what very conservative art audiences anticipate. They wouldn’t want to see anything that might rile them up, or reveal some emotions or memories that are deeply buried in their unconscious. It’s very Victorian—like some pre-modern Paris salon. Knowing this background puts a different perspective on my work—one that you would normally miss if you just look at it from the point of view of its exhibition in Providence or New York. I guess what I’m saying is that I considered it almost a joke in itself to begin making work that employs characters from the history of slavery and ante-bellum myth and literature as subject matter. It’s too perfect for artists, and way too expected of me. When I came up north, to freedom as it were, I was determined to expose all the injustices of being me. This strategy operated a little like the Slave Narrative tradition, except that I was conscious that I played all the roles—Master, Mistress, and Abolitionist—and that the roles have been spoiled over time through the influence of Harlequin romances and pornographic genres.

AA: There’s another aspect of your work, though, that rather than being totally Southern, seems to be very much about American history.

KW: As I see it, in the hundred year span between the end of the Civil War and the strengthening of the Civil Rights movement, the War never ended. The South lost the War, but unable to accept this continues to replay it. But the twenty-five or thirty years since the real end of the Civil War, which I think the Civil Rights movement brought about, has thrown Southerners into this whole other dialogue that they now have to reckon with. You know, there’s the conflict between a love of the past—and of genteel whiteness as imagined to have existed in that past—and the fear of offending the sons and grand-daughters of former slaves. So the traces of the past are everywhere in the South. Polite, Southern hospitality and sweetness

coats everything. But if you just scratch beneath the surface. . . Then again, this happens everywhere. This is American history.

AA: Yeah. And the humor operative in your work cuts through that surface quite well. But the silhouette aspect of your work also ties it to the kitsch mass cultural icons, or emblems, that circulate widely in our society. Do you see a connection between those traces of the past and the mass cultural, kitsch emblem?

KW: “The traces of the past,” this is my favorite aphorism. . . In America, the silhouette was almost always practiced by relative amateurs. Of course, there were a few “masters” of the genre, but all of the great outdated texts speak of lesser lights: ladies, children, and even machines that could do the job no less adroitly. It’s also an art that speaks of a kind of purity of form, color, and, insidiously, of race and heritage. So I would think that this would appeal to an early America seeking to define itself against a flashy and complicated Europe—a Europe, by the way, that went so far as to call shadow portraits “silhouettes,” after the French finance minister whose policies were derided as cheap, and who also practiced the inexpensive little art. . . the word is actually an insult.

As I see it, kitsch is artworks or objects that hearken back to the days of old with sentimental excess. Items that suggest a moment or era of wholeness and innocence, like the genteel Old South where I’m supposed to breed, or the mysterious Motherland where I’m supposed to be a queen. The kitsch object breaks down all forms of transgression.

AA: What about contemporary influences? Which artists working now or in the last couple of decades have had an impact on your work?

KW: You’d probably have to go back a little further than that. The work that I really dig is that done by artists such as George Grosz, Otto Dix, and others around that circle in Germany between the wars. Of course there’s the work of Robert Colescott which I also find very important, especially in terms of subject matter. The way he combines his wit with his militancy for the subject matter was an important model for me. My teenage idol, however, was Andy Warhol.

AA: Andy Warhol? How do you see your work related to his?

KW: Well, his strategy of taking the most obvious things in the culture and blowing them up and placing them in a gallery is something that I think my work does as well. But perhaps it was more Warhol’s persona than his work that interested me early on. I mean, I was fascinated by the way he operated in the artworld, and by the fact that people for the longest time, perhaps to this day, couldn’t figure out if he was a genius or an idiot savant, a Chauncey Gardener. And in fact, my identification with Warhol was so strong at one point that when he died, people sent me condolence cards. [Laughs]

Kara Walker

Born in Stockton, California, 1969
Lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island

EDUCATION

M.F.A. Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1994
B.A. Atlanta College of Art, 1991

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1995 *In Dixie's Land*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annondale-on-Hudson, New York
The High and Soft Laughter of Nigger Wenches at Night, Wooster Gardens, New York
- 1996 Bernard Toale Gallery, Boston
From the Bowels to the Bosom, Wooster Gardens, New York
- 1997 *Kara Walker*, Renaissance Society, Chicago

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1991 *Black Men: Image/Reality*, New Visions Gallery, Atlanta
The Earth Factory Show, Hasting Seeds Building, Atlanta
The Naked People Show, 800 East, Atlanta
One/Another, North Arts Center, Atlanta
Rated R X: Pathological Conditions, New Visions Gallery, Atlanta
Swan Song, Gallery 100, Atlanta
- 1992 *Angry Love*, Pavilion Exhibit, Arts Festival of Atlanta
Black Women Artists, YMI Cultural Center, Asheville, North Carolina
Into the Light, 1992 Nexus Biennale, Nexus Contemporary Arts Center, Atlanta
National Black Arts Festival/Emerging Artists, Arts Exchange, Atlanta
- 1993 *1993 Annual Invitational New Talent Exhibition*, MU Gallery, Boston
Rough Trade, Sol Koffler Gallery, Providence, Rhode Island
- 1994 *An Historical Romance*, Sol Koffler Gallery, Providence, Rhode Island
Selections 1994, The Drawing Center, New York
Summer Group Show #2, Stienbaum/Krauss Gallery, New York
- 1995 *La Belle et La Bête*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris
Inaugural Show, Paul Morris Gallery, New York
Landscapes, Borders, Boundaries, Nexus Contemporary Arts Center, Atlanta
Now Is the Time, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
- 1996 *Body Language*, Mills Gallery, Boston
No Doubt, Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Negress Notes

1995
watercolor on paper
twenty-seven watercolors: thirteen at 9 x 6 in. (22.9 x 15.2 cm), eight at 12 x 9 in. (30.4 x 22.9 cm), four at 7 x 5 in. (17.8 x 12.6 cm), one at 6 x 9 in. (15.2 x 22.9 cm).
Collection of A.G. Rosen

Negress Notes

1995
watercolor on paper
twenty watercolors: fourteen at 9 x 6 in. (22.9 x 15.2 cm), six at 6 x 9 in. (15.2 x 22.9 cm)
Collection of Brent Sikkema

The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven

1995
cut paper and adhesive
twenty-six silhouettes, approx. 13 x 35 ft. (4 x 10.6 m) overall
Collection of Jeffrey Deitch

African's

1996
cut paper and adhesive
twenty-five silhouettes, approx. 12 x 66 ft. (3.7 x 20.1 m) overall
Collection of Eileen and Peter Norton

Allegory

1996
watercolor and gouache
63 3/4 x 51 1/2 in. (161.9 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

B'rer

1996
watercolor and gouache
63 x 51 1/2 in. (160 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

Duet

1996
watercolor and gouache
62 x 51 1/2 in. (157.4 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

John Brown

1996
watercolor and gouache
65 x 51 1/2 in. (165.1 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

Leaving the Scene. . .

1996
watercolor and gouache
61 1/4 x 51 1/2 in. (155.6 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

Missionary Sketch for African's

1996
watercolor and gouache
65 1/2 x 51 1/2 in. (166.3 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

Negress Notes

1996
watercolor on paper
eighteen watercolors: sixteen at 9 x 6 in. (22.9 x 15.2 cm), two at 6 x 9 in. (15.2 x 22.9 cm)
Collection of Pierre Apraxine

Negress Notes

1996
watercolor on paper and ink on rice paper
twenty-six watercolors: eleven at 10 x 7 in. (25.4 x 17.8 cm), eight at 9 x 6 in. (22.9 x 15.2 cm), four at 7 x 10 in. (17.8 x 25.4 cm), one at 12 x 9 in. (30.4 x 22.9 cm), one at 7 x 5 (17.8 x 12.6 cm), one at 6 x 9 in. (15.2 x 22.9 cm).
Courtesy of Wooster Gardens, New York

Negress Notes

1996
watercolor on paper
seventeen watercolors: fifteen at 9 x 6 in. (22.9 x 15.2 cm), two at 6 x 9 in. (15.2 x 22.9 cm)
Courtesy of Wooster Gardens, New York

Pegged

1996
watercolor and gouache
60 x 51 1/2 in. (152.3 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

Philadelphia

1996
watercolor and gouache
80 1/2 x 51 1/2 in. (204.4 x 130.8 cm)
Collection of Dakis Joannou, Athens

Untitled

1996
ink on rice paper
24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm)
Courtesy of Wooster Gardens

Untitled

1996
watercolor on paper
16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.4 cm)
Courtesy of Wooster Gardens

Untitled

1996
watercolor on paper
16 x 12 in. (40.6 x 30.4 cm)
Courtesy of Wooster Gardens

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new
work

A SERIES OF RECENT WORK BY YOUNGER AND ESTABLISHED ARTISTS