



Kara Elizabeth Walker, *The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, 1995



Etching, 35 1/4 x 23 1/4 in.
William R. Mitchell Endowment Fund purchase, 1995.55a-e

*Challenging and highlighting abusive power dynamics in our culture is my goal;
replicating them is not.*

—Kara Walker ¹

I make art for anyone who forgot what it feels like to put up a fight.

—Kara Walker ²

¹ Quoted in Rozalia Jovanovic, "Kara Walker Withdraws Involvement from Clifford Owens Performance," *Observer* (March 9, 2012)

² Eds. Ian Berry, et al, *Narratives of a Negress* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 36.

Artist Biography

Kara Walker (American, b. 1969) creates drawings, prints, sculptures, paintings, installations, and films to explore themes of race, identity, sexuality, history, and fantasy. Born in California, she moved with her family to Atlanta, Georgia at the age of thirteen. There, she enrolled at the Atlanta College of Art, earning a BFA in painting and printmaking in 1991. In college, she first encountered early American art and folk art, which she felt contained “a real humanity that I had been missing in modern painting.”³

She completed an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. Although she initially studied painting, she became frustrated with the medium and its reception by her faculty. While at RISD, Walker learned about cut paper silhouettes, a form of portraiture popular in Europe and the United States in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. For her graduate school thesis exhibition, Walker adopted the straightforward method, imagining the work she might have created if she had lived 150 or 200 years before. She quickly rose to fame for her use of the art form to challenge perceptions of slavery and plantation life in the antebellum South. Her first public silhouette work, installed like a mural on a white wall at the Drawing Center in New York in 1994, was titled *Gone, An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, and addressed Margaret Mitchell’s book *Gone with the Wind*. In 1997, she became the youngest recipient to date, at age 27, of the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. This early recognition, alongside the content of her work, resulted in controversy, especially among fellow African American artists, who have criticized her adoption of stereotypes and challenging imagery. In response to this criticism, Walker has said “I think I had naively assumed that the work I was doing would raise a lot of questions, and that, within the black community in particular, it would foster a dialogue more than a diatribe.”⁴

Nonetheless, her work has been shown prominently and she has received sustained professional recognition. She accepted a teaching position at the Columbia University School of Arts in 2001. A major survey exhibition of her work was held at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2007 and traveled to the Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth Paris. In 2012, she was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Through the years, her work has continued to elicit conversations on racism and raise awareness among viewers of racist histories and imagery. She intends her work to be shocking, and through this method, gain traction with audiences. Her first large-scale public project occurred in 2014, when she created an installation in the former Domino Sugar refining plant in Williamsburg, New York. The project, entitled *A Subtlety: Or... the Marvelous Sugar Baby an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, addressed the troubled history of sugar production. In 2015 Walker was named Tepper Chair in Visual Arts with the Department of Art & Design at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. The American Philosophical Society honored Walker with membership in 2018. Most recently, Walker’s *Fons Americanus*—a 13-meter tall fountain examining the

³ Matthea Harvey and Kara Walker, “Kara Walker, *Bomb* no. 100 (Summer 2007), 81

⁴ Quoted in Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, “Censorship and Reception,” in *Seeing the Unspeakable: the Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) 117



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interconnectivity of Africa, Europe, and America—has been on view in the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, a gallery known for its display of commissioned, large-scale sculptures and installations.

Location

The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts is currently installed at the Chazen Museum in Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts is a horizontal etching created by Kara Walker in 1995. The black and white print measures thirty-five and one quarter inches by twenty-three and one quarter inches. Read in a linear fashion from left to right, it depicts a story carried out in five distinctive scenes all in black silhouettes, each on a separate sheet of paper that have been hung flush one next to one another. The first scene on the far left shows a silhouette of a woman with a child hanging from her breast. The woman stands in profile and faces left, her head slightly down as if watching the child. She wears a skirt which appears to be tattered at the hem. She stands barefoot with her left foot in front of the right as if she is about to move. She has short hair with five small spikes that suggest braids and her lips are full. The child dangling from her breast appears to be male as evidenced by his clothing and hair. In the second scene, a female child sits backwards atop an animal who could be a canine. The child has long curly hair and wears a large bow atop her head. She sits atop the animal and faces left, her arms outstretched, and fingers spread as if trying to reach the woman in the first scene. The animal she's riding on is mid run as its legs appear in a galloping position. In the third scene, another woman emerges and appears to be in distress. She stands with her head turned to our left and her arms facing right. One arm is bent at the elbow towards the back of her head while the other arm stretches straight out and upward, palm to the right. She wears a dress with a full skirt and evidence of pantaloons underneath. She stands barefoot, although only one leg is visible. The heel of her visible foot teeters on top of an oblong black shape that resembles a partially obstructed head. Two additional partially obstructed heads flank each side. In the fourth scene, the outline of a head and hand sits in the lower right corner. The head appears male and has a full nose and lips. The head looks up and to the right as if watching the next scene. The hand is clenched except for a thumb and forefinger that make a pinching gesture like a crab's claw. In the fifth and final scene, a large man stands tall and holds a child in his hands by the neck. The man wears a top hat, an overcoat that is longer in the back than front, and pointy shoes with a slight heel. He faces left, his left arm squeezing a child by her throat. Facing him, the female child is nude except for a pair of short boots with a slight heel and a bow in her hair. Her right-hand juts out from her belly button and her legs dangle over one of the man's outstretched legs. The pair stands on the edge of a black mass that appears to be the edge of a cliff as evidenced by the man's outstretched leg as if threatening to step off.

Content and Context

Each of my pieces picks and chooses willy-nilly from images that are fairly benign to fairly charged. They're acting out whatever they're acting out in the same plane: everybody's reduced to the same thing... The audience has to deal with their own prejudices or fear or desires when they look at these images. So if anything, my work attempts to take those "pickaninny" images and put them up there and eradicate them.

—Kara Walker⁵

The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts from 1995 is one of Kara Walker's earliest printed silhouette narratives. When arranged and displayed together, the five large sheets form a vista similar to the large silhouette wall murals Walker began making around the same time. Each page illustrates an episode in an imagined nineteenth-century romance, performed as a shadow play, and narrated with vague yet intriguing chapter headings: "The Beginning," "The Hunt," "The Chase," "The Plunge," and "The End."

Walker's use of silhouettes to explore complex issues of power, race, and the history of slavery is significant. Cut-paper silhouettes, also known as "shades" or "shadows," were a popular form of portraiture during the period aligning with the height of the American slave trade. Silhouette as a mode of portraiture began as early as the 1600s and gained popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Initially, an artist painted the person's profile with dark pigment, usually black, on ivory or plaster. Later, cutting silhouettes from paper became the preferred method. Practiced by amateurs and professionals alike, silhouettes were a novel and inexpensive form of portraiture available to those who could not afford a painted portrait. Available to virtually everyone, from laborers to the nation's leaders, silhouettes portrayed many different kinds of people in a similar way. In this way, silhouettes reflected period political beliefs central to the formation of the new democracy in post-revolutionary America. Walker's silhouettes depicting masters and slaves of the same era revisits this moment in American democracy and tests the validity of the egalitarian ideal "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

The popularization of Physiognomy, the supposed assessment of a person's personality from their physical appearance, further promoted the silhouette. In the mid-1770s, Johann Caspar Lavatar, a Swiss evangelical preacher, wrote an influential treatise—*Essays on Physiognomy: Designed to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind*—proposing one could easily determine an individual's moral character by studying a silhouette of their profile. The silhouette portrait not only depicted a person, it was, to quote Lavatar, "the justest and most faithful" indicator of their identity.

Walker meticulously defined her cast of characters in *The Means to an End*, delineating facial features and costume details to create stereotypes of plantation life—masters and mistress and their slaves—as codified in novels like *Gone with the Wind* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The silhouettes—often slightly ambiguous, particularly in terms of where one body might end and another begin—give viewers the task

⁵ Quoted in Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, "Censorship and Reception," in *Seeing the Unspeakable: the Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) 117



of identifying the characters and contemplating the nature of their relationships, though Walker has also outlined the framework of this narrative:

“[*The Means to an End* presents] a panoramic view of an antebellum swampland wherein mythic and stereotypic characters, Negro and otherwise, respond to outrageous demands with benign passivity. Illicit sex and violence are suggested as the means by which freedom is attained. The master/slave narrative is expanded and inverted to include authoritarian control over children, the landscape and the self.”

With these themes in mind, one might interpret the scene from left to right. The boy suckled by a black woman in “The Beginning” becomes the portly white man holding a black slave girl by the neck like a doll in “The End.” If one reads story backwards, does the abused black girl grow up to be the black woman who feeds white males with her body?

Designed to provoke viewers into formulating their own interpretations, Walker’s work has evoked powerful responses, both positive and negative. Some critics have taken offense at Walker’s use of stereotyped depictions of African figures, seeing them as racist caricatures operating on the level of a minstrel show. When Walker received the MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 1997, Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell—themselves African American women artists—began a campaign to have the award withdrawn. A primary issue for critics of Walker’s work is the use of racial stereotypes in an art world dominated by white men. Because Walker is black, she validates the stereotypes for white viewers and helps maintain the status quo of black as otherness. In Pindell’s words, “One is off the hook. No need to worry about racism (or remedies).”⁶ In her critics view, rather than challenging racial prejudices, it reinforces them, and is in fact the reason for the artist’s success.

An alternative view that looks positively on Walker’s work argues the artist’s silhouettes destabilize rather than reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans. She is not, for example, reclaiming a stereotypical mammy in an act of black empowerment. Instead, her use of stereotyped figures exposes race-related power structures with the possibility of dismantling them. In presenting these caricatures—of both black and white people—engaged in disturbing, sexually explicit, and violent circumstances, Walker evokes a visceral response, challenging viewers through any curiosity, guilt, arousal, shame, or other feelings that might arise, to confront the possibilities of their own racist history. Unlike the prints in *A Means to an End*, those histories may not be so black and white.

⁶ Quoted in Kim Wickham, “I undo you, Master”; *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, Howardena Pindell, ed. (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009)

Discussion Questions

1. Kara Walker frequently works with silhouettes, which she calls a “medium of avoidance,” in that it prevents the viewer from looking at the subject directly. Does Walker’s simplification of objects and people make the content “easier” for viewers to digest?
2. How does Walker’s use of satire and caricature function in this work? Are the ideas about representation illustrated here still present in society today? If so, where?
3. Walker has said “challenging and highlighting abusive power dynamics in our culture is my goal; replicating them is not”. What power dynamics is she challenging here? What do you see in the artwork that makes you say that?
4. Walker’s career has been marked with controversy and on at least one occasion, her artwork was censored and removed from an exhibition by the Detroit Institute of Arts. On what grounds should a work of art be censored?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Sue Coe (English, b. 1951, active in America). [South Africa, Woman Tied to a Pole](#), 1983. Graphite and collage, 30 3/4 x 22 3/4 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 1991.33.

In her politically charged work, Sue Coe utilized the element of shock to raise awareness of human rights violations in South Africa under Apartheid.

Augustin Amant Constant Fidèle Edouart (French, 1789—1861). [J. and Susan Welles](#), 1843. Cut paper, 6 3/4 x 5 in. Gift of D. Frederick Baker from the Baker/Pisano Collection, 2018.14.66.

This is an example of a silhouette from the mid-nineteenth century. It is images like this one that Walker quotes in her artworks. Compare the girl with the doll to Walker’s plantation master with the black girl.

Utagawa Kunitaru II (Japanese, 1830—1874), after Yoshiku Ikkeisai. [Shadow Portraits of Three Actors](#), from the series [A Newly Published Set of Shadow Pictures](#), 1867. Color woodcut, 14 x 9 in. Bequest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.2644.

In this print, a nineteenth century Japanese artist represents the portraits of three actors through shadows of their profiles.

Additional Resources

Kara Walker's website: <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com/>

Art21, "Extended Play," *Kara Walker: Starting Out*, episode 207 (2014), 5 minutes, <https://youtu.be/MhByMffG9IA>

MAC Belfast, *Kara Walker at the MAC* (2014), 8 minutes, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QbXdPv-O1g>

Lucy McKeon, "The Controversies of Kara Walker," *Hyperallergic* (March 19, 2013), <https://hyperallergic.com/67125/the-controversies-of-kara-walker/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Asma Naeem, et. al. *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Princeton, NJ: in association with Princeton University Press, 2018)

Kara Walker, "Interview: The Melodrama of 'Gone with the Wind,'" Art21 (November 2011, originally published on PBS.org in September 2003), <https://art21.org/read/kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind/> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

David Wall, "Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker," *Oxford Art Journal* vol. 33, no. 3 (2010), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/40983288> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Kim Wickham. "'I undo you, Master': Uncomfortable Encounters in the Work of Kara Walker," *The Comparatist* vol. 39 (October 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26254733> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]