



ART: GONE WITH THE WIND, ROMANCE OF A CIVIL WAR AS IT OCCURRED BETWEEN THE DUSKY THIGHS OF ONE YOUNG NEGRESS AND HER HEART (1994) BY KARA WALKER. CUT PAPER AND ADHESIVE ON WALL, 13' X 50'. IMAGE COURTESY OF SIKKEMA, JENKINS & CO.

## EMANCIPATION PROVOCATION

**Kara Walker's** nine-year-old daughter says, 'Mommy makes mean art.' The MacArthur Foundation says she's a genius. Maybe they're both right.

*Interview by Bill Powers*

**W**HEN HER TRAVELING SHOW *MY COMPLEMENT, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* debuted in Minneapolis earlier this year, wall text warned parents of the graphic imagery and strong sexual content found within. Kara Walker would have preferred that small children and squemish adults be given blinders instead, like those sleep masks they hand out on airplanes, but ultimately that proved an impracticality. This October, Walker's exhibit arrives at the Whitney Museum.

**BILL POWERS:** What's this new show all about?

**KARA WALKER:** Can I send you a plane ticket? It's a survey of work from the last 10 years. For a while we were calling it an "introspective."

**So much of your art, the cutouts in particular, draw from iconography associated with antebellum South. Do you feel that our growth emotionally as a nation has been frozen in some sense since that period?**

One of the experiences I had moving to Georgia from California as a teen-

ager was the recognition that there was this whole universe in play based on Jim Crow laws and its predecessors; attitudes that were stringently black and white, bad versus good, good versus evil, right and wrong. This meta-drama that prior to my introduction to the South I never understood.

**And really the 1860s—with the freeing of slaves—is when racist whites first had to start developing new techniques to hide their prejudice. The seeds of political correctness perhaps?**

Trying to cloak their agenda and their failure to do so is interesting and an aspect of whatever human drama I explore in my studio. I never think about the term “political correctness” because it really just gets in the way. Ideas of masking and making things disappear are interesting—confronting ideas about responsibility that have been the mantle of black artists in my lifetime and even before that. There’s an assumption in American culture that the black creative person is someone who rights historical wrongs or [pursues] social justice or tells hidden truths endlessly and part of what’s at play in my work is this confusion between a responsibility to myself and a responsibility to the broader black community as an artist and the fact that most of my lived experience has been as a black woman in America in the late 20th century, however awkwardly and murkily bound that is with fictional ideas about, What is a black name? What’s an African name? What does the term “African American” mean versus “colored” versus “Negro.” What happens if you’re all these archetypes at once? How do they collide? How does Margaret Mitchell’s version of a black woman collide with Maya Angelou’s version versus Cleopatra Jones versus a girl in the suburbs?

**You have also said “they’re just paper dolls and kind of silly.” Was that a misquote?**

What I’m referring to is the fact that I’m using a second-class art form to reinscribe these ideas. My stepping away from being a high modernist painter to make cut paper silhouettes could be viewed as a rejection of modernist ideals. It’s very passive aggressive.

**There’s something about the silhouette where as a viewer you expect the content to be innocuous, even childlike, where you might catch people with their guard down.**

That’s very much in keeping with my personality. It was not something I planned on doing, but I uncovered these base representations, art forms that aren’t really considered high art like paper cutting or the cycloramas of late 19th-century entertainment just prior to film. That was kind of an interesting aside to history painting. It also falls into the realm of a second-class art form. Mine was an attempt to conflate these small, intimate spaces that the silhouette occupies with something massive, these overwrought gestures. The funny thing, or rather one of the jokes of the piece, is in trying to make a good composition out of all this discord, this continual stealing and giving up and oppressing and suppressing and revolting. It’s almost like this soap opera cinched up in a way that alludes to beauty. But, yes, there are questions of interracial desire or relationships. Why would you be in an intimate situation with someone where there’s so much potential for opening up old wounds? Sometimes it’s motivated by the best sense of humanity, putting yourself in such a vulnerable position with another person.

**Does our culture marginalize political art?**

It depends. My experience as a young adult was that there are many art worlds and one of those is the black art world, which can be ghettoized. With the 1960s you saw a social mission behind efforts by black creative people to recognize and confront a history that was largely being ignored in the mainstream, confronting ideas of there being a dominant culture that



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**HOW DOES MARGARET MITCHELL'S VERSION OF A BLACK WOMAN COLLIDE WITH MAYA ANGELOU'S VERSION VERSUS CLEOPATRA JONES VERSUS A GIRL IN THE SUBURBS?**  
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doesn't include blacks in it. That's kind of a continuing thread that's almost unavoidable if you make any kind of picture that represents a person of color no matter how benign the picture may be. I do think that the mainstream political art is ghettoized and when I talk to students at Columbia they tend to shy away from saying that their work has any kind of political message. I think that speaks to the moment we're living in: where people would rather be ambivalent, because of this suspicion that of all the things that fail political art is one of them.

**Last year you curated a show from the permanent collection at The Met called “After the Deluge.”**

I was doing a show in Los Angeles with shadow puppets just as the after effects of Hurricane Katrina were unfolding in the news. There was this huge sense of horror that was touching everybody, every image on TV and every picture in the newspaper looked like the end of the world, and with black people stuck right in the middle of it. Staging this improvisational puppet show, it was clear to me that people wanted an outlet and this question arose again about the failure of political art. What beyond collecting clothes or making a donation or building a house, what's my usefulness as an artist? I thought, “Well now that I have this venue at The Met, I could use the

ART: DETAIL FROM SLAVERY! (1997), CUT PAPER AND ADHESIVE ON WALL, INSTALLATION VIEW AT THE WALKER ART CENTER, 2007. IMAGE COURTESY OF SIKKEMA, JENKINS & CO.



ART: “... CALLING TO ME FROM THE ANGRY SURFACE OF SOME GREY AND THREATENING SEA,” (2007) BY KARA WALKER, COLOR VIDEO ON PROJECTION SCREEN, PAINTED WOOD, INSTALLATION VIEW AT THE WALKER ART CENTER, 2007. IMAGE COURTESY OF SIKKEMA, JENKINS & CO.



opportunity to speak about these types of images.” I wanted to hold on to this sense of horror and shame that accompanies images of thousands of black people suffering again ... or still! I was reminded of the Homer painting “The Gulfstream” which depicts a solitary black man on a boat with a broken mast adrift at sea surrounded by sharks and what looks like a storm in the distance with a ship far, far off that may or may not rescue him. The whole composition is turbulent and triangular with this man looking off almost in heroic resignation. I wanted to talk about fear and rage and icky, mucky personal reflections that come from screaming out into the void.

**Given its graphic nature, who is it scarier to show your drawings to: your nine-year-old daughter or your dad?**

Well, both actually. My daughter saw my work when she was about four. She came to an exhibition looked around and said, “Mommy makes mean art.” And I said, “Okay, she is very astute.” That sort of stuck. But I don't surround her with my work. I'm pretty careful about what I expose her to just because she is fairly young. On the other hand, I don't want to create a situation where she's so frightened of being the product of her mother's imagination.

**How do you deal with accusation that you're trying to shock people?**

I would say that my imagination is sort of uncontrollable. Maybe it's really a question of freedom versus taking liberties. Letting go of all structures that might impede my imagination. What started me on this project was shaking off the shackles of the art police. I was just reading this op-ed piece about the blackness of Barack Obama and it's like, “When do we stop defining authentic blackness?” Probably never. But it's interesting how we continually impose restrictions on the way we're allowed to express our humanity/culture/ethnicity. There are all these rules.

**When you won the MacArthur Award in 1997 did you feel the pres-**

*This spread and previous page: Three installations by Kara Walker, who was photographed at the Venice Biennale, where she had a video work in the Italian Pavillion. Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppression, My Love opens at the Whitney Museum in New York Oct. 11.*

**sure to live up to its definition of genius?**

It came as a bit of a shock and totally intimidating. My immediate response was to assume they were completely wrong, but then where would that leave me? I had a hard time with it since the first fallout from the announcement was a letter-writing campaign raging against my work as being something “genius.” So I kind of found myself internalizing these two hyper-extended thrusts where I was like, “You're great; no wait, you're a pariah!”

**Do you think that people can end up oppressing themselves with the choices they make, like with the black youth of today turning away from our educational system as a means of empowerment?**

In 1997, my artwork was labeled a product of black self-hate and I wonder if that isn't one of those terms that's essentially lost its importance. It's natural to go through a process where you reject the powers that be, where you reject yourself and your participation. To go it your own way, whatever it takes, but that can also be incredibly limiting.

**There is an essay in your catalogue about how the first inspiration man had to paint was likely his own shadow. Do you agree?**

There's a mythology out there about the shadow trace on the wall. I had sort of a joke in one of the wall pieces out here called “Endless Conundrum” where feces is really the first original artwork humans ever produced, you know, it's a sculpture. But maybe in the kid's version of the show it's better to say it was the shadow.