



Voices from the Gaps

Kara Walker

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Where do these images stem from? Is it your typical black woman shit?

—Kara Walker in a mock interview question for herself, Renaissance Society of Chicago artist book

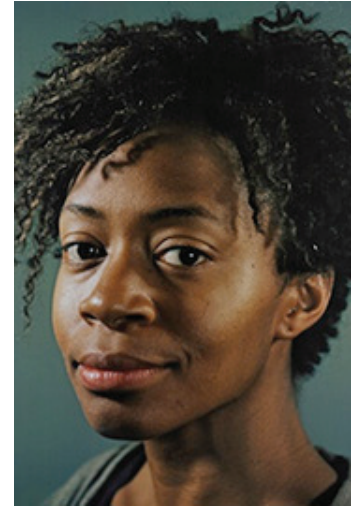
I make art for anyone whos forgot whit it feels like to put up a fight whos forgot what pure sins about.

—Kara Walker on typed notecard (Narratives of a Negress 36)

We are not large enough receptacles- individually/ to contain the enormity of suffering caused./ But at least we try

—Kara Walker on notecard (Narratives of a Negress 171)

”



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1969
- * African-American visual artist and author

Biography

Kara Elizabeth Walker was born November 26, 1969, in Stockton, California. She spent her childhood in San Francisco, but in 1983, her family moved to Atlanta, Georgia. San Francisco had offered her an integrated and liberal community; so, it was quite a shock for Walker to move to a place where the KKK remained in existence.

This page was researched and submitted by Emma Johnson in May, 2008.



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While protected from race issues in her childhood, during high school Walker had white friends that did not consider her to be socially black and therefore felt unconstrained to make disparaging remarks about the African American community. Because they accepted Walker into their social circle, they assumed that she was not offended. In addition, Walker had to contend with white male classmates who exoticized African Americans (Belcove 408). The combination of Walker's experience coming of age in a non-segregated city and then later living in a place with extreme racism contribute to her a unique perspective on race.

After high school, Walker obtained a BFA from the Atlanta School of the Arts in Georgia. Upon graduating, her work was influenced by reading historical Harlequin romances that were pornographic with stereotypical characters. A year later, she attended graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design and worked as a stripper (Leibovitz 273). Walker explains, "That put me back in my studio, trying to process and understand the shame and embarrassment" (Leibovitz 273). The stripper functions as the negress in our time. Perhaps Walker's foray into the lifestyle was to help her understand the stereotype in more than an intellectual way.

This experience also provides additional insight into her self-portrait piece, *Cut* (1998). In this work Walker responds to a photograph of herself jumping in the air published in *Interview* magazine (Nov 1998). She depicts herself as a silhouetted figure slitting her wrists with blood streaming out of them into the air. This was Walker's reaction to feeling like she had whored herself out to be accepted by white art institutions. Her commentary suggests she has to metaphorically sacrifice herself and jump up when they say jump.

After graduating in 1994, Walker had a show at The Drawing Center in New York City. Walker drew a lot of critics' attention with her exhibited piece, *Gone: An Historical Romance of the Civil War As It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. This show elevated her to the status of professional artist. Three years later Walker received the prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius award," making her the youngest recipient. In 2007, *Time* magazine even included her in their annual "100 Top Influential People in the World" definitive list (Kruger 131).

In 2002, Walker moved from Providence, Rhode Island, to Manhattan where she currently teaches at the School of Arts at Columbia University, in addition to her many art exhibitions.



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Subject Matter

Kara Walker's art explores race, gender, sexuality and identity. She addresses the relationship between blacks and whites and the history of slavery. Art critic Jerry Saltz summarizes the experience: "In Walker's art, we're often trapped in the seventy-five years of American hell between 1788, the year slavery was made legal by the U.S. Constitution, and 1863, the year Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation" (Queen). The work is repelling, but the formal qualities of the imagery itself are seductive and entice the viewer to take a closer look.

Walker's art consists largely of drawings, note cards with text and black paper silhouettes on white paper or a wall; but, she is best known for her life-size 19th century silhouettes that reference the antebellum South. These images cover walls with life-size narrative scenes of slavery. The art has been described as pornographic, violent, and provocative. Indeed, the images are aggressive. Walker's stereotypical characters perform bodily functions and sexual acts which leave the viewer to question whether or not the images are depicting rape. Master and slave power struggles are apparent in almost every portrayal. The ambiguity in the scenes serves dually to acknowledge the subjectivity of history as well as to allow viewers to develop their own interpretations. Viewers are invited to question how much of their perception is coming from the piece—and how much is coming from themselves.

Much of this internal anxiety in the viewer is achieved through Walker's use of the silhouette, which encourages the viewer to act as a voyeur. The viewer cannot be confronted because the figures cannot look the viewer in the eye; however, viewers are still challenged to react because of the weighty subject matter. If only on a subconscious level, the silhouette also suggests the image is being projected from behind the viewer; this affords viewers the illusion that they can observe and react without being seen by the subject. Because a silhouette is a projected copy of its original, the image becomes once removed. Consequently, the viewer is less confronted by the subject; however, they're still confronted by the subject matter. The silhouettes force the viewer to rely on stereotypes to decipher who is black and who is white. This causes viewers to be repulsed at themselves for how automatically they can decipher the images. "[W]hen we can tell what race one of Walker's figures are we have to ask what is it about them that makes it apparent to us" (Reinhardt 113).



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Walker explains: “[S]ilhouettes are reductions, and racial stereotypes are also reductions of actual human beings” (Wallace 176). A silhouette has no unique identity; it is a flat black-and-white depiction. The silhouette lends itself to exaggerating stereotypes which collectively rob people of an identity. It’s not surprising that Walker was a fan of Andy Warhol. Their works have many similarities. Both make commentary by taking imagery from pop culture and magnifying it until it becomes an absurd parody of itself—and then presenting it back to an audience (Nickas 154).

The Silhouette

By the late nineteenth century in America, many silhouette cutters were African American, a history Walker would likely be aware of (Wagner 93). The Silhouette was named after Etienne de Silhouette. His attacks on wealth and privilege, combined with the plainness and cheap cost of the silhouette portrait, gave him the reputation of representing anything inferior, from pants without pockets to the paper portrait (Wagner 94). Before the silhouette, families had to be wealthy in order to get their portraits made. Oil painting required a skilled artist, labor-intensive work and expensive materials; this was a luxury assessable only to a select few. The silhouette, however, made the portrait affordable to the working class since the materials were inexpensive and it took relatively little time to make. In this way, choosing the silhouette is much like Walker choosing to call herself a negress. She is rejecting the painted portrait of the elite in favor of the “inferior” silhouette.

Some scholars argue that Walker’s use of silhouette and construction paper are purposefully “inferior” material to oil paint, and, therefore relegates herself into a kind of art that is “lower”—more craft than serious art, and, this in and of itself is a statement that she is of a lower class. Walker’s silhouettes originated as paint on canvas but later evolved into paper on the wall. The preciousness of painting, the baggage of art history and the connotations of the traditional white male artist made the medium less suitable for the work. Walker found the low-grade craftiness of paper on the wall more appropriate for the subject matter. Walker also didn’t want her viewers to be seduced by the paint to the detriment of her content. (Vergne 16)



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Criticism by Some

Although the work addresses African-American issues, some critics assert that Walker's style makes the work look like it was made by a white person. Her work lacks the qualities these critics associate with "outsider art," qualities like a rough wood carving, a primitive hand or Basquiatte-drips and impressionistic brush strokes. And, although the content is aggressive, the way it is rendered does not look "angry." Instead, the work looks well thought out and delicately made.

Many detractors argue that almost all of her collectors are white (Extreme 3) and that white institutions have chosen Walker as their token black artist. They suggest that her use of stereotypes is material that white curators are more comfortable with than other African Americans' art. Some of these groups say the museums have an unspoken quota for colored artists and, after they pick their artists, there is no room to exhibit other artists that portray positive images of African Americans. They argue that Walker is a naïve artist who negatively portrays blacks and hinders the cause of African Americans, most notably artist Betty Saer (Sanneh 46).

Still others have criticized Walker for marrying a white man, suggesting that Walker is living out a slave/master fantasy like the ones she depicts in her art. This discussion exemplifies expectations the public has of minority artists. All minorities are individuals beyond the underrepresented groups they identify with, but they do not afford the same luxury to make art as an individual like their Caucasian counterparts. Divya Tolia-Kelly and Andy Morris write of Kobena Mercer's article "Black Art and the Burden of Representation": "The central argument . . . was that 'black art' is facing a crisis of being perceived as needing to speak for 'the totality of its culture.' Mercer foregrounds this concern by asserting that this predicament was arrived at through a 'misconceptualisation' of culture 'as a fixed and final property of different racial groups.'" (153). Critic Michele Wallace argues in defense of Walker's art: "This is about the work of Kara Walker and no one else, and certainly not about the collective race" (177).



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Walker's artwork also might be in reaction to the art of the previous generation. Walker felt that the artwork in Georgia, exhibited to a middle-class African American audience, was only preaching to the choir. This art has its place, but Walker did not want her art to be catharsis for black audiences that already agreed with her art. Walker states, "I've seen so much really responsible art. I've seen a lot of art exhibits that were less about the art and more about social issues ... I don't want to be a politician" (Armstrong 112).

Is it possible to draw attention to something without increasing its power or implicating oneself in the hegemonic claims that one is critiquing? Some would argue that Walker is "unwittingly reinforcing the stereotypes she parodies" (McEvelley 54 quoting Donald Kuspit in "Kara Walker's Cakewalk" on *Artnet*). However, besides artists, many black people have taken to collecting racist collectables (Sanneh 46). Renowned art critics, celebrities, and artists collect racist African American memorabilia. In order to reclaim their history they find the irony in the objects' kitsch value and subsequently the artifacts do not carry the same emotional weight and pain that they once did. "Walker said that she is regurgitating all of the hate and pain rather than suppressing it," reports Kevin Sipp, a manager at Hammond House Galleries in Atlanta (Sanneh 44).

Just as some African Americans reclaim racist objects, Walker reclaims racist words. In response to Walker's use of the word "negress" she responds: "Well, there are a lot of sophisticated people who get very amused by this backhanded insult to myself, which is, of course, always how black people get really successful" (Armstrong 112). Many older-generation African-American artists do not approve of Kara Walker's artwork. This makes sense: the newer generation has been known for its sarcasm and irony. The older generation has not had enough distance from the past to be able to view these things as ironic. Experiencing racism in a different time period, Walker has a certain distance that allows her to step back and critique. The idea of the negress was a persona Walker developed for herself to use in her work. The negress is Walker. This helps Walker express her message in a more concrete way. The exaggeration allows her to be more forthcoming when she wants to prove a point.



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Conclusion

One is not immune to messages one is bombarded with. Although slavery does not exist in a formal sense, parts of it still exist in the collective conscious. Society has made substantial progress since the Antebellum South, but it is going to take more time to eradicate society's underlying prejudices. Walker invites viewers to continue this healing process with her work. She constantly bombards the viewer with images that are hard to process; but as viewers continue to ruminate on her art, they can begin to process the repressed memories and move forward. Art historian and literary critic W.J.T. Mitchell argues that the history of slavery must be "remembered" in order to be reconciled (Shaw, STU 7).

As more people are exposed to her work, artists, critics, scholars and Walker herself find it increasingly important to make clearer the discussion surrounding her work. Walker raises a lot of controversial issues and approaches it from the perspective of a new generation of thinkers. Some argue that Walker is a naïve artist who negatively portrays blacks and hinders the cause of African Americans (Sanneh 46). However, opponents of Walker's work should acknowledge that the outcome from Walker's art provides a catalyst for important discussions.



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