

Kara Walker, in Context

Decoding the Tales of an Unreliable Narrator

BY REBECCA PEABODY



Installation view of **KARA WALKER**'s *The Long Hot Black Road to Freedom, a Double-Dixie Two-Step*, 2005-08, cut paper, adhesive on wall, and paint on wall, approx. 5.2×45.7 m, at "The World is a Stage: Stories Behind Pictures," Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2005. Photo by Kioku Keizo. All images copyright the artist. All images courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; and Sprüth Magers, Berlin/London/Los Angeles/New York.



Installation view of KARA WALKER's "Safety Curtain," 1998-99, organized by Museum in Progress with the Vienna State Opera.

I."The illusion is that most of my work is simply about past events, a point in history and nothing else."

A bewildering series of vignettes play out, larger than life, across white gallery walls: a woman hangs in mid-air, with what appears to be a baby below her; another woman, baby in arms, offers her hand and foot to a man who is either buried or missing his lower half. Legs, whether his or another's, are draped over the shoulder of another man who watches on, in too-close proximity, to this scene of unsettling intimacy. A trio of figures, some nude, some clothed, run and drag each other across the landscape, tugging on ropes, nooses, and shackles. Meanwhile, children run toward danger, fall into ravines, and molest each other. The schematic potential of the black cutouts is both canny and uncanny. Characters are coded as Black and White through a series of slippery signifiers that refuse stability: hair texture, facial features, clothing, or its absence. Power is indicated but destabilized: a White man holds a noose that entraps a young Black woman but is himself pulled along—off-balance and backwards—by a Black man. A young Black girl and White boy are entangled in what might be an amorous embrace—except the position of the girl's arms suggests something more ominous. Viewers are given just enough information to be disturbed, but not enough to know what *exactly* is happening, or how they feel about it. Even describing what one sees, as I have just done, involves risk. Am I really seeing what I think I am? Or am I drawing on my own imagination to make sense of what I see?

The Long Hot Black Road to Freedom, a Double Dixie Two-Step (2005-08) is a strong representative of the artwork for which Kara Walker first became known. It remains one of her signature mediums: the black-and-white cutout. Like her other silhouette installations, this piece interrogates the audience, creating a psychologically interactive drama. Viewers are given the opportunity to become aware of and spend time experiencing their own uneasiness with stories that invoke race, violence, love, and lust without any of the familiar narrative preconditions they might expect. Yet, this piece also offers a unique opportunity to its viewers.



Installation view of KARA WALKER's *Fons Americanus*, 2019, non-toxic acrylic and cement composite, recyclable cork, wood, and metal, 22.4×15.2×13.2 m, at Tate Modern, London, 2019. Photo by Tate/Matt Greenwood.



Detail of the shell grotto in KARA WALKER's *Fons Americanus*, 2019, non-toxic acrylic and cement composite, recyclable cork, wood, and metal, 3.1×3.2×3.3 m, at Tate Modern, London, 2019. Photo by Tate/Matt Greenwood.

Walker's imagery is often associated with the legacy of slavery in the United States and, indeed, Walker has used this legacy as a rich vein of material inspiration, drawing from archival sources, historical and contemporary reimaginings of history, and her own imagination. But just as the work has a slippery association with the signifiers of race, time, and place, so too does it evade a concrete and permanent location in the US. Owned by a private collection in Hong Kong, which also collects works from Europe, America, and across Asia, and loans its pieces out globally, this work has the potential to disrupt comfort zones, as well as initiate self-reflection and larger conversations worldwide. What histories of violence and enslavement might be called up by the works alongside this piece within the collection? What local meaning might be activated when *The Long Hot Black Road to Freedom* is loaned out and displayed elsewhere in the world? What might be said about the exportation of US-specific imagery about slavery to other countries that are grappling with their own unique histories of oppression? This is, indeed, a piece that

resonates uncomfortably, yet productively, far beyond the US.

Walker has also approached this issue from another direction by applying her distinctive creative methodology to the cultures and histories of other countries. This can be seen in her 1998 work *Safety Curtain*, commissioned by the nonprofit organization Museum in Progress in collaboration with the Vienna State Opera. The *Safety Curtain* (1998-) project invites a contemporary artist to design a new cover for the Opera's extant safety curtain each year. The Opera's permanent safety curtain, which remains installed beneath the temporary covers, was designed by Viennese artist Rudolf Hermann Eisenmenger, a former member of the Nazi Party. The project works to acknowledge that history through an annual invited intervention. Walker's contribution—the first work in the series—drew on her signature silhouette format and juxtaposed characters from Greek mythology, European children's stories, advertisements, and visual references to the original Eisenmenger curtain, raising unsettling questions about Austrian history through the use of culturally-specific evocations and highlighting her work's ability to destabilize an audience.

More recently, Walker created the ephemeral monument *Fons Americanus*, a 2019 commission by Hyundai for Tate Modern in London. The monument, a functioning water fountain, was inspired by the Victoria Memorial at Buckingham Palace. However, rather than exalting empire like the Memorial, Walker's creation asked viewers to reflect on the violently intertwined histories of Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the waters that connect them.

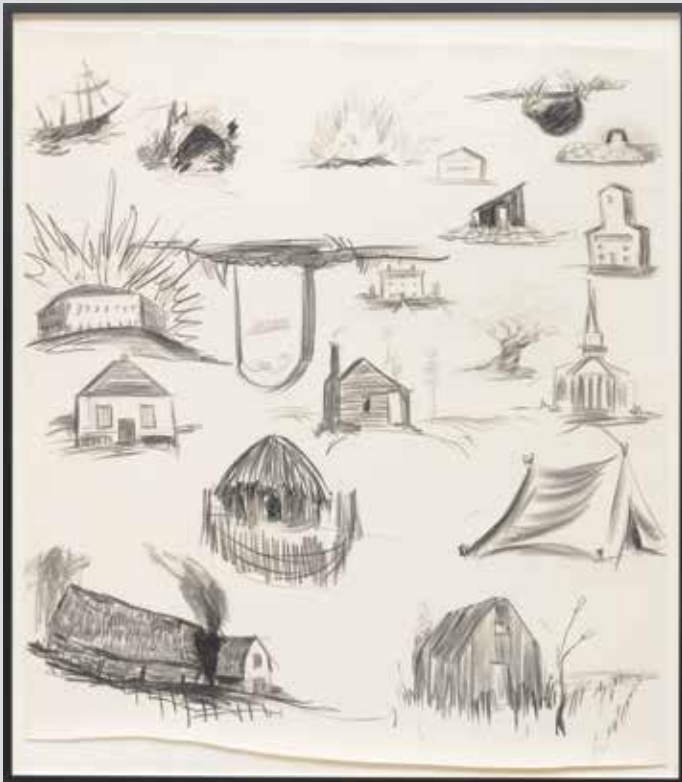
Looking at these three works together allows viewers to see the international scope of Walker's work, not only in terms of its circulation, but in the ways in which imagery coded as "American" can ignite specific and local conversations about power well beyond the US, and in the ways that Walker's visual vocabulary and methodology have been deployed internationally.

II. "I'm not an actual historian. I'm an unreliable narrator . . ."

A collection of seemingly distinct, unrelated structures fills the entirety of *Ode to the Architecture of Black Suffering* (2006). While their legibility is unstable, some seem recognizable: a barn, tent, hut, house, log cabin, church, shack, and plantation.



KARA WALKER, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995, cut paper and adhesive on wall, approx. 4×10.7 m.



KARA WALKER, *Ode to the Architecture of Black Suffering*, 2006, wax crayon on paper, 170.2×153.7 cm.

Others are vaguely official-looking buildings: factories, perhaps, or governmental spaces. Disasters, both natural and humanmade, are interspersed: a raging fire, an exploding multistory building. A ship at sea, in the context of the work's title, becomes a vehicle of genocide. A few twisted lines may allude to a tornado, or to a tree. One large upside down tombstone provides an uneasy anchor for viewers' eyes as they move across the individual entries, while another grave marker fades from view in the upper right corner.

Walker's titles often provide greater access to the works they describe, opening up new ways of understanding their content and expanding their ramifications. The title of *Ode*, for example, helps viewers understand what all these structures might have in common and prompts them to wonder what may have taken place inside their disparate confines. Yet her titles can also contribute to the destabilization of the work. The word "ode," for example, will be familiar to many viewers as a type of poem, or verse, that carries connotations of praise. What does it mean to name a depiction of Black suffering after a poetic form usually reserved for praise? As she does with her silhouettes, Walker often juxtaposes narrative and visual effects in order to create a

destabilizing experience for her viewers. She is, as she notes in the quotation above, an unreliable narrator; hers is the voice we turn to first for narrative guidance, yet that guidance is unlikely to take us anywhere familiar or comfortable. This work also continues a theme that is evident elsewhere in Walker's oeuvre: exploring the relationship between architecture and human behavior. In *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), one of her most famous silhouettes, a range of troubling activities plays out among characters that allude to, yet defy, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While the characters' activities are larger than life and immediately proximate to the viewer (implicating the audience physically in their activities), the subjects are also carefully positioned in relationship to architecture, visible in the form of tiny houses far off on the horizon. The activities we are witnessing are separated from home, from domesticity, from architecture. *Ode* can be seen as part of a visual conversation, an ongoing investigation into the relationship between violence and architecture. How do we understand violence in relationship to shelter, spaces that are designed to protect?



KARA WALKER, *Untitled* from the six-part suite *American Primitives*, 2001, paint, collage on board, 15.2×15.2 cm.



KARA WALKER, *Notes Drawn by a Negress After a Long Absence*, 2016, gouache, ink, and graphite on paper, set of 62 drawings, 50 at 26×17.8cm each and 12 at 30.8×22.9cm each, both vertical and horizontal.



Installation view of KARA WALKER's *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant, 2014, polystyrene foam and sugar, approx. 10.8×7.9×23m, a project of Creative Time at the Domino Sugar Refinery, New York, 2014. Photo by Jason Wyche.

An untitled work from the series *American Primitives* (2001) adds an additional provocation to this conversation. The image depicts a small hut—one that bears a remarkable resemblance to a similar structure in the lower-left corner of *Ode*—centered against a landscape of reds: a red sky, red ground, red horizon. Blood red, perhaps, as there are two Black hands lying on the ground near the door, one of which has been severed at the wrist. Walker has described her artwork in literary terms, invoking three main participants: the author, the reader, and the character. In these works, we see the characters positioned in distinct and different relationships to architecture. They are foregrounded, hidden, partially revealed, but never separated. The violence that is suggested but not depicted by *Ode* is on full display—if far from home—in *The End of Uncle Tom* and right on the threshold of scenes from *American Primitives*.

III. "Does it count? . . . What counts?"

In an interview conducted for Walker's touring exhibition "A Black Hole Is Everything a Star Longs to Be" (2021–22), Walker discusses the content of the show: a collection of more than 600 drawings she had kept private for nearly 30 years, only recently opening them up for public viewing. Sharing her thoughts about their unique status as art objects, whether they were finished enough, and whether they were substantial enough, she asked about a drawing: "Does it count? . . . What counts?"

The private nature and intimacy of drawings is an appropriate backdrop for a discussion of *Notes Drawn by a Negress After a Long Absence* (2016), a collection of 62 drawings using mixed media on paper. Impressionistic and evocative, the individual works are mostly, though not exclusively, figural, exploring bodies in whole and in pieces, their expressive capacities, and their sometimes violent relationships with other bodies, body parts, and objects. The work is remarkable for the proximity and distance it demands of the viewer; one must approach each piece individually, giving it the time and space to exist on its own, while also considering it as part of a much larger effort.

Made in between Walker's two monumental works of public sculpture, *A Subtlety* (2014)—a massive sugar sculpture depicting a nude sphinx-like creature with the face of a stereotypical "mammy"—and *Fons Americanus* (2019), *Notes* invites us to reflect on the differences between intimate drawings and large-scale public works of art, and to ask how they might be in conversation.

It might seem as though monumental sculpture and works on paper are at opposite ends of the spectrum, but they have obvious points of connection. Sketches and drawings are often part of the essential preparation for larger-scale pieces, and can be seen as both documentation of the progression of a larger work and as works of art in their own right. At the same time, both *A Subtlety* and *Fons Americanus* were temporary, site-specific works that were disassembled after their respective exhibitions. While *A Subtlety* continued to travel through the synecdoche of the *Figa* (the left hand of the sphinx at the heart of *A Subtlety*, the only part of the sculpture that wasn't destroyed), both sculptures now exist only in preparatory, archival, and documentary forms—along with the massive crowd-sourced social-media engagement that accompanied both, especially *A Subtlety*. Considered along the chronological arc of Walker's oeuvre, *Notes* can be seen as a pulse-point—a reminder in between two large-scale installations—of the centrality of the drawing to monuments more generally and to Walker's creative practice more specifically.

Kara Walker is a visual artist born in 1969 in Stockton, California. She was raised in Georgia and is currently based in New York.

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