Kara Walker

Riots and Outrages

Introduction

Kara Walker’s work emphatically entered the conversation about art and race in 1994 when her mural entitled “Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart” debuted at the Drawing Center in SoHo. Composed of scenes of sex, violence, and often appalling humor, its reach was grand—not unlike that other epic of the Civil War whose title shares that initial word and to which Walker nodded satirically. Even more disturbing was the effect of all this raunchiness being depicted in the genteel and antiquated technique of silhouette art, for which Walker has become famous—her room-sized installations of black cut-paper figures on white walls helped earn her a MacArthur fellowship at age twenty-eight.

Critics have assigned labels ranging from “provocative” to “exploitative” to Walker’s overall project. At the crux of this controversy is the silhouette itself, which reduces a subject to the least possible amount of information and forces the viewer to rely on stereotypical hints—clothing, hairstyle, exaggerated physical characteristics—leading toward two-dimensional “truths” that make explicit the work’s deep sense of ambiguity. Viewers must become (discomfortingly) reductionist themselves; Walker offers no choice but to understand and then implicitly to accept the stereotypes in order to identify her characters.

The portfolio on the following pages comprises images from two recent shows: a 2007 solo exhibition entitled “Bureau of Refugees” and a smaller show (with Mark Bradford) of new work in 2009, both at the Sikkema Jenkins and Company Gallery in New York. Stylistically reminiscent of Walker’s murals, “Elegy for a No-Account Niggra” (2007) narrates a story that is ambivalent, incomplete, and duplicitous; multiple images of the romantic Old South and mourning motifs share space with depictions of torture, dismemberment, and the noose. The eponymous “Bureau of Refugees” works are spare and isolated in comparison, however. Lacking the juxtaposition, tropes, and other devices,
these images are self-explanatory depictions drawn from a list of “Riots and Outrages” committed by whites, a list the artist discovered in the archives of the short-lived Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, the federal agency that supervised relief efforts and documented conditions related to Civil War refugees and freedmen.

In these newer works, Walker has scaled back her silhouettes, framed them, and placed them against a gessoed ground. Others are displayed in three-dimensions. Perhaps emblematically, her world is no longer seen solely in black-and-white: flames burn and blood flows red, a white silhouette emerges from a patchwork quilt. And new “truths” are seen when the free-standing cutouts are viewed from different angles. Constant, however, is Walker’s refusal to portray history as the familiar oppressor-versus-victim duality, as is evident in “Thickets Parts 1 & 2” (2009), with its grotesque sexual tableaux before a background of women with averted eyes, and in the violence and torture in “Craft” (2009).

Walker steadfastly offers no conclusions, no “Color Purple” redemption. As she states in the catalog to her 2008 exhibition at the Whitney Museum, “My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love,” “I’m interested in the continuity of conflict, the creation of racist narratives, or nationalist narratives, or whatever narratives people use to construct a group identity and to keep themselves whole—such activity has a darker side to it, since it allows people to lash out at whoever’s not in the group.”

Kara Walker was born in Stockton, California, and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. She holds degrees from the Atlanta College of Art and the Rhode Island School of Design. Her public honors include a MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award (1997), the Deutsche Bank Prize (2004), and the Larry Aldrich Award (2007), and in 2007 she was listed among Time magazine’s 100 most influential people. Walker’s work has been exhibited at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Musée d’Art Moderne la Ville de Paris.

D.C.

Copyright © 2009 Kara Walker
Images courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Company, New York