



Darkytown Rebellion Installation

Viewers Become a Live Action Kara Walker Film

As seen at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2007. Original installation made for Brent Sikkema, New York in 2001.

The most intriguing piece for me at the Walker Art Center's show "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love" (Feb 17—May 13, 2007) is "Darkytown Rebellion," which features the artist's signature life-size silhouette figures on the walls depicting the antebellum South and surrounds you like cinema in the round.

In "Darkytown," stereotypes of African Americans in the antebellum South abound. A female African American teenager holds a flag that looks more like a colonial ship sail. Two malnourished boys walk to their master. Three figures partake in ambiguous erotic perversity, including a man whose leg has been cut off. One woman takes care of multiple newborns, her breast for nursing prominently displayed to draw attention to her "purpose" in life. Another woman sweeps where a baby's leg appears, suggesting a black woman aborting her child so as not to give her master another possession; or, perhaps a white woman disposing the evidence of her husband's affair with a slave. An African American man sits up in a tree, perhaps a musician with a harmonica or just a man enjoying a pipe.

Walker creates these figures with great skill, but although craft is important, artists today can't usually build a career on craft alone; few artists are purely formal ones. Today, conceptual art and ideas are what count most. Walker's ideas are powerful and her art is highly conceptual. What's formally different about this piece from her other works is the use of overhead projectors—the type commonly used in schools. These colored projections act as abstract landscape elements to complement the figures in the scene.

The shapes projected are abstract both in shape and color. It is art that is suggestive of something real. The figures are silhouettes that, in their ambiguity, leave it up to the viewer's imagination to decide what the image is communicating.



Darkytown Rebellion Installation

The projectors also serve to show viewers the structure of the piece at the same time they view and experience it. Walker doesn't just show the skin covering it, you get to see the skeleton too. (She also does this in her film *8 Possible Beginnings: or the Creation of African-America. A Moving Picture by the young, self-taught, Genius of the South K.E. Walker* where you can see the puppet strings.) The viewer can experience the content of the piece while at the same time be fully aware of its structure. Psychologically, this reminds the viewer that the piece is all a construct. Walker succeeds in provoking dually a visceral response as well as an intellectual one. The viewer is brought back and forth to simultaneously experience the piece's creation and presence in the world. This serves to reinforce the idea that how we understand slavery is as much our interpretation of history as the reality that transpired.

Then the projectors remind us "Oh, yeah, this is just a set up." In this way, if the viewers' interpretation is too disturbing, they can look at the construction: "This can't hurt me. It's just plastic gel, light bulbs and construction paper." To continue the cinema in the round analogy, one could say, "It's just a movie." Except that, of course, slavery did happen.

The projectors also serve yet another function. Walker's construct shows us the engine, so to speak, of history and how it is built and presented to us. Today a lot of our information comes from the media. We don't necessarily see how information gets to us, the way we come to see or perceive things, or what specifically is influencing our thought process. We only see what we see. While the media disguises the history of slavery as one-dimensional absolute history, Walker peels away the skin to show us the ugly truth beneath: Slavery produced terrible events and these events shape and influence our experience with race today.

The most engaging result of "Darkytown" is that Walker forces us to be in the same picture plane as the shadows projected. This confronts us. We as contemporary people are now summoned to be a part of the experience of the past. The past and present live together in this picture. As we move through the piece, we see ourselves inspecting the past and are made self-conscious of our actions. Our reactions are part of the "dialogue," part of the piece. Today, in real time, we are living with the reality of the past. As we weren't around in the time of slavery, viewers may not be stationary cut outs, but we're still a part of its legacy and still—literally—interact with it. The piece suggests that, yes, slavery happened but it's how we react today that counts.



Darkytown Rebellion Installation

This is reflected, formally, in Walker's piece. As we are moving around and interacting with the piece, we become the focal point of the work as, aesthetically, our movement creates the most interest. We become the most engaging part of the piece not just to ourselves but to other onlookers and the installation as an art object. We—the viewers—are a live action Kara Walker film. Instead of a dormant two-dimensional picture plane, the picture is now literally interactive. We can't escape it. We can't not react or pretend we're not a part of this history. Merely by living in the world today, we must deal with the history of slavery as we form our world which will become future history.

Lastly, the projector set-up, requiring us to be in the dark (but hopefully not metaphorically!) gives the viewer a more cinematic experience. We aren't being seen by others as much as we would be in a more traditional art display that seeks as much track lighting to shine on the work as possible. We have the comfort of being in a black dark box where others can't view our expressions and reactions as we observe what's projected on the wall. It makes the piece feel more intimate. However, unlike a movie, it is less in the realm of group experience. We are alone together with the work.

They are just cut pieces of paper. But they are powerful.

Reviewed by Emma Johnson. Review funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Minnesota. Submitted August 20, 2007. Thank you Mom (René Johnson, PhD) for feedback during the writing process.