



Kara Walker

“One of my earliest memories involves sitting on my dad’s lap in his studio in the garage of our house and watching him draw. I remember thinking: ‘I want to do that, too,’ and I pretty much decided then and there at age 2½ or 3 that I was an artist just like Dad.” —Kara Walker ¹

Kara Walker (American, b. 1969) is best known for her room-size tableaux of black cut-paper silhouettes that examine the underbelly of America's racial and gender tensions. Her works often address such highly charged themes as power, repression, history, race, and sexuality. Born in Stockton, California, Walker moved to the South at age 13 when her father, artist Larry Walker, accepted a position at Georgia State University and her family relocated to Stone Mountain, a suburb of Atlanta. Focusing on painting and printmaking in college, she received her BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991 and her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. At the age of 27, she became the youngest recipient of the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's "genius" grant, which launched a public controversy around her work. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is included in the collections of major museums worldwide. is the artist's first full-scale U.S. museum survey. Walker currently lives in New York, where she is a professor of visual arts in the MFA program at Columbia University.

“Most pieces have to do with exchanges of power, attempts to steal power away from others.”
—Kara Walker ¹

¹Flo Wilson, “On Walls and the Walkers,” *The International Review of African American Art* 20.3: 17–19.

Freedom, A Fable: Pop-up cut paper silhouettes; letterpress A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times, 1997 B.97.8

Kara Walker's cut-paper silhouette images, a technique quite popular in the 19th century for both portraiture and narrative illustrations, are bridges between the slavery folklore of the Antebellum South and the identity and gender issues that today concern modern African American women in particular.

Kara Walker's art takes an irreverent, humorous, and fantastical look at the underbelly of America's obsessions with race, sex, and violence. The artist draws her iconography from sources as varied as the pre-Civil War American South, historical romance novels, commercial culture, and slave narratives. Through a "collusion of fact and fiction," she creates a complex reading of history that is at once

seductive and terrifying. What at first glance appears innocent in its fairytale-like rendering is, upon closer inspection, soon revealed to be full of surprising twists and arresting situations.

**Kara Walker, American, b. 1969 North America, United States
20th century, Linoleum cut, 2009.21**

Black-on-white silhouette of a woman in a horizontal format; woman has short curly hair and wears a long bead necklace and large cuff bracelet on PL wrist; ribbons at woman's hips; long hair between legs (pubic hair or skirt material). Signature and Title at bottom of sheet, in pencil: [(c) African/American KW

Kara Walker's work is layered with images that reference history, literature, culture, and the darker aspects of human behavior. Connecting all of her work is an examination of power. The characters in her environments display power struggles of all kinds: physical, emotional, personal, racial, sexual, and historical.

"My works are erotically explicit, shameless. I would be happy if visitors would stand in front of my work and even feel a little ashamed because they have . . . simply believed in the project of modernism." -- Kara Walker, 2001

Types of Responses

The 2007 Walker Art Center—*Kara Walker: My Complement, My Oppressor, My Enemy, My Love*

Kara Walker's art can stir strong emotions, inspire passionate dialogue, and challenge viewers with scenes that are puzzling, bizarre, shocking, and initially mysterious. This section provides tools for engaging and interpreting these complex and often enigmatic works of art.

The act of interpretation is both individual and communal: we respond—with thoughts, feelings, and actions to what we see—we strive to make sense of our responses; and we convey our understanding to others through writing, speech, or other forms of expression.

The following questions and activities are offered as interpretive strategies that can help guide reflection and response prior, during, or after your visit. Our goal is to provide a resource that can help individuals, families, students and communities discover and invent multiple interpretations and meanings from this provocative and exciting body of work.

Description

Controversial or difficult works of art are often criticized without accurate description. The act of describing slows the rush to judgment, deepens the engagement with the artwork, and gives space for emotions and questions to arise. A full description addresses the people, places, and events in the work; the material from which it is made; and how the artist addresses the subject matter through the medium. Description helps us form interpretations and judgments that are accurate and coherent.

Questions for consideration:

When you look at this artwork, what do you notice?

Take about 5-10 minutes to name things seen in the artwork, without making judgments or expressing emotional reactions.

What do you notice about the artist's use of color? Shapes and forms? Overall arrangements or installation?

Association

Kara Walker's work contains cultural and historical references that can be associated with your own experiences. Create connections between the artwork and books, poems, music, films, dance performances, theatrical productions, or television shows. Doing so allows you to discover and invent a rich set of meanings and interpretations that is linked to your own life experience and knowledge.

Questions for consideration:

Choose a particular work of art. What does it remind you of? What memory, experience, story, song, or other work does this trigger or bring to mind?

Narrative

Kara Walker's art is crowded with figures that evoke history, employ stereotypes and caricatures from the past, and invite viewers to imagine stories and scenarios. Scenes are presented frozen and disconnected, with fragments that often invite viewers to fill in the missing elements. By shaping the experience of these artworks into anecdotal accounts with characters, plots, motivations, and actions, you reveal new questions and insights that enrich understanding and interpretation.

Questions for consideration:

What characters are present in the story? How can you sequence the "scenes" to create a plot?
What do you imagine is motivating the characters?
What went on before and what will happen later?

Emotion

Emotions play a central role in the interpretation and judgment of works of art. Since they arise spontaneously and frequently defy conscious effort, emotions are often described in terms of bodily sensations and are closely associated with preference and evaluation. When you interpret or judge a work of art, you do so not only by perceiving its subject matter, form, and medium, but also by fearing, desiring, enjoying, hating, and loving.

Questions for consideration:

What emotions do you feel as you respond to this work? What do you see that makes you say that?
How does your emotional response affect your judgment of the work in question?
How does it affect your preference for a particular artwork?

Meaning

Experiencing a work of art can involve discovering, inventing or communicating meaning. However, a work's message or significance is not limited only to the artist's intention. As viewer's, our own experiences, associations, feelings, and stories become vital aspects in finding meaning in a work of art.

Questions for consideration:

What do you think the artist wants viewers to learn or understand from this work?
Does Kara Walker's use of racial stereotypes successfully subvert their original intent and meaning?

Discuss in the group.

How has the artist changed the original intent of the 19th-century practice of cut-paper silhouettes?