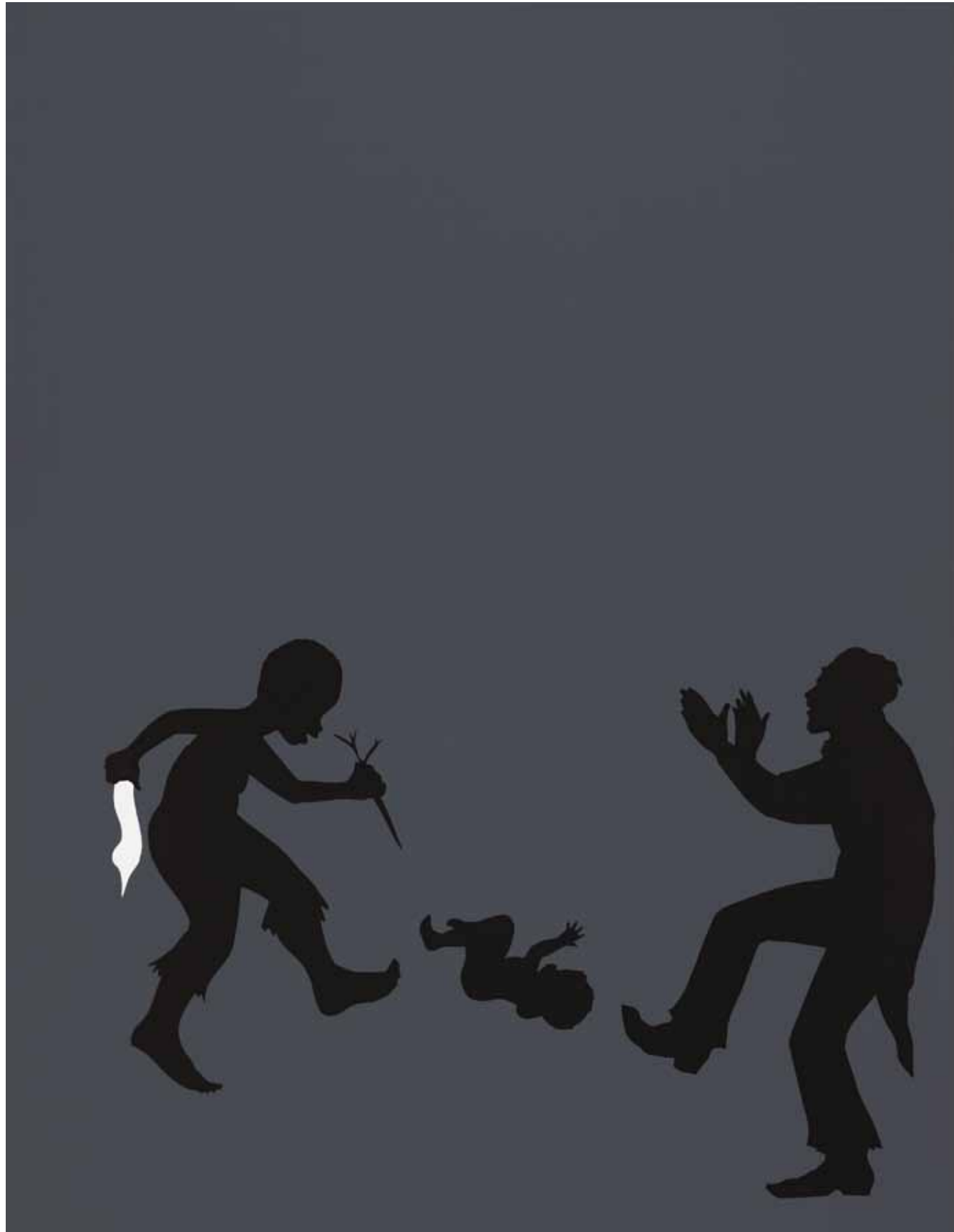




# **EMANCIPATING THE PAST**

Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power

PRINTS AND MULTIPLES FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF JORDAN D. SCHNITZER AND HIS FAMILY FOUNDATION



Front cover: *African/American*, 1998; Linocut; 44 x 62 inches; Edition 22/40

Above: *The Emancipation Approximation: Scene #11* (from a portfolio of 27), 1999–2000; Silkscreen; 44 x 34 inches; Edition 7/20

## INTRODUCTION

To call Kara Walker a provocateur is perhaps too flippant, without nuance, or even unfair.

Can one word contain an artist and her body of work? Yet the epithet pulls no punches; it mirrors Walker's appropriation of in-your-face imagery—grounded in the era of antebellum racial politics *but* still very much alive. After all, does Walker ever create works that don't provoke?

Walker reanimates and dissects stereotypes of African American submission, ignorance, and broad physicality. She often works in black and white, with silhouettes that isolate uncomfortable poses and evil power relationships in which fantasy scenes of servitude and freedom are played out. They can't be read easily, and they make us feel uneasy. Who doesn't wish such images would disappear instead of being repurposed and pushed to extremes that make us laugh and cry at the same time?

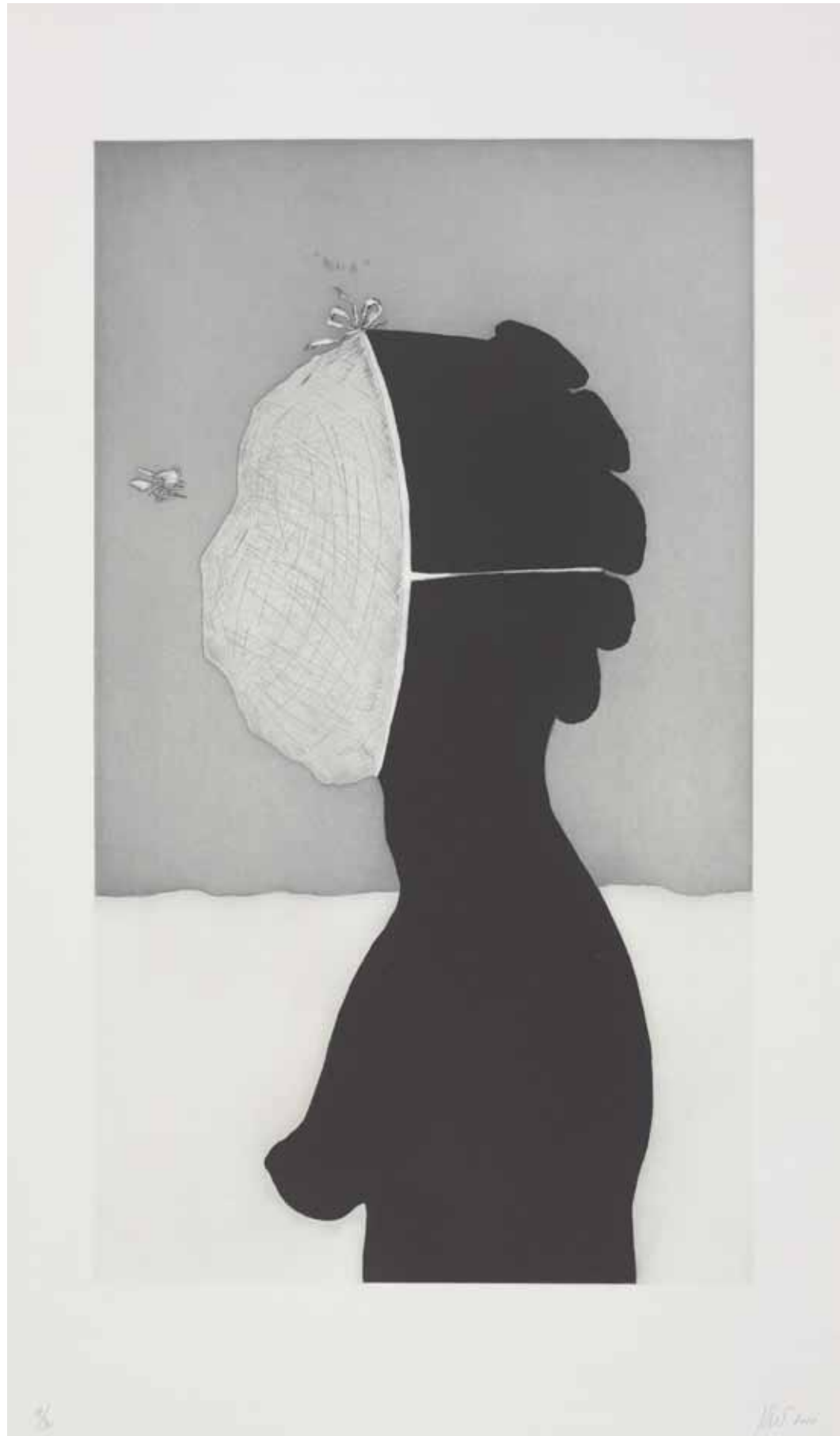
Walker's images are powerful. Much of their power comes from their content, but much also depends on the artist's command of her varied materials—painting, printmaking media, silhouettes, video—and the two- and three-dimensional objects she makes and manipulates within them. Examples of all these are present in this special exhibition, which focuses primarily on her ambitious body of prints.

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA) was honored to organize *Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power* from the collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his Family Foundation in Portland, Oregon. Assistant Curator Jessi DiTillio worked with the Foundation to select fifty-nine prints and multiples that will travel to

the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California; Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, Oregon; Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho; Tufts University Art Gallery at the Aidekman Arts Center, Medford, Massachusetts; David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland, College Park; Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri; and the University of Wyoming Art Museum, at Laramie.

We are grateful to Jordan Schnitzer for his thirty-five year commitment of leadership and generosity to the art museum at the University of Oregon, which was named in his honor in 2005. We also appreciate Jordan's generosity in sharing works from his collections and supporting the accompanying publications and educational programs. The depth of his collections allowed for great latitude in accurately representing Walker's practice, which continues to evolve yet remains closely tied to her core themes. Lawrence Fong, former curator of American and regional art at the JSMA, and Diana Daniels, associate curator at the Crocker Art Museum, were instrumental in conceptualizing the exhibition and arranging the groundwork needed for the traveling exhibition. Sikkema Jenkins & Co., the artist's representative, provided important access and information critical to Jessi DiTillio's development of the exhibition as well as her thoughtful essay. It is our hope that audiences will be challenged and engaged by this exhibition to reflect on the themes of gender, race, and identity politics, and the place of power within each realm.

Jill Hartz  
Executive Director, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art



## EMANCIPATING THE PAST

Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power

Jessi DiTillio

**E**merging in New York in the mid-1990s, Kara Walker has become one of the most successful and controversial artists working today. Exploring the painful history of American race relations through elegant and unnerving silhouettes, Walker's work challenges us to access buried emotions about our nation's past. In her hands, the medium of silhouette becomes a tool for examining the traumatic psychological legacy of slavery.

Walker engages with historical imagery from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to explore its effect on contemporary psyches. Her works evoke a sense of nightmares past, and reflect the way old traumas reverberate through the generations. Yet there is also humor in her work, and fantasy. The perversity of slavery and the visual legacy of racism are embellished to such unsettling extremes that it is often hard to avoid laughing at the sheer discomfort her work evokes. Her dark sense of humor is purposefully provocative and vulgar, and pushes the boundaries of propriety for a museum audience. By exploring the Antebellum era as the foundation of contemporary racial psychology, Walker's work imaginatively transforms American history.

The artworks presented in this exhibition display the range of approaches she has taken to the silhouette and the human figure, to printmaking, and to narrative. Beginning with some of her early works in the style for which she is best known (black silhouettes on a white ground), the exhibition moves forward to show some of her most recent and innovative artistic experiments. The specific media that Walker selects frequently draw on the history of art and popular culture, which adds further subtle meanings to her work. Often using outmoded technologies or old-fashioned techniques like silhouettes, eight-millimeter film, or nineteenth-century printmaking, she brings contemporary perspectives into direct confrontation with the artifacts of history.

Throughout the range of different media she uses, Walker's work focuses on the complexities and ambiguities of racial and historical representation. By highlighting the obscure references and old-fashioned techniques in her artistic process, *Emancipating the Past: Kara Walker's Tales of Slavery and Power* illuminates the way she uses these historical materials strategically to present ideas about contemporary identity and psyche. Walker's rigorously



Figure 1. *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart*, 1994; Cut paper on wall; 13 x 50 feet; installation view at the Drawing Center, New York, 1994

researched art practice makes her work a treasure trove for those interested in delving into the darker places of American visual culture. In combining the often disturbing stories and materials of Antebellum and Reconstruction history with the materials dredged from her own unconscious, Walker calls the work “two parts research and one part paranoid hysteria.”<sup>1</sup> Rich with layers of reference and metaphor, Walker’s installations, print series, and films provide an avenue for critical dialogue about race, sexuality, power, and identity in our complex world.

Walker first drew the public’s attention in 1994 with an installation at the Drawing Center in New York. In *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, bold black cutout figures enact an Antebellum-style spectacle that stretched thirteen feet high and fifty feet wide across the white gallery walls (fig. 1). The figures interact in episodic bursts, engaging in increasingly perverse couplings that invest the sentimental world of *Gone with the Wind* with sinister undercurrents of sexual

domination, violence, and abuse. The installation was spectacular and overwhelming in scale, but the figures’ clear contours and elegant execution gave viewers full access to the dark tales being told. This piece set out many of the themes that have traversed Walker’s art over the last nineteen years and pervade the body of work in this exhibition.

Central among these themes—and rich with associative meaning—is the silhouette. It is helpful to begin any discussion of Walker’s work with a bit of the historical context the artist alludes to in her appropriation of the concept of the silhouette. The silhouette was named for the Marquis Étienne de Silhouette, a French Minister of Finance notorious for enforcing frugality on Paris in a period of financial instability. Unfortunately for the Marquis, “silhouette” became a derisive slang term for anything cheap. During this period, black cut-paper silhouette portraits became immensely popular all over France as an inexpensive alternative to painted miniature portraits. Consequently, the term silhouette was applied to this type of portrait so frequently that

it was eventually accepted into the French dictionary, and became the official name of the medium.<sup>2</sup>

At the height of their popularity in the nineteenth century, silhouettes also had more sinister implications that are relevant to Walker’s appropriation of the technique. One of the champions of the silhouette was a Swiss pastor named Johann Caspar Lavater, father of the now-discredited science of physiognomy, which claimed to have found a direct correspondence between a person’s physical characteristics and their personality, intelligence, and moral character. For example, in the 1794 English edition of *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater illustrated a range of profiles in silhouette, elucidating such qualities as “aristocratic high foreheads, brutish thick lips, and determined jaws,” and explained their interpretive use for analyzing people (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> In Lavater’s would-be science, much as in racist stereotypes, the visual characteristics of different ethnic features served as evidence of a person’s inherent quality.

In Walker’s work, the blackness of the silhouettes, perhaps their simplest property, creates an extraordinarily complex theater for the examination of racial representation. While nineteenth-century silhouettists saw the medium as expressing the subject’s internal essence, from a formal perspective the silhouette functions as an emptying-out of a person’s interior, because it conveys merely the outline of their form. In this way, the silhouette is like a racial stereotype, which is formed exclusively by surface appearance yet contains no true internal content.

Visually, the relation between black and white both figuratively and literally shapes all the characters in Walker’s silhouettes, regardless of their race. All the figures are rendered in black, so that the only evidence she provides for determining racial identity are socially constructed signifiers of race. Some of these seem innocuous, such as particularities of Antebellum dress or hairstyle, while others, such as exaggerated lips, are derived from the realm of racist caricature. Her visual lexicon includes references to a variety of sources—from films and minstrel shows to cartoons, from the racist kitsch material now termed Black Memorabilia to history painting and advertising.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2. Page of silhouettes from Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy; for the promotion of the knowledge and the love of mankind; written in the German language by J. C. Lavater, abridged from Mr. Holcrofts translation* (London, 1794).

A longer contemplation of what we are seeing reveals the instability of racial identity in Walker’s artwork. Our instinctual ability (or desire) to determine whether Walker’s characters are white or black based on factors other than their skin color draws attention to the enduring presence of racial stereotypes, and implicates our complicity within this visual system. By using black to represent multiple skin colors, Walker forces us to confront the internalized or naturalized stereotypes we hold. As a socially constructed phenomenon, the idea of race encompasses much more than the color of one’s skin. For Walker, racial identity is not a natural or biological given, but is defined through the matrix of popular imagery. Her exploration of racist stereotypes through the lens of the silhouette emphasizes the flatness of these images, yet also highlights their persuasive power. Paradoxically, by using the medium of silhouette to flatten the concept of race, Walker makes it reemerge as an infinitely complex and multidimensional matter.



Figure 3. *I'll Be a Monkey's Uncle*, 1996; Lithograph; 39 1/2 x 35 inches; Edition 24/25



Figure 4. *The Keys to the Coop*, 1997; Linoleum block print; 46 x 60 1/2 inches; Edition 39/40

Walker has been both criticized and applauded for her unflinching approach to racist stereotype. For example, in *The Keys to the Coop* (fig. 4), a young black child ferociously rips the head off a chicken to devour it. Keys swing jauntily from the girl's finger, suggesting her indiscretion in stealing the chicken. Chicken is one of the foods most associated with Black stereotype, and emerged from a genre of racist caricature that pictured slaves stealing chickens from their masters. Yet within this highly stereotyped image, Walker accesses a sense of violent rebellion. The girl may be trapped within the stereotype of a chicken thief, but her hunger seems to empower her resort to extremes. The piece does not present an image of an African American girl overcoming stereotypes, but rather probes the violence and psychosis masked by naturalizing or ignoring stereotypes.

Walker's work is risky, and critics have argued against her approach to these types of negative

images. Yet, if one considers Walker's motivation for the work, it can be read as a commentary on the insidious power such tropes possess: they haunt us through the ages. Prints like *Keys to the Coop* remind us that stereotypes that have come to seem natural or harmless in contemporary culture (like an African American love of chicken) stem from a specific historic context. This context is the visual campaign of racist caricature mainly propagated in the Reconstruction era of the late nineteenth century, when popular media constructed stereotypes of the newly emancipated slaves as amoral, evil, and subhuman. By reawakening such grotesque racist caricature in her work, Walker forces viewers to confront racist imagery's lasting, if transformed, visual presence in American culture.<sup>5</sup>

In the print portfolio *Emancipation Approximation*, Walker strays from her characteristic black-and-white palette while continuing to use the



Figure 5. *The Emancipation Approximation: Colophon, Scene #3, Scene #4, Scene #23, Scene #24, Scene #25* (from a portfolio of 27), 1999–2000; Silkscreen; 44 x 34 inches each; Edition 7/20

panoramic silhouette form, drawing on an assortment of mythological imagery to evoke meditations on beauty, power, and sexuality (fig. 5). The swan is a symbol that frequently appears in the *Emancipation Approximation* series, standing in for white erotic power (fig. 6). To explain this symbolism, Walker has alluded to the Greek myth of Leda and the swan, in which Zeus assumed the form of a swan to rape and impregnate the mortal woman. Drawing on the whiteness of the swan, the allusion mythologizes the tragic history of rape perpetuated on female slaves by their masters, a trope that appears frequently in Walker's narratives.

Walker brings her silhouettes into direct confrontation with historical imagery in the celebrated series of large-scale prints, *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War: Annotated* (figs. 7 and 8). In this series, the spare aesthetic of her cut-paper

silhouettes engages directly with nineteenth-century visual culture. According to Walker, "These prints are the landscapes that I imagine exist in the back of my somewhat more austere wall pieces."<sup>6</sup> Enlarging the woodcut plates first published in 1866 in the series' titular book, Walker overlays these landscapes and battle scenes with silkscreened silhouettes in a range of melodramatic, violent, and grotesque configurations. This juxtaposition disturbs the authority of Harper's publication, which claimed to "narrate events just as they occurred," and highlights the omission of violence inflicted on African Americans in mainstream narratives of the Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

The photogravure prints titled *Testimony*, stills from Walker's 2004 film *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, demonstrate one of the major ways the artist's practice has expanded in the twenty-first century (fig. 9). Walker

began to experiment with moving images in 2001, turning her signature silhouette figures into puppets with hinged joints. Creating hand-built theatrical sets and using Super 8 film, with *Testimony* Walker began to explore the possibilities of new media through her own idiosyncratic lens, making use of the old-fashioned techniques of shadow theater and animation. Walker's filmmaking process was adapted from the German animation pioneer Lotte Reiniger, who was renowned for her innovative techniques in animating fairy tales in the 1920s. For both Reiniger and Walker, the silhouette, though it resembles a shadow, embodies a distance from reality. Like Peter Pan's escaped shadow, the silhouette takes on a mischievous life of its own. Despite her references to history, Walker's silhouetted figures are not meant to be representations of true events as they occurred.



Figure 6. *The Emancipation Approximation: Scene #2* (from a portfolio of 27), 1999–2000; Silkscreen; 44 x 34 inches; Edition 7/20

Figure 7. *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated): An Army Train* (from a portfolio of 15), 2005; Offset lithography and silkscreen; 39 x 53 inches; Edition 21/35



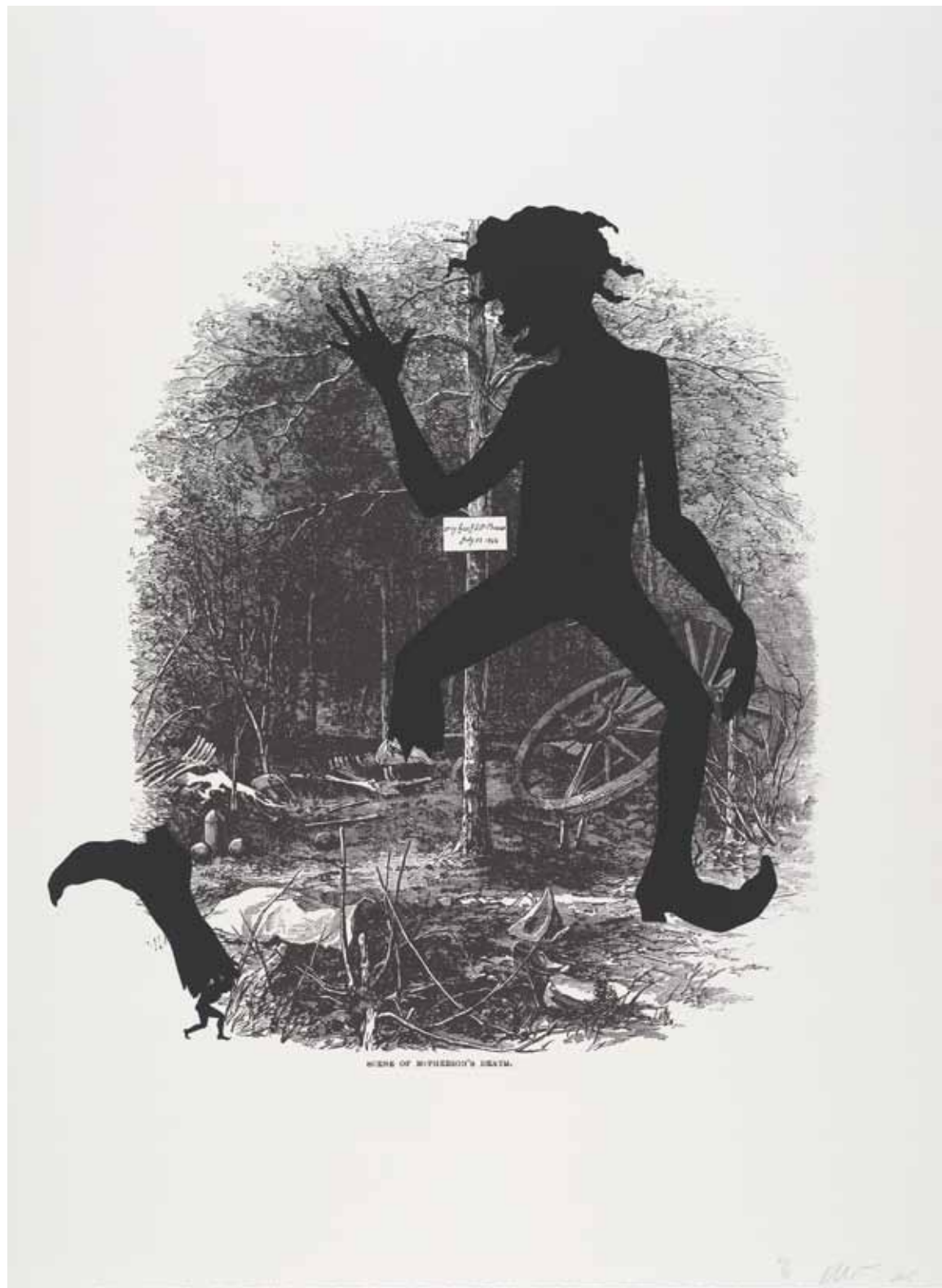


Figure 8. *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated): Scene of McPherson's Death* (from a portfolio of 15), 2005; Offset lithography and silkscreen; 53 x 39 inches; Edition 21/35



Figure 9. *Testimony* (from a portfolio of 5), 2005; Photogravure; 22 3/8 x 31 inches; Edition 12/40

Rather, her videos present historical material twisted into nightmarish fantasy.

The video selected for this exhibition is Walker's 2009 piece, *National Archives Microfilm Publications M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: 1) Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road* (fig. 10). It was developed through Walker's research into the U.S. National Archives on the War Department's Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands. Established in 1865 to aid former slaves in the transition to freedom following the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau kept precise records of the brutal violence inflicted on African Americans during the chaotic Reconstruction period.<sup>8</sup> Walker's video depicts one example of this brutal violence, detailed in the archives through interviews with a family that was attacked and had their home burned to the ground. What appears at first to be a calm, pastoral scene of a Black family

performing their daily chores quickly devolves into a nightmarish vision of murder, rape, and arson.

As in Walker's earlier videos, *Six Miles from Springfield* alludes to the tradition of shadow theater by revealing the human actors operating the silhouette puppets with a perverse sense of playfulness and glee. Glimpses of Walker's hands and face appear as she manipulates the puppets and her mouth moves as if she were speaking their dialogue. The materials of the set's construction all look hand-made, like a lovingly constructed school project (fig. 11). This attitude of playfulness makes a stark contrast with the painful narrative of the video. Glimmering red and orange pieces of mylar flicker like flames as the family's home burns, accompanied by a sound of something like bacon sizzling in a pan. The contrast between pleasing aesthetic and brutal content makes the experience of watching the video something like a form of pleasurable torture.



Figures 10–12. Stills from *National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road*, 2009; Video (color, sound) with original music by Alicia and Jason Moran; 13:22 min

*Six Miles from Springfield* brazenly emphasizes the artist's role as a performative player and manipulator of the narrative (fig. 12). Walker's process, and her strategic revelation of that process, makes the viewer aware of the constructed and projected nature of the fantastical history they are watching. The artist's role in the films creates a sense of perverse and sadistic play that is both humorous and haunting. The films make clear elements that are subtler in Walker's other media: that the narratives she presents are not authentic histories to be believed, but instead are the projections of her imagination.

For Kara Walker, the psychology of race in contemporary America is deeply rooted in the wounds of the past. Yet perhaps more interestingly, Walker's work proposes that this influence flows in both directions. As history affects contemporary people, so we affect history by forming and transforming it through fantasy and interpretation. Kara Walker's artwork inhabits the past and present at once, intertwining eras to demonstrate the complex and

subjective nature of memory. In this way Walker's work emancipates the past from the authority of established narratives about American history and its meaning for the present and opens new territory for the future.

Jessi DiTillio is Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. She has worked in a diverse range of contemporary art institutions, from artist collectives in Ghana to nonprofit galleries and alternative performance spaces in New York City. Following her study of contemporary art and political activism at New York University, she earned her MA in Art History at the University of Oregon.

#### Notes

- 1 Kara Walker, "Kara Walker: Projecting Fictions—'Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On,'" [www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-projecting-fictions%E2%80%94insurrection-our-tools-were-rudimentary](http://www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-projecting-fictions%E2%80%94insurrection-our-tools-were-rudimentary) (accessed May 15, 2013).
- 2 Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films* (London: Watson-Guption Publications, 1970), 11–12.
- 3 Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on physiognomy; for the promotion of the knowledge and the love of mankind; written in the German language by J. C. Lavater, abridged from Mr. Holcroft's translation* (Boston: Printed for William Spotswood, & David West, 1794), 218. Eighteenth Century Collections Online.
- 4 Kara Walker, "Chronology of Black Suffering: Images and Notes," in *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 75–111.

- 5 For an excellent history of the origins and early meanings of racist stereotypes see Marlon Riggs's documentary *Ethnic Notions*. Marlon T. Riggs and Esther Rolle, *Ethnic Notions* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2004).
- 6 Kara Walker, "Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)," bio for LeRoy Neiman Center for Print Studies, [www.columbia.edu/cu/arts/neiman/Walker/](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arts/neiman/Walker/) (accessed May 15, 2013).
- 7 Alfred H. Guernsey and Henry Mills Alden, preface to *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* (Chicago: McDonnell, 1866), i.
- 8 Kara Elizabeth Walker, *Bureau of Refugees* (Milano: Charta, 2008), 3–7.

All works are from the collection of Jordan Schnitzer and his Family Foundation unless noted otherwise. Except page 7, all artworks © Kara Walker

#### EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California	September 22, 2013 – January 5, 2014
Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, Eugene, Oregon	January 25 – April 8, 2014
Boise Art Museum, Boise, Idaho	June 7 – August 17, 2014
Tufts University Art Gallery at Aidekman Arts Center, Medford, Massachusetts	September 4 – December 7, 2014
David C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland	February 5 – May 29, 2015
Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri	September 11, 2015 – January 3, 2016
University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, Wyoming	January 30 – May 14, 2016



## COLLECTOR'S STATEMENT

Jordan D. Schnitzer

**I** bought my first painting when I was fourteen years old, and since then, while I appreciate all visual and performing arts, my principal passion has been for contemporary prints. That initial acquisition started a lifelong pursuit, not only to be surrounded by art, but also to build a collection that could be shared with the public. After several museums borrowed works for exhibitions, I realized that if I were able to acquire a significant number of prints and multiples, I could build a program to facilitate sharing these with broader audiences. During the last twenty-five years, I have organized more than eighty exhibitions from my collections, which are loaned without fees. I also help fund educational programs tailored to individual community needs.

In 1997 I purchased my first Kara Walker print, and have been steadily adding her work to my collection ever since. Her work engages me both intellectually and emotionally. The themes are numerous: race, power, identity, gender, and violence. What may appear graphically simple and stark is layered

with complex references and perceptions, just shy of tangible yet carefully crafted. It's provocative and impossible to view passively. Her work grabs me and shakes me to my inner core, as it should. While I believe I don't hold any stereotypes or racial prejudices, I feel compelled to question my own values when I view her work. I think it is that quality, along with Walker's continually evolving themes, that draws me to her work over and over again and why I am so honored to share this exhibition with many audiences.

As a collector I know how art can inform, confound, elicit new views, and ultimately enrich our lives. For me, the thought of waking up each day without art would be like waking up without the sun. When you experience art like Kara Walker's, you're challenged not only to interpret the artist's intent but your own response. I hope everyone who sees this exhibition of Kara Walker's prints and multiples is as inspired and moved as I am.

*Below: Burning African Village Play Set with Big House and Lynching, 2006; Painted laser cut steel; Installation dimensions variable; Edition 4/20*

