

Kara Walker Recreates Scenes from Antebellum South through Life Sized Silhouettes

BY KRISTIN STERLING

Kara Walker infuses the 18th and 19th century art of silhouetting with a modern scale: utilizing life-size cut-outs often spanning an entire wall or room. And her subject matter—the antebellum South, slavery and stereotypes surrounding African Americans seen through an equally contemporary intellectual lens—is as intriguing as her methodology.

In 1994, three months after receiving her M.F.A. from the Rhode Island Institute of Design, Walker, now a full-time visual arts professor at Columbia's School of the Arts, had her debut show at the Drawing Center in SoHo. There she created a 50-foot mural depicting a southern plantation scene by pasting her oversized black paper cutouts on a large white wall.

More recently at the 2002 Sao Paulo Biennial, one of the largest and most prestigious international arts exhibitions, Walker represented the United States with a cyclorama, a grand scale painting in the round, 85-feet in circumference. She built the installation, entitled "Slavery! Slavery!," on site and filled it with her signature life-sized silhouettes. Like Atlanta's famed Cyclorama, Walker's installation portrays the Battle of Atlanta during the Civil War.

How does she create such vast murals and life-sized cutouts? She lays large papers on the floor and, without models or photographs, outlines people in white chalk. She then cuts them out and puts them directly on the wall.

"Watching Kara draw is like it must have been to watch Picasso," said Bruce W. Ferguson, dean of the School of the Arts. "She has an incredible blend of pure skill, talent and imagination, all of which make her a great artist and a great teacher. We are enormously gratified to have her here at the School of the Arts where both undergraduate and graduate students have access to her as an artist and teacher."

Walker, who won a MacArthur Foundation "genius award" at age 27, began using silhouette form in the early 1990s. While in graduate school she started combining



RECORD PHOTO BY EILEEN BARROSO

Kara Walker's life-sized silhouettes, "The Policy of Admissions," on display in 305 Dodge Hall.

themes of slavery, violence and sex, drawn from cultural influences that include folklore, cartoons, movies, black memorabilia, Harlequin romance novels and slave narratives.

Such large-scale works catch the viewer's attention and often spark controversy. Upon careful inspection, viewers may realize that the silhouette is a narrative device Walker employs to mix historical facts and stereotypes of racism and sexism. Her work is particularly controversial among the previous generation of African American artists who fought for civil rights and are sometimes offended by her use of degrading characterizations.

"Throughout her career, Kara has challenged and changed the way we look at and understand American history," said Thelma Golden, chief curator at the Studio Museum, which is currently exhibiting one of Walker's installations. "Her work is provocative and emotionally wrenching, yet overwhelmingly beautiful and

intellectually compelling."

The installation from "Narratives of a Negress" was on exhibition through Sept. 28. The exhibition, organized by the Tang Teaching Museum and Williams College Museum of Art, spans her career and will travel to Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., through Dec. 5.

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"The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does," Walker explained in the catalogue

for her solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "So I saw the silhouette and stereotype as linked. Of course, while the stereotype, or the emblem, can communicate with a lot of people, and a lot of people can understand it, the other side is that it also reduces differences, reduces diversity to that stereotype."

Another way Walker communicates with her viewers is by bringing them into the story. In "American Primatives," last fall at the Brent Sikkema Gallery in Chelsea, and in part of the traveling exhibition "Narratives of a Negress," this spring at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Walker set up colored-light projectors that cast colorful landscape designs over the cutouts on the wall. As viewers moved around the installation and crossed in front of the projectors, their shadows were also cast on the wall, joining the scenes.

"Her charged and visceral

imagery not only brings to light troubling episodes from the history of black and white relations in America, but also highlights the problems of racism, sexism and abuse that continue into the present," said Ian Berry, curator of the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College.

Walker's work has been on exhibition around the world, including group shows such as: Moving Pictures, Guggenheim Museum, New York; La Belle et La Bete, Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Conceal/Reveal at SITE Santa Fe, an exhibition curated by Dean Ferguson; and Contemporary Artists and a 19th-Century Vision, Hayward Gallery for the Arts Council of England, London.

Closer to home, Walker created an installation entitled "The Policy of Admissions" that is on display in 305 Dodge Hall. True to her signature style, the life-size silhouettes depict a scene from antebellum South.

Columbia Law School Alumnus Paul Robeson Honored With US Postal Stamp

BY MICHAEL LARKIN

Columbia welcomed the family, friends and admirers of one of its most accomplished graduates last week when the United States Postal Service unveiled the Paul Robeson commemorative stamp at a special ceremony hosted by The Center for Contemporary Black History.

Robeson, Law '28, was a seminal figure in black American history during the 20th century where he used his popularity as a singer and actor to speak out against civil and social injustices.

"This stamp is a symbol of our nation's recognition of Paul Robeson's service not only to America but the world," said Paul Robeson, Jr.

Speakers that included, President Lee C. Bollinger, former

New York City Mayor David Dinkins, Provost Alan Brinkley, Law School Vice Dean Richard Briffault, New York Postmaster Vinnie Malloy and Professor Farah Jasmine Griffin, director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies, spoke of Robeson as a man of "great spirit," "intellectual integrity" and "unique courage."

Manning Marable, founder of the Institute for Research in African American Studies and the current director of the Center for Contemporary Black Studies, described Robeson as "one of the greatest and most extraordinary Americans of the 20th or any other century."

Columbia has honored the life and legacy of Paul Robeson through the Annual Paul Robeson Conference and Gala, hosted by the Columbia Law School Black Law Students Association

(BLSA), and the Annual Paul Robeson Lecture, held by the Law School's Center for the Study of Law and Culture. Leading scholars including Manning Marable, Cornel West and K. Anthony Appiah, a professor of Afro-American Studies of Harvard University, have given past lectures.

Paul Robeson fellowships have also been established by the Institute of Research in African American Studies. Current Robeson fellows are Tiffany Ford, Tikia Hamilton, Natasha Korgaonkar and Jamie Whitfield.

The Robeson commemorative stamp is the 27th installment in the Black Heritage Series, which includes the images of Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther, Jr., Langston Hughes, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, and A. Phillip Randolph.



RECORD PHOTO BY MICHAEL LARKIN

Paul Robeson, Jr. speaks at the unveiling ceremony of the United States Postal Office stamp honoring his father, Paul Robeson.