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In the Studio: Kara Walker

Steel Stillman

KARA WALKER'S RISE to the top of the art world came fast and loaded with controversy. At the age of 24, three months after the artist received an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), her work was included in a 1994 survey exhibition at New York 's The Drawing Center, wowing critics and viewers alike. Over the next three years, she had eight one-person shows and became the youngest artist ever to win a MacArthur "genius" award. She also came under attack by a group of 200 older black artists, led by Betye Saar, who mounted a vigorous letter-writing campaign seeking to prevent the exhibition of her work, on the grounds, as artist Howardena Pindell later put it, that its representations of black people constituted "visual terrorism."

So singular and strong was Walker's first publicly exhibited work- mural-sized, wall-mounted tableaux of black cut-paper silhouettes depicting caricatures of antebellum slaves and slaveholders in scenes of sex, violence and dissolution- that it might well have eclipsed all that followed. But Walker had other tricks up her sleeve. Since the late '90s, while continuing the cut-paper series, she has developed significant bodies of work in other mediums, notably drawing, writing and filmmaking, that have deepened her multiform recasting of tales of African-American life.

Walker has been drawing since childhood-her father, Larry, is an artist and retired professor of art who moved the family from Stockton, Calif., where Walker was born in 1969, to the suburbs of Atlanta, in 1983, to direct the art department at Georgia State University. And she's been writing since her early 20s, typing streams of words onto 3-by-5-inch file cards and scrawling the texts into drawings. Then, less than a decade ago, Walker began making films. Generally short- the first four were between 9 and 26 minutes long they turn her silhouette figures into small, hand-operated puppets, and transform the implied narratives of her wall pieces into more explicit, if still open-ended, parables. There's a distinctly handmade quality to everything Walker does; her hand is her voice- her testimony- and its evidence is as much the story as is any depicted event or incident.

Walker has exhibited in galleries and museums all over the world in dozens of solo and hundreds of group shows. Her retrospective "Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love" originated in 2007 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and traveled to, among other places, the Hammer Museum in L.A., the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris. In late April, a two-gallery exhibition of new work opened in New York, with drawings and text pieces at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in Chelsea and a new video installation at Lehmann Maupin's Lower East Side location. Both will be on view until June 4. Walker lives and works in New York and teaches at Columbia University. Her studio in the garment district features an impressive view of the Empire State Building; we met there on a sunny afternoon in February.

STEEL STILLMAN I read that you made a cartoon strip when you were a kid.

KARA WALKER I began drawing newspaperlike strips when I was five and from then on I wanted to be a cartoonist. Inspired in part by Charles Schulz, I developed characters that commented, sometimes indirectly, on my family's life. By the time I got to middle school I'd made plans for a multimedia enterprise that, in addition to the strip, included a Saturday morning TV show, books accompanied by audio cassettes and figurines that I'd made out of clay.

SS And then when you were 13, your family moved to the South.

KW My dad was born in Georgia-his family left when he was a child-so moving back to a region that had supposedly changed was, for him, something of a homecoming. Yet, while he was interviewing for his job at Georgia State, the Atlanta Child Murders were at their peak. I had actual nightmares about moving to a place that was hostile to 13-year-old black children.

The Klan was alive and well in Atlanta in the early '80s, holding rallies and putting fliers and American flags in everyone's mailbox. We spent the first year in Decatur, but soon moved to nearby Stone Mountain, where the public park's featured attraction is an enormous stone monument commemorating the Confederacy. We lived on Walker Road, in a neighborhood that changed from all white to all black around the time we got there; James A. Venable, an Imperial Wizard of the KKK, lived at the other end of the road.

Georgia never felt quite normal to me: overt racism from whites was not uncommon. And expectations for a black girl were more limited than they had been in California. I didn't have the language to understand it at first, but I could sense the difference in the way people treated me. Early on, I remember entering a poster contest at school and being made to feel that I'd stepped over a line: "None of *our* girls *ever* enters the poster contest!" It took me years to acknowledge how insidious and effective the stereotyping was within the black community. In the meantime, I just sort of bumbled along, trying to figure out what exactly I was in relation to all that *baggage*.

SS You began cutting out silhouettes at RISD-what led to your discovery of their potential?

KW First at the Atlanta College of Art and then at RISD, I spent much of my time trying to find something that would have the impact of painting without robbing me of my identity. In Atlanta I'd run afoul of teachers who believed, correctly enough, that I was sidling up too close to traditional, patriarchal modernism, and that I hadn't come to terms with black liberation ideas. So when I got to Providence, in the libraries of RISD and Brown, I began researching what having a black body meant in art historical terms. From there, I followed a branching network of clues that linked early American art, various folk or "second-class" art traditions and work made by black artists of the 19th and 20th centuries.

As I went along, I investigated minstrelsy, looking especially for evidence of what blacks working in blackface had experienced. And I read Thomas F. Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (which became the

basis for D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*), where I found Lydia Brown-described as a tawny vixen, the unruly mistress of the carpetbagger lead character. I adopted her persona as my own-I called her Negress and realized that through her I could bring historical subject matter into my work.

At RISD I was still painting, but I was also typing things out, appropriating imagery and making prints. One day while drawing, I was thinking about physiognomy-the notion that identity can be divined from external appearances- when it occurred to me that identity was more likely to be revealed by editing away external assumptions. I cut out a shape I'd been drawing and then cut out a few more before abandoning them. After one of my professors said they looked interesting, I tried again. The first successful ones weren't very big-3 by 4 feet at most-but they had too much detail and it was hard to get the paper to lie flat.

SS Is there still a lot of drawing hidden on the back of the silhouettes?

KW Yes. The drawings start out furtively; they're not drawn from life. They develop in a flurry of ideas and mark-making. It's always satisfying to find-from among the filly smudges that count for an arm, say-the one that's going to make it. The cut is a form of editing.

SS Since your early large-scale piece at The Drawing Center *Gone; An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, you have deployed cut figures and motifs across large expanses of white wall. How do you choreograph their arrangement?

KW For *Gone*, I had two of three anchoring characters and then, as with a comic strip, I found actions and situations that connected them. The silhouette installations can be like three-ring circuses: there's this going on here, something else in the middle, and, over there, a clown. In 1997, I did an installation in the round, inspired by 19th-century cycloramas, like the 360 degree *Battle of Atlanta*. But in a more metaphorical sense, all the cut-paper works occupy a kind of endless panorama, their ongoing narrative suspended between what can and cannot be seen.

SS *Gone with the Wind* was your starting point?

KW When I first read *Gone with the Wind* in my early 20s, I never got much beyond standard feminist or black studies interpretations; but then, at RISD, I picked it up again and *loved* it, swept along by its relentless storytelling, fully aware of all the complicated reasons that I shouldn't like it. The experience helped me realize that my own conflicting reactions-esthetic, or even physiological, on the one hand, and political on the other-could be useful in making work.

There are facts and experiences at the root of most race issues-hard to get to, but there-around which layers of hyperbole and fiction grow. It's often impossible to know what actually happened, historically speaking, but it can feel necessary to knock those descriptions around. I'm not a historian or a social scientist; to be an artist is to fictionalize. Making work that connects to *Gone with the Wind* or *The Clansman* is a matter of weaving fictions around other fictions-trying, by subversive means, to approach another truth,

SS Your work also appropriates the language of slave testimonials,

KW Genuine slave narratives have a rough, manhandled quality, full of sex and violent material, which was often cleaned up for readers-black and white-in polite society, I like drawing from sources where the demand for authenticity is satisfied before the censors show up; I've used pornography for the same reason, In a sense, I've adopted the testimonial format but have abandoned nearly all its reform minded aspirations. Being a black girl means that I operate as the narrator, rendering testimonials in the language of art.

SS After seeing several silhouette installations, I remember being surprised to see your smaller watercolor drawings in the late '90s. Their content was familiar from the cutouts, but their figure-drawing style seemed to come from a different place altogether.

KW I'd taken figure drawing classes at Georgia State since I was 14, and I'd made lots of drawings leading up to the cut pieces, so it felt important to bring all that into the open, I had a teacher at ACA who made us do 100 drawings in an afternoon, and while I'm not always as disciplined as that, I do love to draw, Though my line is cartoony, my gods are Goya, Daumier and Hogarth; I'm still trying to make figures emerge from darkness as wonderfully as theirs do!

SS Your drawings often have words in them-but I was also surprised to discover your typewritten text works,

KW I started typing in earnest on my mother's IBM Selectric the year I graduated from ACA [1991]; it was kind of a lifesaver because I didn't talk much in those days, Writing-which half the time is just letting the sound of the typewriter accompany the voice in my head- is often the first step to making drawings, I don't think of myself as a writer, but I like struggling with words; and I like the way they move on the page, I'm always astounded by what comes out. Occasionally, when the phrases haven't sounded like mine, I've Googled them; but I've yet to find anything that wasn't original.

SS You often make drawings and text pieces in series, For example, "Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?", a suite of drawings, many of them bursting with words, was made as a response to the attack Betye Saar and others had mounted after you won the MacArthur.

KW Three major things happened that year-in addition to the MacArthur and the letter-writing campaign, my daughter was born, so I was mostly at home struggling with postpartum depression, I didn't know at first how to respond to the furor. But then I embraced the 100-drawings process and opened a notebook. Drawing (and writing) helped me sort out what the controversy was about and what I wanted my work to do. Eventually, I understood that my attackers had turned me into a fiction; they were vilifying me for making caricatures of blackness by doing the same thing to me. They were, in effect, rewriting the narrative of my Negress character and turning her into a whore. That irony got lost in all the noise.

When I started making my real work I knew I was stepping into an arena that I didn't want to get stuck in. I didn't want to take on all the baggage that goes with being a

Black Artist: I didn't want to have to uphold the race. Recently, I've been reexamining the New Negro movement of the '20s, in which Alain Locke and others admonished black artists to make responsible, respectable work and to proclaim our past and struggles. The art associated with black liberation movements tends to be propagandistic in tone and is often redundant- the subject matter can't expand and complicate and the art doesn't either.

SS In 2000, you began putting overhead projectors on the floor to cast colored shapes and motifs onto your cut-paper wall works. Viewers moving through these installations cast their own shadows onto silhouettes that were already there. What led to that development?

KW I bought a Super 8 film camera in 1999, never having held a movie camera before, but then found I couldn't trust myself with it. The projections became a way of sketching out an approach to film and video. I wanted to see what it would mean to make works that traveled through space from point A to the wall. My projection pieces were on the verge of becoming animate, but there was something halting about them; compared to the viewers' moving shadows, the cutouts seemed particularly static. Nonetheless, I loved the overhead projectors, those funny, sculptural bits of antiquated technology, sitting on the floor, staring, like me.

SS And then, it seems that you got braver with Super 8. For your first film, *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions* (2004), you worked with puppets, mounting small backlit silhouette shapes on sticks, cobbling together a narrative that turned the plot of *The Clansman* inside out

KW In *Testimony* the Negress has the power. Considering the simplicity of their means and execution, my films have all been difficult to make. I'm always piecing things together on the fly, and trying not to be too precious or romantic with the medium. I learned how to construct the puppets by trying to translate a German book about shadow puppet theater and the work of the pioneering animator Lotte Reiniger, whose 1926 feature *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* preceded Disney's *Snow White* by 11 years,

SS Do you think of yourself as a storyteller?

KW No, not really. Whenever I try to tell or write a story all the way through I stumble around and hesitate. It may be that I'm only *really* interested in beginnings: my second film *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, A Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker* (2005) is a catalogue of creation stories. I sometimes think the only tale I can tell goes something like this: Once upon a time there was a beginning followed by another beginning, and another, and so on. The primary situation in my work is that of the African-American telling her story. My job is Just to tack onto that existing, historicized narrative bits that I've picked up along the way.

SS For your upcoming shows in New York, you've made two large-scale series of drawings on paper as well a new film. One of the drawing series consists entirely of texts.

KW I'm still trying to find a way to make large text pieces that have the immediacy of typewriting and the visual presence of the silhouette work. For these new works I

cut out letters, and block printed them on large sheets of paper. I was thinking about the weight of word, about all the things I had read: histories of colonialism in America: dissertations on the black subject in relation to X, Y or Z; and a few things that have been written about me. Among the text works are a number of portraits-biographies of creative black women, historical figures like Louise Beavers and Nina Simone. The words I used came from Wikipedia entries, which are peculiarly fixated on their subjects' personal problems, profiling legendary black women by way of their endless bad marriages and drug addictions. I've since heard that Wikipedia is looking for more female contributors.

SS The other drawings are more figurative; like the text works they cover themes and incidents from Reconstruction to the present day.

KW The figurative drawings are loosely situated in the period between Reconstruction and the Jazz Age. I'm interested in the moments when black identity multiplied in ways that it couldn't when most blacks were slaves. The process of making these large drawings sort of parallels that multiplicity, and allowed me to work across a range of subjects and times. Going back and forth between the drawings and the text pieces, alternating between intuitive and analytical modes, seemed also to reflect how my imagination works.

SS One of the most explicitly up-to-date of these new drawings is a text work that prophesies the lynching of Barack Obama [*He Will be Executed by a Mob, 2010*].

KS I'm certainly not the only person who worries about the assassination of our first black president. Around the time of the election, the collective anxiety about this was palpable, and I felt I needed to confront my own fear directly. The text of *He Will be Executed* is mostly lifted from an 1899 newspaper article, with some additions. There will be at least three pieces in the show at Sikkema Jenkins that warn of this maddening danger. My hope is that they will function as protective talismans

SS These days you're making your films on video. What is the new one about? [*Fall From Grace, Miss Pipi's Blue Tale (2011)*]

KW I'm just preparing to do the last shoot, so I'm still working on the narrative-who knows what will happen once editing begins! But essentially it's a lament, like the Blues, about forbidden love and inevitable, devastating loss. I have material from a number of places, including some things I shot in Mississippi, which I may or may not use I'm not yet sure how it will come together.

SS Sack in 2006, a year after Hurricane Katrina, you curated a remarkable show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "After the Deluge." Using water as a theme you wove a number of your own works into an extended conversation with pieces that had mostly come from the museum's collection. I wonder if that show might offer an image of your practice as a whole-in which materially diverse bodies of work call out to one another, each in their own way reflecting the same undeniable subject.

KW My sense of the whole flickers, at best. I often feel my work is having conversations with work by artists from other periods. But here in the studio, the conversations among my own pieces can go off on deviating paths. Years ago it struck me that I arrive at what I need through a kind of negative process, not unlike

what I went through when I found my way to the silhouettes. Working from the inside out, thinking about what isn't visible, I can't always see the connections-but right now, with things in a flow, I think I can.