

# Kara Walker

**ROBERT STORR** *Would you talk about the beginnings of your training and your relationship to painting? It was during the 1980s, which was the moment of Neo-Expressionism and of ironic or conceptual appropriation in all media including painting. You also connected to the European tradition of painting – [Francisco] Goya, [Eugène] Delacroix, and [Théodore] Géricault, for instance. How did you find yourself there and how did you inhabit that?*

**KARA WALKER** It was painful, actually. I found that the work that I liked – either the German Neo-Expressionist paintings or conceptual works such as Lorna Simpson's or Adrian Piper's – was either raw emotion or just really sort of cut and dry, spelling it all out. I was then an undergraduate in school, and I think one of the moments when I came to realize who I was and what I liked in the world was when I visited the National Gallery in Washington DC on a field trip with my classmates. I saw little genre paintings by so-and-so and I just remember saying to myself, "This is what I like. I like these slightly pathetic scenes of human beings rendered with an effort to truth telling."

**RS** *Did you make conceptual-related work like Lorna's and Adrian's or did you think one thing and did another?*

**KW** I sort of thought one thing and did another. It was always in the context of school. I was introduced to Adrian's work then and did a project based around it. I thought it came out pretty well, but it didn't really count as my actual work because I was still hanging on to this juicy painting idea. When I graduated and realized that nobody was gonna look at my work anyway, that terrified me but also freed me up to be a little less romantic. And I started to make a bunch of collages, which are long gone and forgotten. I started collecting black postcards – late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representations of black children and so on – and started making these text overlays over those. I kept them very private and to myself, because they didn't look like what my painting was supposed to look like – my paintings were just really big. I was reading and collecting information, and I think that some of Adrian Piper's early works influenced me in a way.

**RS** *You use large paper silhouettes to explore issues of race, gender, sexuality, and violence as well as to critique historical narratives of slavery. In terms of art-historical references, did you have any affinity at all for Aaron Douglas or for Jacob Lawrence, or for other African-American artists of the past who used silhouetted forms?*

**KW** Yes. Those were works I was familiar with. And even my dad [artist Larry Walker]

employed silhouetted forms work in some of his early stuff from the 1960s and 70s that I saw growing up. But I didn't make the connection when I started doing my things – my dad since reminded me! [both laugh]

**RS** *When you began thinking about who might look at your work did you have a certain type of viewer or a range of viewers in mind?*

**KW** I had a definite cluster of ideal viewers in mind. When I started my early work, I really felt I was making it in response to a lot of work that I had seen, especially in the year or so leading up to graduate school. At that time there were the riots; also, Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989) came out. In general, there was a lot of talking about blackness in a significant way. And I found that a lot of work by peers and associates from school, in the Atlanta area, was kind of didactic, or it was received by a white audience as being representative of a whole thing. So I wanted to address that group of black artists, but also this white audience that has a certain level of expectation for what a black artist ought to make. I was really addressing an art audience. Before then, for me, it was more about addressing everybody, but then I limited myself.

**RS** *So, in a way, you were challenging one prevalent way of making art within the community of black artists, as much as you were setting forth another way of doing it.*

**KW** Yes, I was always challenging myself, because, in my mind, the looming questions to myself were, "Why aren't you making work like this? What kind of black woman are you? Who are you within this looming dialog?" I thought of it as an experiment to see what would happen. As I developed, I ended up finding myself in there. I was going to implicate myself, and in that implication there was something really charged and interesting.

**RS** *You speak of "finding yourself". Do you see yourself projected in one character or a number of characters, or in the position of the artist in relation to all of these characters?*

**KW** In all the characters and in the position of the artist in relation to all of the characters, and in what happens in between in those relationships. Once I participated in a group show in Atlanta about the black man image/reality; the show included mostly painters. I received a lot of responses by which I felt that in order to take on such a heavy, real topic – about real time, real issues – you can't divorce yourself from the fact that you are dealing with a fiction. As a painter, I am dealing with a stage and I have to figure out if I am comfortable with that role, being like a director on a stage with all these characters.

**RS** *And, is being uncomfortable with them a sort of needle on the meter of where the work is going?*

**KW** Well, it has gotten really uncomfortable being uncomfortable all the time. It is really important to me that, whatever work one is looking at, there be an experience of dislocation so that you're suddenly not sure of where you thought you were, and of who you thought you were. Your belief system gets jarred for a moment standing in front of something stationary and quiet. I think that that's just the most incredible situation, when art can really move you.

**RS** *Given the fragility and scale of your silhouettes, are these pieces made once, carefully preserved, and then put back up, or are these done with dress patterns, or whatever the equivalent would be, so that they can be recreated? How do you handle practical issues of permanence and impermanence?*

KARA WALKER

**KW** When I made my first installation of black cutouts, as it Occurred b'tween the walls, there were all these reprehensible actions, and I thought, "What if the viewer and the viewer have this relationship now there is a dress pattern of currency in seeing this served, I suppose – I want to raise all kinds of interesting questions perpetuating them."

**RS** *In some ways, the work you do is related to early Conceptual art, where there was almost too much material to make something that could be dynamic is to make something that is literal. To dematerialize something with projection, gets into the realm of Is that something that is a film on the wall or a painting?*

**KW** That's a good way to think about it. It's apparent. It feels like a painting exists by cutting itself out of its existence by cutting itself out of a film. Maybe film is a painting and keeping them in mind. **RS** *Have you ever thought of your work as a painting?* **KW** Not really. I always think of my projections I make right in front of me. I think that, before I started, it was a long length story.

**RS** *There is a certain quality to your work, and then a doubling back to the nineteenth-century painting, or situations?*

**KW** Yes. But it's also a question of thinking about. And I think that I can do. But I don't say it all so perfectly. I think about the body. For instance, I found the most beautiful drawings based on the access into one artist's mind.

**RS** *In my view, caricature has always been treated in art as a*

**kw** When I made my first piece at the Drawing Center [New York] in 1994, a wall installation of black cut-out silhouettes [*Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*], there were all these reprehensible figures going about and making all these reprehensible actions, and I thought, "I can take them away so that there is this moment when me and the viewer have this pleasure in that reprehensibility and then it's denied." But now there is a dress pattern and there is – I hate to say it – a market. There is a kind of currency in seeing this work and having this dialog. So the work has to be preserved, I suppose – I was talked into it anyway. So there are dress patterns and that raises all kinds of interesting questions for me about sustaining these images and perpetuating them.

**rs** *In some ways, the whole argument about permanence and impermanence ties back to early Conceptual art, in which there was a premium placed on not being marketable. There was almost too much economic determinism in the arguments that if you could make something that could not be collected you were home free. But the other side of the dynamic is to make something where the fragility of the object is connotative rather than literal. To dematerialize bodies and to make specters, operating the way that you've done with projection, gets into a formal use of those things separate from preservability per se. Is that something that is guiding the way you think about the next stages? Is making still films on the wall or animations a movement into immateriality?*

**kw** That's a good way to put it. I keep thinking about making the work less and less apparent. It feels like a natural growth somehow, taking the material and denying its existence by cutting it out physically. I don't know what happens after film. And I think that's why I prolong that moment between making cut-outs and some kind of a film. Maybe film is the only solution beyond doing nothing, thinking my thoughts and keeping them in my head! *[both laugh]*

**rs** *Have you ever thought of doing a film at length?*

**kw** Not really. I always think about something of this moment. With regards to the projections I make right now, I just want them to be surprising and at the same time quiet. I think that, before I make a full-length movie, I'd rather learn to write a full-length story.

**rs** *There is a certain jump forward from the silhouettes to their projection on the wall and then a doubling back where you return to drawing with its associations of nineteenth-century painting. Is it crucial to you to keep moving between those two impulses or situations?*

**kw** Yes. But it's also an anchor for me. It's a way of processing what I'm already thinking about. And it has a little bit of a pleasure principle in that I know it's something that I can do. But I am also still learning how to do it. I find that some images say it all so perfectly but they still need to be processed through my body, my black body. For instance, I became interested in this wonderful book on long forgotten panoramas from the Mississippi valley created by some long forgotten artists, and in it I found the most beautiful reproduction of an image ever. So I made all kinds of large drawings based on this fragment of this image and that became an anchor in gaining access into one artist's vision of a harmonious antebellum world.

**rs** *In my view, caricature is a form of art. It has a very long history, but it's been always treated in art criticism with a little bit of reserve, with notable exceptions such*

as [Ernst] Gombrich. Could you talk about your thoughts on caricature and how caricature is understood by people as an art form, as a way of thinking, imagining and picturing, or embodying?

**kw** Well, it is considered sort of second class. All the forms I am working with – the silhouette, the psychorama, caricature – are considered second-class. They are relegated to not really being art. The main criticism I've received concerning my use of caricature has come from the black community, just because there is always the issue about the positive representation of blacks. That's a question that has come up often and the answer always seems to reside in media other than painting, such as television and cinema – and these are all forms that deal with stereotyping and caricature, no matter what and no matter who. So there's no point in looking for satisfaction there.

**rs** You know, I wanted to be a cartoonist before I wanted to be a painter. And when I started making the first drawings, it felt very natural for my hand to use simple lines and make cartoon-like images.

**rs** Why do you think there is this incredible resistance to using all the registers, all the range of the visual arts including caricature – lampoon, burlesque, and grotesque? How come this is not permitted to visual artists while, for example, if comedian Richard Pryor makes a way-off racially multi-barbed joke most people are in on it, and laugh with it?

**kw** I wonder that too. I guess we deal in beauty, and in a quiet language, and we cause people to stand still for a long period of time. And there isn't the same anticipation of when one goes into a theater or a comedy club, where one walks in with the expectation of being jarred. When it comes to the visual arts, most of the time we are very complicit and placid. And sometimes in the black community we have certain expectations about what we want to see. What is it worth looking at? This is a question that has been raised for a couple of generations. But employing all the registers, including caricature, will be permissible one day. Most likely it will be too late, though: I will have moved on to abstraction! [both laugh]



Kara Walker  
*Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War  
One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994  
Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable  
Installation view, *Selections 1994*, The Drawing Room  
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