

Kara Walker

A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be

Kara Walker is known around the world for her silhouette cutouts, yet her oeuvre of works on paper has hitherto remained almost overlooked. For the exhibition *A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be*, the artist has opened up her archive and is presenting a wide range of drawings in the broadest sense for the first time: watercolors, sketches, studies, collages, cutout silhouettes, pages of text, diary-like notes, but also found materials like advertisements and newspaper clippings. Walker selected some 650 works and arranged them for the exhibition. However, not only the quantity of artistic material is enormous. Spanning the last twenty-eight years, the archive encompasses the artist's entire career, and the spectrum of techniques covers drawings in charcoal, ink, watercolor, pastel, and crayon. The wide range of works is held together by recurring content: drastic depictions of extremely diverse forms of violence connected to sexism and racism, as well as other practices of oppression. Like hardly any other exhibition, this show asks something of viewers: to engage, endure, and, finally, to take a side.

Many sheets were created in series and have no individual titles. The catalogue reproduces all of the exhibited pieces and describes them in detail in the list of works. In the exhibition you will find texts on thematic focuses derived from or inspired by Walker's oeuvre. They accompany the visit to Walker's cosmos and hopefully also offer stimulation as well. Though these reference points are of central importance, they encompass only some of the relevant topics that become visible amid the great diversity.

ARCHIVE

or: The Immense Puzzle of Identity

The items that Kara Walker selected from her archive are an apparent hodgepodge of works on paper: small-format paintings, drawings in all of their intermediate and preliminary stages, notes typed on index cards, and handwritten scraps of paper. Walker was unable or unwilling to show many of them in the past, since she found them too personal and provocative. Besides drawings and sketches, there are also sequences of diary pages that convey very intimate insights into the life of the artist. All of these works populate long rolls of paper, small sheets, and pages removed from sketchbooks. But empty cracker packages and newspaper clippings are also found in the archive, such as the one about laying the foundation stone for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial.

Kara Walker stored this collection in boxes until she opened them up to prepare for the exhibition. The drawings all originate from Walker's work process and were not created explicitly for the eyes of the public—but they are now accessible to us as viewers. Even though some of the works are unfinished statements, in the exhibition they stand next to pages that, although not yet completed and sketch-like, are nevertheless finished. They defy any clear ascription. Walker's archive thus fundamentally gives rise to the question of when a work can be regarded as finished. The artist herself selected what is shown here. She compares this process with an excavation that led her somewhat closer to the puzzle of identity. The search for identity—as a woman artist in the patriarchal history of art or as a Black woman in the United States—is a central component of her art. Instead of providing a clear answer, her archive shows a plurality of aspects from which identity is constructed. She has thus not adhered to any chronology, instead combining series from various periods anew. Fresh connections thus come about on the walls of the exhibition, and the “puzzle” can be reassembled again and again.

Katharina Dolm, Ann Mbuti

DRAWING

or: Form as a Trap

After completing her artistic training, Walker made a clear decision against the established art canon and bid farewell to the brush. She saw no possibility to express herself as a Black woman artist in the genre of painting, which is shaped by the dominance of white men and a history written from a white perspective. In the 1990s, she thus developed silhouette cutouts into the panorama-like round pictures and room installations for which she is known throughout the world. But drawing has constantly accompanied her nonetheless, and she has created numerous works on paper.

The works from the archive often have the character of a sketch or a study. They are generally made with swift strokes and sketched without their backgrounds being elaborated in detail. They seem to have been created while immersed in a flow, facilitating intimate insights into the artist's creative process. As a result of the extreme contents, viewers become witnesses to murder, rape, and discrimination. The aesthetics of the sketches and drawings frequently refer to an elaboration still to follow. But the works are not an intermediate stage, since Walker does not develop them further into "finished" versions of the motifs. The final expression lies in the unfinished quality, and the designation of an exercise is thus found even in the title of the large-format, dramatic composition *Faalty as Feint (A Drawing Exercise)* (2019).

While many artists look to drawing as a space to develop freely, Walker deliberately incorporates the traditions, styles, and techniques of Western European art history, adapts them in a playful way, and fills them with new content. The numerous drawings, sketches, and watercolors in the exhibition may look delicate, filigree, and aesthetically appealing at first. But on closer examination, they open up a world filled with racist and sexual violence, torture, and fragmented bodies, thus giving rise to confusion and consternation when being viewed. In Walker's well-known silhouette cutouts, the form initially feigns something different and then shocks as a result of the content that is depicted. Hence, one might speak in this context of "form as a trap"—an effect that continues in the drawings.

Katharina Dolm, Ann Mbuti

(OVER-)WRITING HISTORY

or: The Construction of Narratives

Walker's relationship to history and the past is special: even though her topics are deeply anchored in the past of the United States, her works never pertain to concrete points in this history. She thus wrote about the exhibition: "Born on an impulse to retrieve some part of my own history, I let instinct override intellect—now I am being asked to answer for it."

At some points, the works fall back on what already exists: this is shown both formally with the silhouette cutouts and the traditional techniques used in the drawings, but also with respect to content in the topics of the pictures. A reference to history thus becomes clear on various levels. Walker overpaints yellowed newspaper articles or pages that appear to come from old history books, inserting her figures and stories into these narratives in a light-handed way—also in a figurative sense, such as when she combines her depictions of Obama with Shakespeare's Othello. She masterfully adapts not only the techniques but also the styles of renowned protagonists in the Western European history of art, filling them with different themes. In the works on paper, there are often breaks in time within one series. In the thirty-eight drawings that make up *The Gross Clinician Presents: Pater Gravidam* (2018), Walker combines themes from various temporal levels: ranging from the founding fathers of the United States to the exploitation of Black corpses for medical purposes, to current eruptions of violence against Black people. The series brings together various dimensions of how Black bodies are perceived and shows how scientific racism and the racist attributions of the present are interconnected. She references the historical dehumanizing of Black people that was promoted by racist practices, which continue to have deadly consequences still today.

But Walker does not engage in any appropriation when she cites the styles and techniques of renowned artists such as Rembrandt, Rubens, Goya, or Picasso. By interlinking these borrowings with the topics in Walker's oeuvre, the lack of a Black history of art and pictures becomes apparent. Something entirely new arises from her overwriting of existing history or histories. The artist constructs her own view of the past, which seems very authentic due to the masterful application of her technique. But what does authenticity mean in the writing of a fictional history? Kara Walker does not claim any prerogative of interpretation over it—instead leaving it ambiguous.

Katharina Dolm, Ann Mbuti

OBAMA

or: One Cliché Replaces the Other

Barack Obama was the forty-fourth President of the United States—but, considering his significance for the history of the United States, he is already much more than that. As the first Black president, his election in 2008 seemed like the realization of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream. Obama's inauguration was accompanied by great optimism, but his time in office was always characterized by racism, and by harsh criticism of him as an individual. Walker set herself the task of drawing this iconic figure as a reaction to Barack Obama's official portrait of 2018 by the American painter Kehinde Wiley.

Obama appears in four works, whose large format and mode of presentation almost seem to contradict the charcoal and pastel drawing technique used in them. At first glance, they seem to be paintings. Walker superimposes various roles from the religious and literary cultural history of Europe over Obama, for instance, making him into Saint Anthony resisting the temptations of evil. The suggestive title of this drawing, *Barack Obama Tormented Saint Anthony Putting Up With the Whole "Birther" Conspiracy* (2019), makes reference to the conspiracy theory circulating at the time that Obama was not born in the United States and was thus, according to the US Constitution, not entitled to be president. The tormented Obama, with his eyes contorted in pain looking up to the heavens, becomes a martyr and savior, while being beset by demons. The technique and style of the drawing recall the European pictorial tradition and clearly cite Martin Schongauer's renowned medieval engraving of the saint.

In the work with an equally suggestive title, *Barack Obama as Othello "The Moor" With the Severed Head of Iago in a New and Revised Ending* by Kara E. Walker (2019), Obama sits holding the severed head of his successor in office, Donald Trump, on his knees. In Shakespeare's play, Othello ultimately kills himself, but Walker rewrites the story unceremoniously: Iago, alias Trump, ends up beheaded, and even though the decapitation is not visible, the scene nonetheless shows a violent gesture, with Obama boring his finger into the eyes of the beheaded individual. Opposite him stands another version of Obama as a supposedly uncivilized African, whom Walker, adhering to the cliché, depicts enthroned on a pig and holding a spear: a picture with which Obama has been associated again and again because of his African American origins.

Walker plays with existing stereotypes and clichés, making use of them in her works. Due to their ambivalence, the depictions are not unproblematic. They still show an act of killing involving two of the most well-known politicians of our time and depict racist prejudices. In the drawings, the figure of the first African American president is stylized as a savior, martyr, and tormented soul. This begets new stereotypes, which, as a result of their exaggeration, are just as out of place as the picture of the exoticized African with which they are juxtaposed.

Katharina Dolm, Ann Mbuti

RECLAIMING

or: Letting Stereotypes Work for Her

In recent years, the topic of appropriation has given rise to numerous debates in social and artistic contexts, particularly in the US sphere. There has been a tremendous increase in sensitivity to the question of which segment of society is permitted to lay claim to which topics and visual symbols. As a result, people around the world are held accountable for wrongful appropriation with ever-greater frequency. But the phenomenon of reclaiming can also be observed more often. Besides visual codes like the wearing of natural hair rather than wigs or a chemically straightened hairdo, one of the most well-known examples is the use of the N-word. Despite its racist origins, it has come to hold considerable importance in the vernacular of the Black population of the United States. By appropriating a formula for oppression, it has developed into a symbolic form of verbal resistance.

Kara Walker also utilizes this effect of reclaiming in her work: she deals with racism, sexism, and other forms of violence in her oeuvre, and makes use of stereotypes that have become buried in the visual memory of the United States over centuries. The figure of the Black woman appears as an exoticized object of desire, as a “Mammy” (a pejorative term for the African American women who had to work as nannies for the white families in the southern states), as field workers, and in many other roles. However, Walker is not interested in reprocessing such images, but rather in what lies behind them. In many scenes, the artist exaggerates the stereotypes so strongly as to call out the absurdity of the racist prejudices on which they are based.

Falling back on charged pictorial material can be problematic at times. Walker’s reception has been characterized by criticism from various sides. “I revel in the contradictory pose of the subservient miss, giving ‘not what he asked for,’ but giving nonetheless,” Walker writes in the exhibition catalogue. Walker is also aware that everything she does is always political. The appropriation of various styles and quotations from art history blurs the boundaries between what actually happened and what might have occurred. In Walker’s drawings, both levels are not only juxtaposed on an equal level, but also constantly mixed together.

As an artist, she combines reality, fiction, and fantasy and lets stereotypes work for themselves. By being reclaimed, such stereotypes also continue to remain a tool in her drawings—but no longer a tool of oppression. Her works take a critical look at the past and thus shake up the picture of the present and the future.

Katharina Dohm, Ann Mbuti

ANTI-BLACK RACISM

Anti-Black racism can be described as racial discriminatory practices, which specifically target Black people. This specific form of racism is based on the idea that Black people's minds, bodies and ideas are worth less than those of non-Black people. The term captures and reveals the roots of the hardships that Black people have faced for centuries. Depending on time and locality, racial discriminatory practices have been changing and can be historically traced throughout the different stages of Antiquity, to the so-called Middle and Modern Ages up until today. A common factor throughout time and place is that they are designed to oppress Black people's lives, ultimately having serious long-term and in many cases deadly consequences for Black people and their families. Specific historic examples of practices that contribute to the dehumanizing of Black people are the Indian Ocean Slave Trade and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Contemporary examples include Black communities being more vulnerable to Covid-19 deaths, voter suppression or restricted access to education in countries like Brazil or the US, but also police brutality and racial profiling, which can be observed and experienced in Germany as well.

Like most parts of the world, Germany has a history with Anti-Black racism. Having forcibly colonized parts of western, southern, and eastern Africa, German authorities implemented segregation laws in the early twentieth century, which ensured that Black children by white colonizers and Black colonized people were left without access to German citizenship. Although this Anti-Black practice is officially outdated, the notion that "German-ness" equals whiteness is still existent and experienced in German society to this day. This highlights that Anti-Black racism is not limited to institutionalized forms of discrimination, as everyday microaggressions carrying Anti-Black thought also exist.

Much more is to be said on this topic, including (but not limited to), colorism, the model minority myth and internalized Anti-Blackness. Furthermore, as Anti-Blackness changes and adapts throughout the years, so do the different forms of resistance that Black people develop in order to ensure their sane survival.

Marny Garcia Mommertz

LANGUAGE

or: The Moment at Which No More Pictures Are Created

Writing is a central part of Walker's work process. A large portion of her archive consists of text. In addition to the quotes that she collects, text and language are incorporated into her oeuvre in various ways: language pictures (*Trolls*, 2012) formulating allegations, prejudices, and clichés connected with the life of Black women are created based on short painted text passages. She incorporates provocative slogans or poetic lines into the rolls of pictures as in a comic strip. In series such as *Only I Can Solve This (The 2016 Election)* (2016), Walker combines language with drawings, so that the text becomes a sort of comments layer. Or, on the other hand, the words take the place of a picture entirely, as in the large-format charcoal and pastel drawing *I Am Not My Negro* (2020), in which the artist adapts a quote by the Black author James Baldwin (1924–1987).

Her use of language is thus extremely poetic and associative. The title of the exhibition itself is also taken from a few short lines of "poetry." The verse comes from one of the comic-like, long "murals" of 2012 and reads in its entirety: *The sweet, sweet smell of success, and the stench of ingratitude; A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be*. It is accompanied by a drawing of a naked Black woman kneeling in front of a white man and vomiting on his shoes. But the artist leaves what stands behind the picture open. The lines simply made sense at a particular point in her life. Like a black hole, many things in Walker's work are accompanied by uncertainty. Her use of text and language shows an intuitive handling of these forms of expression. But regardless of the form in which they appear, Walker also sees the predominantly text-based works as drawings, since they all arise from the same place in her creative activity. When she is no longer able to express her ideas in pictures, then she starts writing, the artist says about her work process, and thus reverses the customary order of the creative process.

Katharina Dolm, Ann Mbuti

SATIRE

or: A Critique of Perception

On first glance, the critical examination of topics like racism, sexism, and other violent forms of oppression does not really lend itself to interlinking with the comic-like figures in Walker's works. But the artist utilizes this field of conflict in a skillful way. In her caricature-like drawings, she deploys subtle humor bordering on cynicism, evident in the exaggerated figures and their interactions. Yet this humor gains more acerbity when one considers that the racially exaggerated depictions have their origins in real prejudices.

Walker makes use of historically charged figures and motifs, not only in drawings but also in her other works. The stereotypically voluptuous Black woman, naked, with large breasts, lips, and buttocks, has a firm role in her ensemble. She exaggerates these attributes and has them appear in different contexts again and again. Walker engages in satire and confronts viewers with stereotypes in which prejudices of the past are carried forward. Many of them go back to the time of the transatlantic slave trade and its systematic dehumanization and continue to shape the social perception of Black people today. But unlike classic satire, which pillories specific individuals or circumstances, the mockery in her works is not directed at a fallible "Other." Her drawings assault our perception as a whole, since the stereotypes arise from a collective subconscious, from which hardly anyone can escape.

Katharina Dolm, Ann Mbuti

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECEPTION OF KARA WALKER'S ART

Kara Walker's work has a history of reception that is divided and is constantly evolving. When Walker was awarded the Genius grant by the MacArthur Foundation in 1997, various artists in the United States considered this award to be the ultimate recognition by the white art establishment. Given that Walker's work shows the explicit depiction of Black people's suffering and exploitation, some artists believed at the time that her work was reproducing Anti-Black stereotypes and serving the entertainment of white people. This concern was specifically formulated by Black artists from a generation that had helped to shape the Black Arts Movement (1960s–1970s) in the United States. Engaging in ongoing discussion on the purpose of Black artists' work, they firmly believed that such artwork should be rooted in the empowerment of Black people and should create a counter-narrative to that of Black suffering so dominant in white museum institutions. Ultimately, they were on a journey to break the negative attributions from which Black people were suffering and to step away from the recognition of white institutions—and hence saw Walker's work as impeding that journey.

This stance, however, has not remained uncontested. Notably, there are voices from leading Black figures in the United States and British arts and culture scenes, who see Walker's work as contributing to societal transformation and leadership. In 2001, Thelma Golden, the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, pointed out that Walker's work stimulates a rethinking of the ways that history is dealt with and remembered. It is an observation that is interesting specifically in the context of the traveling exhibition *A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be*. Especially in the German context, Golden's interpretation offers potential to inform ongoing discussions on, for example, colonialism, identity politics, Blackness, and Anti-Black racism. The author Zadie Smith has furthermore noted recently that the outrageous part about Walker's art is that she, as a Black woman and artist, feels empowered to create the art she desires instead of fulfilling the expectations that different societal groups have of her. As Walker references musicians such as US rapper Lil' Kim in her work, it has also left its imprint in pop-culture including being featured in the music video "Don't Judge Me" by UK singer FKA Twigs and referenced in songs by Le Tigre, Destroyer, and Lupe Fiasco.

Marny Garcia Mommertz