

KARA WALKER OPENS UP HER ARCHIVE OF DRAWINGS AT THE SCHIRN AND PERMITS EXTENSIVE INSIGHT INTO HER ARTISTIC COSMOS

KARA WALKER

A BLACK HOLE IS EVERYTHING A STAR LONGS TO BE

OCTOBER 15, 2021 – JANUARY 16, 2022

PRESS PREVIEW: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2021, 11 A.M.

Kara Walker (b.1969) is one of the most eminent American artists of our time. She achieved world-wide renown with her wall-sized silhouette cutouts and large-scale sculptures, which interrogate racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and violence in a provocative and impressive way. For the exhibition “A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be”, the artist is opening up her extensive archive of drawings for the first time. At the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt she is presenting some 650 works from the past twenty-eight years, along with a selection of her films, from October 15, 2021 to January 16, 2022. Her archive comprises drawings in the broadest sense: watercolors, sketches, studies, collages, silhouette cutouts, pages of text, diary-like notes, but also found materials such as advertisements and newspaper clippings. Work on paper is of central importance to Walker’s practice. The artist masterfully makes use of diverse styles, references, and techniques—from charcoal and ink to pastel chalk and crayon drawings. Her intimate sketches and notes are a place for graphic thought processes, and simultaneously a vehicle for satire and caricature, imagination and subversion. Walker relentlessly shakes up pictures from history, examines racist power structures, stereotypes, and gender roles with radical openness and stark visual imagery. In doing so, she repeatedly makes reference to events and topics, both historical and current, from the transatlantic slave trade to the presidency of Barack Obama. The artist makes visible conflicts and trauma that are still felt today and deals unsparingly with the emergence of the collective American identity and her own personal one as well.

The exhibition “Kara Walker: A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be” is supported by the City of Frankfurt am Main and the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

Dr. Philipp Demandt, Director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, emphasizes: “We greatly value Kara Walker for her trust in opening up her extensive archive of drawings to our visitors at the Schirn. It is an extraordinary opportunity to obtain unprecedented insight into the wide range of works by this great artist. Throughout her career, Kara Walker has posed burning, uncomfortable questions and thus created an oeuvre of relentless urgency. This exhibition also prompts visitors to engage, to endure. It concerns all of us—as individuals and as a society.”

The curators of the exhibition, Dr. Anita Haldemann, Kunstmuseum Basel, and Katharina Dohm, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, explain: “The selection of works from her private archive of drawings and the decision regarding how they should be presented in the exhibition were both made by Kara Walker herself. The artist compares the psychological, emotional, and physical process of rediscovery with an ‘excavation.’ Central to her work is the search for identity as a woman artist in a history of art shaped by patriarchy and the white gaze, and also as a Black woman in the United States. The unfinished character of sketches and the potential openness of drawing in particular offer her an ideal free space for her artistic practice. In the works presented in the exhibition, what opens up is not any clear ascription, but rather a spectrum of aspects from which identity is constructed.”

Kara Walker’s extensive oeuvre of drawings has hitherto remained nearly overlooked. Most of the works being shown at the Schirn were not initially created explicitly for the public and facilitate

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

personal insight into the artist's working process. Many of them have the character of a sketch or study and are produced using swift strokes, without the backgrounds being elaborated in detail. The drawn line also remains an important element in the painterly-seeming works. Numerous pieces were created in series and have no individual titles. The presentation of her artwork in diverse formats does not follow any chronology. Kara Walker combines series from various periods anew so that new connections arise on the walls of the exhibition. The intimacy of the individual works thus stands in productive tension with the sheer quantity of the pieces displayed. They are held together by recurring content, including stark depictions of sexism, oppression, racism, and other forms of violence.

Kara Walker became known in the 1990s with her characteristic silhouette cutouts in panorama-like round pictures and room-filling installations. The choice of this technique reflects her conscious decision against the established art canon. After completing her university studies, Walker, as a Black woman, saw no path for her to express herself in the genre of painting, which has been shaped by the dominance of white men and a history written from a white perspective. Instead, in addition to the silhouette, she turned to drawing, which has constantly accompanied her artistic work ever since. While many artists develop freely through drawing, Walker here plays intentionally with the traditions, styles, and techniques of the Western European history of art, adapts it, charges it with new contents. As in the silhouette cutouts, the artist at first deceives with the filigree form and then shocks with the contents depicted.

In addition to the approximately 600 works from Walker's private archive, the Schirn is also presenting more recent works like the series of four large-format portraits that Kara Walker dedicated to Barack Obama and his role as the first Black President of the United States, created in 2019 as a reaction to the official portrait by the artist Kehinde Wiley. Rendered with great detail in the technique of charcoal and pastel chalk drawing, Kara Walker presents Obama in various roles taken from the religious and literary cultural history of Europe. In *Barack Obama Tormented Saint Anthony Putting Up With the Whole "Birther" Conspiracy* (2019), she masterfully cites Martin Schongauer's famous engraving of Saint Anthony from the Middle Ages and shows Obama as a tormented martyr. In the title, she makes reference to the racist conspiracy theory claiming that Obama was not born in the United States and that his presidency was thus illegitimate. In the work *Barack Obama as Othello "The Moor" With the Severed Head of Iago in a New and Revised Ending* by Kara E. Walker (2019), the artist depicts Obama with the severed head of his successor in office, Donald Trump. She thus rewrites the story: unlike in Shakespeare's piece, in which Othello ultimately kills himself, Walker stages Trump in the violent scene as the beheaded Iago.

Kara Walker's topics have deep roots in the American past, yet without portraying any concrete points in history. In her works, various aspects and temporal levels are instead condensed and superimposed. In the thirty-eight-part series *The Gross Clinician Presents: Pater Gravidam* (2018), for instance, she brings together the Founding Fathers of the United States, the exploitation of Black bodies for medical purposes, and current eruptions of violence against Black people, showing that the historical dehumanization of Black individuals has served to encourage racist practices that continue to have deadly consequences still today. In other artworks, Walker overpaints yellowed newspaper articles or pages that appear to come from old history books, incorporating figures and stories that fracture and interrogate the narrative of a history written from a white perspective.

Another central component of Kara Walker's work process is writing. A large portion of the archive consists of text. Besides collected quotes, the elements of text, language, and literature are also incorporated into her oeuvre in various ways. The exhibition title, for instance, comes from her

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

comic-like long “murals” of 2012, which combine provocative slogans and poetic lines with drawings. The complete sentence is “The Sweet, Sweet Smell of Success, and the Stench of Ingratitude . . . A Black Hole is Everything a Star Longs to Be” and flanks the drawing of a naked Black woman kneeling in front of a white man and vomiting on his shoes, thus juxtaposing the submissive position with resistant refusal. In the exhibition, it is also possible to see Walker’s *Trolls* (2012) series, language pictures that formulate allegations, prejudices, and clichés relating to the life of Black women; and in series like *Only I Can Solve This (The 2016 Election)* (2016), Walker combines language with drawings to arrive at a commentary level of sorts.

On a linguistic and graphic level, in her examination of topics like racist and sexualized violence, Walker makes use of stereotypes that have become ingrained in the cultural and visual memory of the United States over centuries and are today known around the world. The figure of the Black woman thus appears in Walker’s work for instance as an exoticized object of desire, as a field worker, or as a “Mammy” (a pejorative term for the African American women who had to work for white families in the southern states as nannies). Some works from Kara Walker’s archive also make reference to examples of sexism and racism in Germany. What interests Walker here is not mere reproduction, but instead a relentless confrontation and grotesque overdrawing that expose corresponding ascriptions. This act of reclaiming is simultaneously also a reaction to cultural appropriation and a strategy for self-empowerment, such as the claiming of the N-word by part of the Black population in the United States. As an artist, Kara Walker makes clichés work for her and combines reality, fiction, and fantasy. At the same time, by appropriating styles and citations from the Western European history of art, she blurs the boundaries between what actually happened and what might have occurred. Her work thus casts a critical gaze at the past, the present, and the future.

In addition to the oeuvre of works on paper, the Schirn is also showing three videos by the artist: *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture* (2005), *National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road* (2009), and *Fall From Grace, Miss Pipi’s Blue Tale* (2011). These filmic works bring together aspects from Kara Walker’s artistic oeuvre that are also characteristic of her drawings and silhouette cutouts, unfolding their inherent narrative potential in an impressive way. In her videos, Walker develops the technique of the silhouette further by creating moving figures that she as narrator guides with her hand. In the video work presented, she interweaves historical events with fictitious elements, reflects stereotypical narratives, and stages nightmarish stories of racist violence and exploitation in the ostensibly sedate form of shadow theater.

Kara Walker was born 1969 in Stockton, California, and at the age of thirteen moved with her family to Atlanta, Georgia. She studied there at the Atlanta College of Art (Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1991) and then at the renowned Rhode Island School of Design (Master of Fine Arts in 1994). The artist lives and works in New York. She has received numerous awards for her work, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award in 1997 and the Eileen Harris Norton Fellowship in 2008. Walker is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (elected in 2012) and the American Philosophical Society (elected in 2018). In 2019, she was named an Honorary Royal Academician by the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Her works are represented in renowned museums and public collections in the United States and Europe, for instance at the Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) of the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Tate Gallery, London, the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI secolo (MAXXI), Rome, and the Collection of the Deutsche Bank, Frankfurt am Main.

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

An exhibition by the Kunstmuseum Basel in cooperation with the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and De Pont Museum, Tilburg. Consulting for the exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt by Contemporary And (C&).

EXHIBITION PROGRAM

The Schirn, in cooperation with various protagonists in the German art and cultural scene, has put together an extensive program to accompany the exhibition by Kara Walker. At the Artist Talk on October 16, Kara Walker enters into conversation with Yasmil Raymond, rector of the Städelschule and co-curator of the first Kara Walker retrospective at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2007). Noura Johnson, an art historian and assistant curator at the Kunstmuseum Basel, speaks about Kara Walker's archive. In conjunction with the exhibition, the project "An Interracial Love Affair" is taking place in collaboration with Deutsches Museum für Schwarze Unterhaltung und Black Music (DMSUBM), which focuses on Black culture, popular music, and history in Germany. The film series "Black Is Not a Color", put together and moderated by the independent director, author, and filmmaker Oliver Hardt, deals on four evenings with the multifaceted life realities of Black People in Germany and interleaves Afro-American perspectives with Afro-German discourses. Further information about the complete exhibition program is available at www.schirn.de.

PODCAST Based on Kara Walker's art, Jena Samura speaks with various experts, including the historian Edna Bonhomme, the African studies scholar Josephine Apraku, and the cultural studies scholar Aïcha Diallo, about the European history of art and about Black art in the European Context, colonial gender constructs, and a critical view of history. The series begins as in November 2021 on SCHIRN MAGAZIN at www.schirn.de/en/magazine/podcasts.

DIGITORIAL® The Schirn's digital mediation format provides informative backgrounds for the exhibition and explains the essential content. It mediates contexts in art and cultural history and, beyond the American context, also addresses German colonial history and racism in Germany. Moreover, it brings together various perspectives on Kara Walker's art from BPoCs living in Frankfurt and the surrounding areas. The Digitorial for the exhibition is free of charge and can be accessed in German or English as of October 15 at www.schirn.de/digitorial.

CATALOG KARA WALKER: A BLACK HOLE IS EVERYTHING A STAR LONGS TO BE; DRAWINGS 1992–2020, edited by Anita Haldemann. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt, Josef Helfenstein, and Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen. Contributions by Maurice Berger, Aria Dean, Anita Haldemann, and Kara Walker. German and English editions, 600 pages each, 700 illus., 21.5 x 28 cm, softcover, JRP|Editions, ISBN 978-3-03764-558-1 (German edition), ISBN 978-3-03764-557-4 (English edition), 45 € (SCHIRN), 60 € (bookshops).

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main

DURATION October 15, 2021 – January 16, 2022 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **E-MAIL**

welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49-69 29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49-69 29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION**

10 €, reduced 8 € **ONLINE TICKETS** Time-slot tickets for the exhibition are available for purchase in the online shop at www.schirn.de/tickets **SAVETY AND SANITARY MEASURES**

In order to make visiting the exhibition safe during the corona pandemic, comprehensive protection and hygiene measures have been developed in coordination with the relevant authorities. Further information at www.schirn.de/en/visit **CURATORS** Dr. Anita Haldemann, Kunstmuseum Basel, and Katharina Dohm, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt **CURATORIAL ASSISTANCE** Marie Oucherif

EXHIBITION TEXTS Katharina Dohm, Ann Mbuti, and Marny Garcia Mommertz **CONSULTING**

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

BY Contemporary And (C&) **SUPPORTED BY** City of Frankfurt am Main and the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

HASHTAGS #KaraWalker #Schirn **FACEBOOK, TWITTER, YOUTUBE, INSTAGRAM, PINTEREST, TIKTOK, SCHIRN MAGAZIN** www.schirn.de/en/magazine

PRESS Julia Bastian (Interim Head of Press/PR), Elisabeth Pallentin (Officer for Press and Moving Images), Simone Krämer (Press Officer), Clara Nicolay (Trainee) **SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT** Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt am Main **TELEPHONE** +49-69 29 98 82-148 **FAX** +49-69 29 98 82-240 **E-MAIL** presse@schirn.de