

THE EMANCIPATION APPROXIMATION

The Emancipation Approximation is a 26 page portfolio of silkscreen prints that evokes the style and scale of Walker's large installation works. In this piece Walker draws on mythological imagery to evoke meditations on beauty, power, and sexuality. Walker uses the swan as a recurring symbol in this work to allude to the Greek myth of Leda and the swan. In the myth, Zeus became infatuated with a beautiful mortal named Leda. In order to consummate his love without suspicion from his wife, Hera, Zeus metamorphosed into a swan to rape and impregnate Leda.

Leda and the swan became a popular theme in painting and sculpture throughout the Renaissance, serving as a discrete way to present a lewd subject. Images of a woman caressing a swan served as visual shorthand for artists to communicate ideas about sexuality to educated viewers, while avoiding accusations of obscenity or impropriety. Drawing on the whiteness of the swan, Walker's adaptation of the tale mythologizes the tragic history of rape perpetuated on female slaves by their masters and addresses the legacy of antebellum miscegenation.

While the narrative of the piece is ambiguous, it has a clear beginning and end. In the first two images, black women are attacked and swept into the air by the virile aggression of swans. White and black silhouettes are used arbitrarily to represent both races in this work, forcing the viewer to think more deeply about their associations with these colors. As the backdrop turns from white to grey, black and white become profoundly intertwined in scenes of anarchic and erotic cultural mixing.

The final vignettes of the portfolio serve as an ominous conclusion to the sagas of miscegenation presented throughout the work. White swans swim and fly haphazardly with black human heads crudely sewn on, the hybrid products of a violently forced encounter between the races. In the second to last scene, a black woman has become the sexual aggressor in her relationship with the swan, creating a surprising reversal of power dynamics. Finally, a woman in elegant dress presides over a chopping block, surrounded by discarded, decapitated heads. These heads seem to be the unfortunate byproducts of the process of hybridization, the victims cast aside in a tragic experiment.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

I often compare my method of working to that of a well-meaning freed woman in a Northern state who is attempting to delineate the horrors of Southern Slavery with next to no resources other than some paper and a pen knife and some people she'd like to kill.

— Kara Walker

Kara Walker was born in Stockton, California, and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. After graduating from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991, she earned her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. The same year she finished graduate school, she exploded onto the contemporary art world with her first major installation.

In interviews and public talks, Walker frames her adolescence and artistic development as a metaphorical slave narrative. Alluding to the literary memoirs of former slaves like Harriet Jacobs or Frederick Douglass, her narrative begins with the loss of childhood innocence, when she was taken from the relative racial freedom of northern California to the segregated world of suburban Atlanta. For Walker, the move to Atlanta was a brutal awakening to the relevance of racial history and the legacy of slavery; she calls this transition “the culture shock that defines my life.”

Following her time in the South, Walker describes gaining her artistic freedom as “escaping North” to graduate school in Providence, Rhode Island. Her academic experience allowed Walker the distance and freedom to begin to articulate and probe the complex ways in which the heritage of racial strife affected her identity and relationship to others. Appearing frequently as a character in her artwork, Walker mines and exaggerates the darkest parts of her unconscious to evoke the subtle and insidious ways racism is rooted in American culture.

SILHOUETTES & STEREOTYPES

In Walker's work, the blackness of the silhouettes, perhaps their simplest quality, creates a complex examination of racial representation. Silhouettes appear to depict people realistically by showing only 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.

All the characters in Walker's scenes are rendered in black, so the only clues she provides for determining racial identity are often crude cultural symbols of race. Some of these, like exaggerated lips, are derived from the realm of racist caricature and reference a variety of sources, from early films and minstrel shows to cartoons and the racist kitsch material termed "Black Memorabilia." As you look at Walker's work and interpret its visual narrative, you may discover knowledge of racist stereotypes you weren't aware you had. We encounter these images in advertising, television, and even food packaging so frequently that we unconsciously absorb their messages about Black identity. By using black silhouettes to represent multiple skin colors, Walker forces us to confront the internalized or culturally enforced stereotypes that mold our understanding of Blackness.

By removing any obvious indication of skin color, Walker leaves the racial identity of her characters open-ended. However, our ability to identify Walker's characters as White or Black, regardless of their color, draws attention to the enduring presence of racial stereotypes in contemporary culture. As a social and political 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; rather, it is defined through the matrix of popular imagery. Walker's artwork explores the frightening idea that our understanding of race and identity is based on pictures instead of real people.

HARPER'S PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR (ANNOTATED)

For these prints, Walker began by enlarging woodcut print illustrations from *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*, first published in 1866. The original *Harper's Pictorial History* was widely circulated in the years following the Civil War as the definitive anthology of military, political, and social information about the war.

In his preface to the book, editor Alfred Guernsey claimed to “narrate events just as they occurred” and presented detailed descriptions of a diverse range of elements of the period, from acts of legislation and political debates to battles and tactical maneuvers. Conspicuously lacking in the original *Harper's* is any serious investigation of the violence and oppression inflicted on African Americans during this period.

According to Walker, “These prints are the landscapes that I imagine exist in the back of my austere wall pieces.” In other words, the historical records of the Civil War form the implied background for all Walker's images of chaos and racial strife. Yet, she does not leave *Harper's* authoritative illustrations untouched. Walker imposes silkscreened silhouettes in a range of melodramatic, dismembered, and grotesque configurations on top of the original landscapes and battle scenes. Walker's “annotations” highlight the limited scope of the history *Harper's* presents.

KARA WALKER'S VIDEO ART

In Walker's videos, the jaunty nature of handmade puppets creates an unsettling yet humorous contrast to the brutal imagery presented. Walker began to experiment with moving images in 2001, turning her signature silhouette figures into puppets with hinged joints. Creating hand-built theatrical sets, she explores the possibilities of the old-fashioned techniques of Shadow Theater and animation.

The tradition of Shadow Theater is said to date back to the Han Dynasty of ancient China, when an unnamed emperor commissioned a shadow play to commemorate the loss of a beloved concubine. Shadow puppetry has played important cultural roles in a variety of cultures since then, from India and Java to Greece and Germany. Walker makes the technique her own, using it to bring many of the politically charged themes of her prints into motion.