

Kara Walker



Photo by Tom van Eynde

Kara Walker, *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through The South And Reconfigured For The Benefit Of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored*, 1997, Paper, and watercolor on paper, Installation dimensions variable. Installation view at the Renaissance Society, 1997. © Kara Walker.

An image of Kara Walker's black silhouette artwork installed on two white walls inside of the Renaissance Society gallery located on the University of Chicago's campus. The floors are dark brown and polished with a reflective surface, the lighting is warm and soft. Above the walls there is a white metal structure that holds the tops of the walls and the gallery lights in place. Above the metal structure and gallery walls there is a white vaulted ceiling with sky-lights. There are six silhouettes on the wall closest to the front of the picture plane, three suggest a landscape setting; tree branches with Spanish

moss hanging from them and cattails growing from the ground. The other three silhouettes are of figures with contorted and exaggerated features; one holds a banjo as liquid drips from their mouth as a smaller feminine figure stands behind him and turns a large winder into his back. The central figure on the same wall flies through the air with a trumpet that seems to protrude from between their legs, while a third figure that appears to be wearing a dress is cut off and only partially visible on the right side of the picture plane. The second white wall in the image that is set further back in the room has three visible black silhouettes that are part of the same artwork. On this wall the silhouettes combine the figure and landscape elements of grass and clouds. The largest central silhouette shows a horse that has fallen on its back, its legs are flailing in the air as a feminine figure stands on top of it and appears to be attacking it, they have an arch of silhouetted clouds around them. The silhouette on the right is also a feminine figure in a dress who appears to be running away from the horse and central figure, and the silhouette on the left is of a bag that is tied at the top, it looks full and it is sitting in the grass.

Kara Walker works with shadows. Black silhouettes depicting antebellum America pop against a never-ending white. This is may be her best-known work: *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. First exhibited in 1994, this 25-foot-long paper installation is reminiscent of Victorian shadow portraits, the slender outline of the figures a nod to children's storybooks. But there is something unnerving about these scenes, and a second glance will reveal the figures are staged in violent acts. *Gone* walks the line between history and myth. This is true of much of Walker's work. With her distinct style, she transforms what we thought was familiar into uniquely uncanny shapes.

Originally from California, the artist has held exhibitions at many of the world's leading museums and has dedicated her

career to exploring themes of race, gender, and violence in society. Since signature moments like *Gone*, Walker has contributed to the global art world for over 20 years, employing a wide array of artistic media. She is not bound by material. Working across the spectrum, she has used paper, sculpture, painting, and installation, among others. Amid these changing forms one thing becomes clear: Walker's true medium is history.

Indeed, one of her most recent works, *Fons Americanus*, a giant fountain that explores the role of public art in crafting historical and cultural narratives, opened at the Tate Modern in 2019. This piece is inspired by a London icon, the 1911 Victoria Memorial Fountain at Buckingham Palace. Here, *Fons Americanus* leans into the allegorical tradition of public monuments to subvert conceptions of success. Although worlds away in form, *Fons Americanus* is not a departure from foundational pieces like *Gone*, but an exploration transformed, a renewal of constant themes.

It is in this dedication to revisiting our past and renewing our present that Walker's art fits into the framework of *Toward Common Cause*. Displaying new objects while also including works from the past, this exhibition poses questions about access and inclusion. *Toward Common Cause* pushes us to consider what is "common" in society and who has access to natural and cultural resources. Like this exhibition, Walker's body of work questions the mainstream narratives that shape our world, while challenging our contemporary view of the past.

Whether through paper, allegorical sculpture, or musically accompanied installation, Walker's work pulls from styles and stories ingrained in our cultural memory. In harnessing history, Kara Walker casts shadows on our present, her work confronting viewers with the silhouette of our past.

—Marie-Capucine Pineau-Valencienne

b. 1969, California, United States
MacArthur Fellow, 1997

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