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HYPE AND HYPERSEXUALITY:

KARA WALKER, HER WORK AND CONTROVERSY

by

ERIKKA J. SEARLES

Under the Direction of Susan Richmond

ABSTRACT

Kara Walker, winner of the MacArthur "Genius" award and the Smithsonian Lucelia award, is one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary African American artists. Her work, especially her cut-paper silhouettes depicting grotesque antebellum scenes, has inspired as much outrage from an older generation of Black artists as acclaim from the mainstream media. This thesis gives an overview of the artist's life, analysis of some of her works, and an examination of the controversy her work has caused. In the conclusion, I introduce the next generation of Black American artists, self-proclaimed "Art Stars," including Atlanta artist Fahamu Pecou.

INDEX WORDS: Kara Walker, Silhouettes, Civil War  
Imagery, Black Women, Art, Critics, Positive and Negative  
Stereotyping

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by  
ERIKKA J. SEARLES

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Art  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2006

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Erikka Juliette Searles  
2006

HYPE AND HYPERSEXUALITY:  
KARA WALKER, HER WORK AND CONTROVERSY  
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Electronic Version Approved

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2006

## DEDICATION

Hype & Hypersexuality is written in memory of Dr.  
Thomasine Bradford. I hope to one day become a fraction of  
the feminist and scholar she was.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has been four years in the making. I would be remiss not to thank all of the scholars and professors that have assisted me in this process, especially Dr. Nicole Hood for helping me begin the thesis stage and Dr. Susan Richmond for helping me complete it. I would also like to thank Cheryl Goldsleger, Karen Pierce, Dr. Melinda Hartwig, Dr. Emily Hanna, Dr. Florencia Bazzano-Nelson, and Dr. Glenn Gunhouse for all of their assistance. I would like to thank all of my family for their prayers and support.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF FIGURES.....	vii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 THE ARTIST.....	2
Life.....	2
Process.....	4
Formal analysis of <i>Why I Like White Boys</i> .....	9
3 THE WORK.....	12
Complexity of Subject Matter.....	12
Picturing the Negress: Black Feminist Analysis of	
Figures.....	17
4 THE CONTROVERSY.....	23
Rewriting History: Kara Walker's Imaginary	
Plantations vs. Slave Reality.....	28
Critics and Controversy.....	32
Positive and Negative Stereotyping.....	33
Post Black Art?.....	35
5 CONCLUSION.....	38

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	41
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#### TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Burn</i> 1997. Cut paper.....	43
Figure 2. <i>Why I Like White Boys</i> . Cut paper.....	44
Figure 3. <i>The End of Uncle Tom (Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven)</i> and Detail 1995. Cut paper.....	45
Figure 4. <i>Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart</i> 1994. Cut paper .....	46
Figure 5. <i>Untitled</i> 1998. Watercolor.....	47
Figure 6. <i>African't</i> 1996. Cut paper.....	48
Figure 7. <i>Consume</i> 1998. Cut paper.....	49

## Hype and Hypersexuality:

### Kara Walker, Her Work, and Controversy

#### **Preface**

In the summer of 2002 in the midst of the National Black Arts Festival, I found myself at the Georgia State University School of Art and Design Gallery exhibition entitled *Looking Forward, Looking Black*. Though I found the entire body of exhibited work interesting, the outstanding work in my opinion was ***Burn*** (Figure 1) a black cut-paper silhouette of a Black woman, engulfed in flames, with smoke billowing around her, lying flat against the stark white wall. This was by no means one of artist Kara Walker's sensational, titillating works. It was not, as is usually the case in this artist's work, dripping with sexuality nor did it overtly take on issues of race. It was simply a beautiful piece of fantasy or nightmare and so captivated was I by the sheer skill of the artist's hand in creating a drawing with scissors that I began to research the artist.

But I found that there was so much more to Kara Walker than the beauty of her silhouettes: there was

actually some substance, some racial and social commentary, and most exciting to me, she was a master at using shock effect to make her point. Her work was everything I thought art should be. Later I discovered her ties to Atlanta and this only intrigued me further. I knew that I would study this artist in great detail and the result is the following volume.

### **Introduction**

"Stealing Black culture- or Black bodies is maybe one flawed cultures attempt at redemption, silently acknowledging Black power- the power of subversion- oooh- but this is just an idea and its only a drawing after all, it has no real power... --- Kara" Text from ***Untitled 1998***.

Part of the following work examines the life of the artist and how her life experience informs her work. The largest and central part of this work will show that critics on both sides of the issue are responsible for the huge amount of acclaim that Walker has received. A close examination of Walker's work especially her black paper cutout silhouettes from the late nineties and early 2000's follows, and I also examine the controversy her work has produced. Walker receives a wide range of responses, from

critical acclaim from the mainstream "White" art world to public outrage from some members of the Black community.

Walker's work is visually black and white. The artist delights in both extremes, such as critics' love or hate reactions to her work but also in the gray areas. The viewer is at once attracted to and repelled by her work.

### **The Artist**

#### **Life**

Kara Walker was born November 26, 1969 in Stockton, CA. Walker earned a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art and a MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Her first exhibition was in 1991 in Atlanta. In 1997, at the age of 27, she became the youngest-ever recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award, often referred to as the "Genius Award." She continues to garner acclaim, winning the Lucelia Award from the Smithsonian in 2004. The Lucelia Artist Award, established in 2001, annually recognizes an American artist under the age of fifty who demonstrates exceptional creativity and has produced a significant body of artwork that is considered emblematic of the new century's period in contemporary art.

I am interested in the motivation for Walker's great critical acclaim and will examine this further in the final section of this work.

### **Process**

Walker's signature and most celebrated work consists of life-size silhouettes cut out of black paper, glued or pinned on a contrasting white wall. The method of paper-cutting she uses is rooted in a "traditional Swiss-German technique called *Scherenschnitte*, which was brought to the United States by the Pennsylvania-Dutch." She plays with the irony that this cut paper silhouette medium found popularity among "nineteenth century genteel Southern 'ladies.'"<sup>1</sup> Like generations of women before her, which not coincidentally included skilled black women by the nineteenth century, Walker draws in white chalk on the reverse side of the paper and then cuts.<sup>2</sup> Many of these

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Janus, "As American As Apple Pie," Parkett no. 59 (2000), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Anne M. Wagner, "The Black- White Relation," Narratives of a Negress (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003),

"cutters" unlike Walker remained anonymous, a characteristic of this silhouette work being considered more craft than "art."

In Walker's large-scale installations, she builds on the tradition of cut paper silhouette. The artist commented on the large scale of her panoramic silhouettes in an interview with curator Thelma Golden: "That's why the cutout installation remains interesting to me. ...[t]hey are large and consuming, intellectually and physically."<sup>3</sup> The viewer is overwhelmed not only by the subject matter but the gigantic imposing "shadows" cast by the "historical" figures.

The process and medium the artist chooses is important because Walker delights in the contradiction of the intentional beauty juxtaposed with the often ugly, uncomfortable subject matter of her work. The intricate paper cut-out silhouettes look innocent enough at first glance and it is easy to get lost in Walker's skill at rendering antebellum figures. The nature of the medium is

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<sup>3</sup> Thelma Golden and Kara Walker, "A Dialogue," Pictures From Another Time (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan 2002), 48

that it is at a glance beautiful. It is the beauty of the scene that elicits a second glance and this is when the subject matter hits the viewer. A closer look at the seductive panoramic landscapes with dreamy names like ***Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*** (Figure 4) reveals sex everywhere, an illicit affair between master and Negress, birthing scenes, airborne bodies, and other nightmarish ambiguities.

Walker's interest in this kind of subject matter seems to have been shaped by her move to Atlanta. Walker lived in California in a multicultural "utopia" that was a mixed, tolerant community, until the age of 13 when her father artist Larry Walker was offered a chairmanship at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Walker describes the move as complete life-defining culture shock, from a "live and let live" environment in free-thinking California to a more rigid, traditional, and distinctly black vs. white life in the middle of the Bible belt. According to Walker, "Going to Georgia was a little bit like going back in time, with the social mores, the do's and don'ts, the very



conservative Christian things (most of which were racially based), the divisions of who's a good person to talk to and who's a bad person to talk to, black and white."<sup>4</sup>

I would argue that it was above all this culture shock that caused Walker's fixation with the topic of race, of antebellum race relations in particular. If Walker had been eased into the dichotomies of the New South, perhaps she would not have delved into the gray areas and contradictions that resulted from such "imaginary" memories. The New South, especially the city of Atlanta, is built on a nostalgic longing for the Civil War past; in struggling with the progress that Blacks have made in every arena, it provides the perfect backdrop for Walker's "cycloramas."

Walker seems to have taken a humanistic multiculturalist approach in her own personal life, valuing all people and embracing diversity. She attended Redan High School in Stone Mountain from 1985-87. Apparently she had no idea that interracial dating remains taboo, particularly in the South and especially in a city darkened

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<sup>4</sup> Hilarie M. Sheets "Cut It Out!" ARTNEWS (April 2002)

by the shadow of a huge monument to the glory of the Confederacy. In a 1998 interview, Walker recalled an incident where she and her white boyfriend John took a walk in the park. They returned to their car shocked to find a note from a Ku Klux Klan member waiting for them, "spelling out for [John] all the evils of black women, describing what sort of peril he was in, and identifying stereotypes of disease and moral degradation."<sup>5</sup> Walker was often ostracized for "hanging out" with the white kids. This all occurred during a period when Walker had a huge crush on Andy Warhol, and she became extremely disappointed when he told a reporter that he did not find black women attractive.<sup>6</sup> Walker's romantic attraction to those she calls "white boys" is interesting in the way that it translates as a recurring theme in her work.

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<sup>5</sup> James Hannaham, "Pea, Ball, Bounce- Artist Kara Walker Interview," Interview, (November 1998)

<sup>6</sup> Kara Walker and Bob Nickas, "Depth and Dying" Artforum (October 2004)

### **Formal analysis of *Why I Like White Boys***

In the image ***Why I Like White Boys*** (Figure 2), originally a cover for one of Kara Walker's handmade books, a black woman is depicted having sex with her White master. The White man is well-dressed in a bowtie, pointed shoes and suit but his coat-tails are tossed over his shoulder as the black woman, the Negress, bends him over and has her way with him from behind. Walker takes care in rendering the lines of the nude Black woman's profile: nappy hair, slim graceful neck, rounded possibly pregnant stomach, ample lips, breasts and buttocks. At the feet of the Negress lies a serpentine form, perhaps a whip she used to get her "Master" to submit.

Walker comments on the personal phenomenon of White boys attraction to her in a set of journal-like thoughts typed hastily on index cards that are collected in Narratives of a Negress. "I'm easy," she states. "...that is why white boys like me and black boys suspect me of

liking white boys. [F]unny loop."<sup>7</sup> She describes herself as "a gash, like a swipe of black ink on plain paper."<sup>8</sup> She calls attention to the absence of the Black male in her work.<sup>9</sup> But these facts, why white boys like her and why black ones do not, fail to answer the more interesting question: Why does Kara Walker prefer white boys?

Walker hints at the answer, saying that White boys never try to play the role of big brother, that they think themselves either God or the Devil, and that they are in either case distant and often oscillate between those extremes. She is herself aware of the way that some white men used her as a mere sexual conquest, allowing them to check "Did a Black Woman" off their list. In a 1996 *Flash Art* magazine article, she states: "That already has a slightly masochistic effect: to have just been the body for somebody's life story. I guess that's when I became a

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<sup>7</sup> Kara Walker, Index card writings Spring 2001 in Narratives of a Negress (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 75.

slave just a little bit."<sup>10</sup> As shown in the image, Walker herself plays the part of the young "negress," who knowingly takes sexual abuse into her own hands. Walker slips into autobiography, examining in her work the tensions and power struggles involved in being a Black woman dating a White man in America that she knows first-hand.

Editor Juliette Bowles comments in the now infamous article in the *International Review of African American Art* (which I will discuss in detail later) that "[t]he controversial Kara Walker phenomenon, extends from her art to her entire persona."<sup>11</sup> This quote indicates how her real life spills over into her work.

In life and art, Walker enjoys being taboo and loves to create controversy. In reality, Walker married German-born jewelry designer Klaus Burgel and the couple had a

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<sup>10</sup> Juliette Bowles, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," International Review of African American Art 14 no.3 (1997) 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

daughter named Octavia. As of late, she often collaborates with her husband in making art.

### **The Work**

#### **Complexity of Subject Matter**

The Black Female Body Dispossessed:

A Brief History

In order to understand the outrage of Walker's critics, it is important to give a brief discussion of the treatment of Black women's bodies throughout history from Africa to the Americas. Much of Walker's subject matter depicts the Black female body, either realistically or in an exoticized way.

In 1810, twenty-year-old Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman was kidnapped from South Africa and paraded around Europe, exhibited, experimented on because of her "deformed" large breasts, buttocks, and extended labia that were symptoms of disease, as an example of exotic "othered" Black female sexuality until the time of her death. Baartman, a Khoi Khoi woman who frequently referred to as the Hottentot Venus, died within five years but her amputated sexual organs and her brain continued to be shown in jars of

formaldehyde until they reached their present home in the basement of the Museum of Man in Paris. According to historian Sander Gilman, she was considered the "antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty...primitive and therefore more intensely sexual... The physical appearance of the Hottentot is the central nineteenth century icon for sexual difference between the European and the Black." Walker plays on the sensitivity of Blacks toward the sexuality of Black women, something that an older generation of artists have carefully protected in the art they produced themselves.

Such extraction and objectification of Africans was not uncommon in this period of the buying and selling of humans and was essential to pseudo-scientific theories that African peoples were less than human and therefore acceptable commodities.

Similar atrocities occurred in the United States, where African American women suffered the horrors that slavery inflicted on both their bodies and their sexuality. Angela Davis writes that virtually all slave narratives of the nineteenth century contain accounts of slave women's

sexual victimization at the hands of masters and overseers...

"M.F. Jamison's overseer raped a pretty slave girl and Northrup owner forced one slave 'Patsy' to be his sexual partner." Former slave and early Southern Black feminist Anna Julia Cooper spoke to the 1893 Congress of Representative Women about the Black woman's struggle to control their own bodies and protect those of their daughters, saying:

Yet all through the darkest period of the colored woman's oppression in this country her yet unwritten history is full of heroic struggle, a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds, that often ended in horrible death, to maintain and protect that which woman holds dearer than life. The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a fee simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight, as of an entrapped tigress, to keep hallowed their own persons, would furnish material for epics.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bert Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin. Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, And Their Feelings. (University Park: Pennsylvania UP, 1976) in Dorothy E. Roberts, "The Future of Reproductive Choice for Poor Women and Women of Color," The Politics of Women's Bodies ed. Rose Weitz (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 270.



Black women sought to counter such eroticized imagery, while struggling with the everyday issues of fending off slavemasters and other privileged white males that considered themselves sexually entitled to all women's bodies. This was especially true of Black women whose bodies they considered property. The Black woman, or "Negress" as Kara Walker terms her, was transformed into a producer of more slave labor, without control of her own reproduction, powerlessly watching as her children became a part of the cycle of slavery. This mistreatment of Black women's bodies continued when slavery ended, as Black women were the victims of lynchings and rape by groups like the Ku Klux Klan who expressed their anger at their loss of control by terrorizing the Black community by abusing the bodies of Black women.<sup>13</sup>

Walker's depictions of sexual encounters of slave women with their slavemasters unapologetic-cally show the

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<sup>13</sup>Dorothy E. Roberts, "The Future of Reproductive Choice for Poor Women and Women of Color." The Politics of Women's Bodies Ed. Rose Weitz (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 271.

horrors of which Cooper spoke (See Figure 6, where the white farmer uses the black woman as a plow).

The preconceived notions that African American women encountered, of both Black female hypersexuality and the desexualized mammy stereotypes, is highlighted in abolitionist literature, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. ***The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*** (Figure 3) is Kara Walker's interpretation from the novel. In one section of one wall of the installation that spans the whole room, three slave women suckle at one another's breasts (Figure 3, detail). A landscape forms the background while a Negro child defecates, making piles across the entire tableau. Little Eva wields an ax, about to smash a slave child with the blunt end. A young female slave behind Eva points a sharp stick at the white girl's frilly dress, preparing to stab her in the rear.

In this image, the young Black female takes agency in her life by attempting to assault her White Mistress. She appears to be fighting back on behalf of her brothers and sisters.

## **Picturing the Negress: Black Feminist**

### **Analysis of Figures**

Kara Walker: Blurring Borders and Questioning Sexualities

Walker's 1998 *Untitled* (Figure 5) image uses the symbology of another's body in her critique of the art world. Walker depicts a flapper-like white woman who has replaced her mink stole with the pelt of angry black woman. Walker builds on the visual imagery by adding text that deconstructs the image for the viewer, including a "[d]escription for the visually illiterate and/or impaired" (Figure 5).

This work, one of Walker's early pieces, is significantly in the medium of watercolor rather than in the cut-out silhouette medium, which generally calls for simplicity. As a student and in her budding career, Walker focused on drawing and by extension watercolor. In fact, she considers her silhouettes cut-paper drawings. Though the main focus of this thesis is the silhouette, Walker's body of work features a number of watercolors produced both early in her career and between the cut-paper pieces. In

the watercolor as in all of her work, Walker brings attention to the gap between her own generation of artists and older generations.

The artists born to those who participated in or lived in the time of the Civil Rights movement are not as kind to direct the viewer by simplifying the issues. For example, traditional artist Betye Saar places Mammy figures in a position of power in her work. Quite the contrary, for Walker and her generation of artists the more complex and layered the issues the better. Kara Walker wants her viewer to be distracted... distracted, disturbed, titillated even and then confused and guilty about it... she would prefer for all these emotions to course through the viewer at once. Rather than ignoring sexuality to address a "larger" and what some believe to be essentialist issue of racial solidarity, sex *is* Kara Walker's issue. Walker specifically addresses the view of Black women as merely sexual objects and the idea of meaningless sex that is not so meaningless when coupled with issues of race and power. She attacks head-on the theme of the racial politics of sex that has previously been considered untouchable. From

romances between slaves and slavemasters to child sexuality and bestiality, Walker likes to push the envelope and seems most pleased when creating a scandal. These sexually charged images are only barely palatable because Walker has often chosen to represent them in a medium that is deceptively Victorian. In *African't* (Figure 6), where a white farmer uses a Black woman as a plow and benign mammies become sexualized lesbians/molesters as they feed the plantation's children, the landscape captures the viewer's eye. It is easy to get lost in the dreamy landscape of images created by Walker's skillful hand, in spite of their grotesque subject matter.

Critics have been largely uncomfortable with Walker's casual treatment of the serious topics of rape, miscegenation, sexual acts between adults and children, such as in *The End of Uncle Tom* (Figure 3). Her critics feel that for Walker to trivialize Black women's suffering, plays into hypersexualized stereotypes like the Josephine Baker-like image in *Consume* (Figure 7), or even to imply that Black women were willing participants in a "romance" with her slavemaster is an absolute outrage. Though the

world Kara Walker creates is black and white, figuratively and literally, she delights in gray areas, creating tensions between sex and violence, lovemaking and rape, nurturing and homosexuality and bestiality, black and white.

Walker succeeds in creating a gray space where Black women are not simply hypersexual or asexual. She acknowledges that a love/hate relationship could exist between master and slave and that this is as illogical as desire itself. Some things defy explanation.

In her attempt to rewrite history, Kara Walker gives the Negress agency in her sexuality. Often Walker places her in control, in whatever small degree and in spite of her circumstances. Art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw terms it "rememory," stating: "[The End of Uncle Tom] is a shadowy fantasy of Morrisonian rememories, spawned by the artist's growing up in Georgia surrounded by a dominant culture obsessed with a myth of the Old South."<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004) 64.

author also makes reference to Walker's work as a Civil War battlefield reenactment, a description first used by art historian Dan Cameron. This is a significant comparison because such re-enactors are often doing their own version of rewriting a history that they have romanticized and assuaging their own generational guilt.<sup>15</sup> It is exactly this romanticized historical myth that Walker attempts to counter in her work.

On the other side of the same issue, African Americans began to romanticize about a slave past creating the strong people that they are now largely as a result of Roots by Alex Haley. In 1977, the book was translated into a television miniseries. As a result, many African American families began idealizing the "legacy of resiliency and strength" and therefore "glorifying slavery as a sacred myth and essential rite of passage."<sup>16</sup>

Another myth comes into play in Walker's work in the myth of the matriarch, making the Black man invisible. By emphasizing the relations between Black women and white

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 62-64.

<sup>16</sup> Corris and Hobbs, 430.

males and sometimes Black women and white women, the Black male disappears completely. Walker is quite aware of this. She is, as she claims:

Always making work which invisibilifies [sic] the Black Male real and imagined... I would like to point out that Invisibility can be a form of power- CAN BE- didn't say is don't put words in my mouth. Of course this doesn't play well in an art institution which is all about vision, seeing, looking, tangibility, [or] for folks who feel that they are not seen...<sup>17</sup>

This quote refers to the invisibility that Blacks sometime feel within the mainstream (white) art world. She is addressing both groups at once here.

Walker uses several myths either supporting the Black matriarch or debunking myths of the Old South and those of romanticized Ancient Africans entrapped in slavery. It is this use of "rememory" and the redrawing of several myths that aid in making Walker's work intriguing to both the viewing audience and the mainstream art world.

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<sup>17</sup> Kara Walker, Index card writings Spring 2001 in Narratives of a Negress (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003)



### **THE CONTROVERSY**

Kara Walker's explosive emergence into the mainstream art world earned her a mountain of acclaim from the world of galleries and museums and possibly an equal amount of harsh criticism from certain African Americans. The larger part of the work will focus on this criticism. I will explore the following issues: the motivation of the harsh criticism from established Black intellectuals, the effects of an artistic generation gap, and the possible root of Walker's popularity such as tokenism and sensationalism with the "mainstream" white art community. Does the work reinforce negative racist stereotypes in the minds of an audience, white or black, that frequents the gallery scene? Does this negate Walker's artistic talent? In addition, this work will explore the issues of art and sensationalism and tokenism in the mainstream art world.

### **Rewriting History: Kara Walker's Imaginary Plantations vs. Slave Reality**

It is important to juxtapose the slave's historical reality with Walker's imagined romances. Political activist, professor, and historian Angela Davis

has devoted much of her research to the very topic of slave history. Davis shows that in actuality the agency of the Negress in any real way is little more than one of Walker's grand fantasies. She states on the myth of the Black Matriarch which she describes as a cruel misnomer:

It is a misnomer because it implies stable kinship structures within which the mother exercises decisive authority. It is cruel because it ignores the profound traumas the black woman must have experienced to surrender her childbearing to alien and predatory economic interests.<sup>18</sup>

Women were given little time to be women. They were expected to work alongside men, working just as hard and producing just as much. A slave account from Moses Grandy quoted in Davis paints the scene of a very pregnant woman forced to lie on the ground with her large belly in a hole as she was beaten bloody.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," in Words of Fire Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 206

The problem with Walker's implication of the Negress and her own sexual abuse is that there is some complicity in whatever small degree, that the victim is a participant in her own captivity. Any semblance of romance between the Negress and Master, as depicted in *Gone*, positions the black woman as a co-conspirator against the Black male, especially if the woman has the wiles to use her influence however great or small for her own good or even the good of her family. It is significant that Walker admits her erasure of the Black male; he is not only disrespected but completely deleted from the situation.

Hazma Walker, Director of Education of the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, describes Walker's work as shameless three times over in "abandoning the historical shame surrounding slavery, the social shame surrounding stereotypes, and finally a bodily shame regarding sexual and excretory functions." The author goes on to express that shame and disgust are simultaneous and that both must be overcome in order to reach a level of sexual pleasure. The root of many critics' anger at Kara Walker's work stem from what the writer calls, "the 250-

year history of slavery as it was conducted squarely within our consciousness that makes it possible for Walker to render shameful acts shamelessly."<sup>20</sup>

Many older and more traditional critics felt Walker treated a serious subject from African American history in a much too cavalier manner. In response to a Kara Walker work being pulled from the 1999 Detroit Institute of Arts exhibition, Shaw states:

Cultural constructions of the African American imago as hypersexual, lazy, and brutal subhuman creatures still permeate racial discourse in the United States, and Kara Walker's representation in her work of these stereotypical signs of corrupt blackness couples with images of perverted whiteness challenges the limits of what is tolerable to a community striving to overcome the impact of two centuries negative imagery. Ironically, this overwhelming fear of sanctioning a potentially negative presentation of blackness on the part of the African American middle class has been a strong force fueling Walker's meteoric success. This antagonism has served to disconnect the artist from certain reactionary elements of the African American community while ensconcing her within the mainstream art world.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hazma Walker, "Nigger Lover or Will There Be Any Black People in Utopia," Parkett 59 (2000) 156.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw 105

In the following section, the question of critics will be addressed. The overwhelming pressure of censorship was definitely a factor in the case of the DIA exhibition.

### **Critics and Controversy**

This topic leads to the question of audience. Toward whom is Walker directing this work? Why does the older generation of artists and scholars see Walker and the work with such disgust? Why does almost every attack (even in my own analysis) leave the arena of the professional and become personal? Why does Walker create such a polarized response? Is this work about shock value or pushing artistic limits?

African American artist Betye Saar first encountered Kara Walker's work in an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1997. She was so outraged by the images that she started a letter-writing campaign to the committee that selected the young artist for the MacArthur Foundation Award against Kara Walker and the negative stereotypes and vulgar images in her work. "Here we are at the end of the millennium seeing work that is very sexist and derogatory." She complains that this is

a flaw in the current generation: lack of personal integrity, the desire to be rich and famous at all costs, being as nasty as humanly possible. She is quoted in the *IRAAA* as saying "I have nothing against Kara except I think she is young and foolish... As a grandmother, I can't do much but I can write. Kara is selling us down the river."<sup>22</sup>

Betye Saar goes on to point out the difference in her opinion with that of her artist daughter Allison and Allison's friends. The younger artists are excited about the trend and think "Walker is trying to show that racism is subtle and persistent." The elder Saar feels that on a surface level most people are not interpreting the work in this way. She acknowledges the generational divide between her daughter's generation and older people who "remember the history of Blacks selling others in Africa and the history of struggle of blacks in the United States."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Betye Saar quoted in Juliette Bowles, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," International Review of African American Art 14 no.3 (1997) 3. Online version.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

In her critique of Walker's work, fellow African American woman artist Howardena Pindell, tries to deny the generation gap of which Saar is painfully aware. She insists that the protests are multigenerational. The difference of opinion is actually between traditionalists and non-traditionalists, which often translates in older people landing on the more traditional side. Robert Reid-Pharr terms it a battle between the "The Old School," more "literal, celebratory and 'responsible'" and "The Postmodern," who are considered more theory-driven, and approving of pastiche and parody.<sup>24</sup>

Pindell herself states that there has been "muffled restrained, fearful response" from conservative Black sectors that might be fearful of backlash from the mainstream art community. She comments on Saar's work, in which stereotypes are reclaimed to "empower." According to Pindell, "... it is tragic when black artists further 'invigorate' the stereotype. Their work is... catering to

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<sup>24</sup> Robert F. Reid-Pharr "Black Girl Lost," Kara Walker: Pictures From Another Time (Ann Arbor : U of Michigan, 2002) 27.

racism, misogynistic at times and self-loathing in both its subtle and more gross forms."<sup>25</sup>

It is of interest to point out here that Walker engages in a dialogue with Howardena Pindell via her work **Untitled** (Figure 5), the only watercolor I examine, offering a "[d]escription for the visually illiterate and/or impaired (this means you Howardena)." In this piece, Walker covers many of the issues I sought to explore in this work including: power of stereotypes, motivation of the gallery world for applauding this work, and implied racism of the white viewer. The artist is aware of the forces that are pushing and pulling at her work and shows that through the written text. Cultural critic and Harvard professor of African American studies Henry Louis Gates defends Walker's work calling it an example of artistic exorcism: "only the visually illiterate could mistake this post-modern critique as a realistic portrayal, and that is the difference between the racist original and the post-

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<sup>25</sup> Howardena Pindell "Diaspora/ Realities/ Strategies," n. paradoxa no.7 (August 1998) Online Version.



modern, anti-racist parody that characterizes the genre."<sup>26</sup>  
 The earlier generation of artists makes the mistake of taking Walker's work at face value and lacks the visual literacy to take the work as a parody.

### **Positive and Negative Stereotyping**

There is much discussion about the uses of stereotyping in art. Walker herself stated in her *Interview* magazine article that it was the overly, almost sickeningly "positive" stereotypes that Black folks cling to that drove her to the images that she creates that are often considered not so positive.<sup>27</sup>

The most pressing factor of the issue for most critics is the fact that this body of work is the only work representing African Americans in major galleries and museums. Can African Americans truly control what Whites think of them as African Americans? It is doubtful that creating only "positive" images of Blacks would change the opinions of Whites that already hold racist ideas. The fact that negative racist stereotypes are alive in the

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<sup>26</sup> Corris 436.

<sup>27</sup> Hannaham. Online version.

minds of some viewers does not negate Walker's talent. Taking into account Walker's skill at drawing and our American society's growing fascination with the grotesque, the success of the artist is no surprise.

It is possible Walker has also benefited from tokenism, where the mainstream art world showers affection on one Black artist in its skewed attempt at diversity. In an address at the Johannesburg Biennale, Pindell refers to the way Rasheed Arareen uses the term "positive stereotype" in a way different from my earlier description but perhaps in a way more relevant in terms of Walker's art:

"The 'positive stereotype' is the expectation that artists of color will create work about their ethnicity, therefore locating themselves outside the mainstream, separate and different. The mainstream feels that it is not racist in encouraging and embracing the work, but if the mainstream embraces the work, it will not tolerate or acknowledge work by non-whites that is not ethnically based in difference. White artists, on the other hand, can create work that is avant-garde and addresses a wide range of issues."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Corris 431

Reinforcing an ethnic "positive" stereotype, Walker's work has its own Hottentot quality in that it is exotic, sexual work touring the United States, amazing and titillating Whites. This work has taken the place of side-show gawking, making it acceptable for society ladies of all races to enjoy sexual scenes in public, to stare at Black women's bodies exposed. Walker's choice of medium manages to expose without being obvious, the silhouette actually serving to hide very little.

#### **Post-Black Art?**

This is interesting in the context of the post-black art movement, a trend in the late nineties where Black artists, including Glenn Ligon and Ellen Gallagher among others, longed to be labeled just artists rather than associated and grouped with their race.<sup>29</sup> This is ironic in that most of these artists' work is steeped in racial reference and subject matter. The artists involved in this movement are of particular significance in the discussion

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<sup>29</sup> Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004) 158.

of Kara Walker and her critics because artists are trying to make a distinction between themselves and the Black artists of previous generations. Their art is different. Their methods are different. They want to be free to push the boundaries of art, without concern for "airing their dirty laundry" in front of Whites. This art is less about activism and representing the race as a group and more about personal experience and individualism.

The attitudes of Walker's generation have produced the next group of young artists, artists that consider themselves "Art Stars." Atlanta artist Fahamu Pecou, 1997 Atlanta College of Art graduate with a B.F.A. in Painting/Computer Art, for example, considers himself a star first, then an artist. Pecou in effect takes Walker's imaginings a step further. In real life, dressed in the costume of his professional persona in addition to the imagined reality where his paintings are set, he travels with a larger entourage than most rappers, complete with

bodyguards and video models.<sup>30</sup> He promotes himself shamelessly, proclaiming *ad nauseum* that he is "the shit."

Like Walker, Pecou lists Warhol as one of his influences (he uses various popular icons in his paintings) and labels his work NEOPOP. Pecou has essentially replaced the critic by evaluating himself, proclaiming himself in the title of one of his works *Instant Art History Immediately*, often positioning his image on the covers of various art journals.<sup>31</sup> His persona balloons, and the fact that his paintings are skillfully rendered becomes almost irrelevant. Pecou delights in his self-portraiture, imagining himself a champion in the boxing ring amongst other fantasies of his own grandeur. Where Walker's self-portraiture is subtle, Pecou is obvious. Walker creates work that creates "buzz" and Pecou manufactures "buzz" to promote his art.

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<sup>30</sup> Art Talk, "Artist to Artist: A Lively Conversation Between Amalia Amaki and Emerging Artist Fahamu Pecou," Spelman College Museum of Fine Art. (April 24, 2006)

<sup>31</sup> Online website. [fahamupecouart.com](http://fahamupecouart.com)

### Conclusion

Though it seems at first that Walker's work would be a binary "either/or," it is in actuality more "both/and": her work is at once loved and hated, celebrated and critiqued. Her acclaim is a result of both talent and controversy, attractive in medium and repulsive in subject matter. Walker revels in these gray areas where the viewer is not exactly sure how he/she should feel about the image. I think that Walker has tried her best to depict the realities of slavery. In portraying this "unidealized" view of antebellum society, Walker inadvertently perpetuates the stereotype of the hypersexed Negro but she also highlights the cruelty of the Master, who performs acts of his perverse sexuality on any woman or child under his control.

Additionally, the outcries of those critics who hate Walker's work have actually helped her work gain exposure in spite of themselves. This is often the result of censorship. I am sure Walker and those who represent her in the gallery world would agree that there is no negative side to exposure. As a result of Walker's controversial

acclaim, a younger generation of artists have chosen to create their own publicity.

But Walker's work goes beyond the "buzz" of many other artists who were considered "hot" around the same time of Walker's peak in popularity. Another testament to the substantial quality of Walker's work is its appeal to various cultures around the world that may be familiar with the US history of slavery and those that can see something of their own history in her work.

In further research, I would like to examine Walker's body of watercolors. There is much discussion on the silhouettes but I find their precursors, such as the 1998 **Untitled**, just as fascinating. As far as Walker's silhouettes, I think there is room for more discussion on the interaction between Black women and White men. The artist also extended her silhouettes by projecting colorful landscapes over her cutout figures. I would be interested in exploring the artist's foray into color, examining the symbology that comes into play with each color as I have employed black, white and gray in this work.

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Figure 1. *Burn* 1997. Cut paper.



Figure 2. *Why I Like White Boys*. Cut paper.

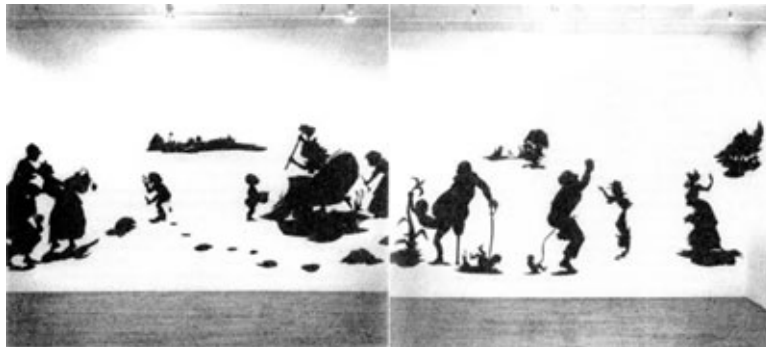


Figure 3. *The End of Uncle Tom (Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven)*, and Detail 1995. Cut paper.



Figure 4. *Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* 1994. Cut paper.





Figure 6. *African't* 1996. Cut paper.





Figure 7. *Consume* 1998. Cut paper.