Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love

October 11, 2007 - February 3, 2008

The first full-scale American museum survey of the work of artist Kara Walker arrived at the Whitney Museum of American Art on October 11, 2007, where it will remain on view through February 3, 2008. Organized by Philippe Vergne, Deputy Director and Chief Curator, and Yasmil Raymond, Assistant Curator, at the Walker Art Center, in close collaboration with the artist, *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* features works ranging from the artist's signature black-paper silhouettes to her acclaimed recent film animations. The Whitney installation will be overseen by Chrissie Iles, the Museum's Anne & Joel Ehrenkranz Curator.

Kara Walker is among the most provocative and prolific American artists of her generation. Over the past decade, she has gained national and international recognition for her room-size tableaux depicting historical narratives, haunted by racism, sexuality, violence, and subjugation, which she makes using the genteel 18th-century art of cut-paper silhouettes. Set in the antebellum American South, Walker's compositions play off stereotypes and portray, often grotesquely, life on the plantation, where masters and slaves engage in a profoundly unsettling historical struggle.

Over the years the artist has used drawing, painting, colored-light projections, writing, shadow puppetry, and, most recently, film animation to narrate her tales of romance, sadism, oppression, and liberation. Walker's scenarios put an end to conventional readings of a cohesive national American history and expose the collective, and ongoing, psychological injury caused by the tragic legacy of slavery. Her work leads viewers through an aesthetic experience that evokes a critical understanding of the past and proposes an examination of contemporary racial and gender stereotypes.

Walker's visual epics systematically and critically walk a line -- the "color line," to quote W.E.B. Du Bois -- that moves us from the antebellum South to an analysis of the sustaining economic, social, and individual power structures still in place today. Deploying an acidic sense of humor, she examines the dialectic of pleasure and danger, guilt and fulfillment, desire and fear, race and class. She has said, "The black subject in the present tense is the container for specific pathologies from the past and it is continuously growing and feeding off those maladies."

Organized deliberately as a narrative, the exhibition articulates the parallel shifts in Kara Walker's visual language and subject matter: from a critical analysis of the history of slavery as a microcosm of American history through the structure of romantic literature and Hollywood film to a revised history of Western modernity and its relationship to the notion of "Primitivism."
About the Artist

Born in 1969 in Stockton, California, Kara Walker received her BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991 and her MFA from Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. Since that time, she has created more than 30 room-size installations and hundreds of drawings and watercolors, and has been the subject of more than 40 solo exhibitions. She is the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award (1997) and, most recently, the Deutsche Bank Prize (2004) and the Larry Aldrich Award (2005). She was the United States representative for the 25th International São Paulo Biennial in Brazil (2002). She currently lives in New York, where she is associate professor of visual arts at Columbia University, New York.

Catalogue

To accompany the exhibition, the Walker Art Center has published a 418-page illustrated catalogue containing critical essays by scholars and cultural critics on the myriad social, racial, and gender issues present in Kara Walker's work by exhibition curator Philippe Vergne; cultural and literary historian Sander L. Gilman; art historian and critic Thomas McEvilley; art historian Robert Storr; and poet and novelist Kevin Young. The publication features more than 150 four-color images of the artist's work, a complete exhibition history and bibliography as well as an illustrated lexicon of the recurring themes and motifs in the artist's most influential installations by Yasmil Raymond. Kara Walker has contributed a 36-page visual essay to the catalogue, which is distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc.

After its premiere at the Walker Art Center (February 17 - May 13, 2007), the exhibition traveled to the ARC/Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris (June 20 - September 9, 2007), before coming to the Whitney; it will also be seen at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (March 2 - June 8, 2008).

About the Curators

Philippe Vergne, Senior Curator, Walker Art Center

Currently the Chief Curator and Deputy Director, Vergne joined the Walker Art Center staff in 1997. As Senior Curator and head of the Visual Arts department, he organized the exhibitions How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age, Let's Entertain, and Herzog & de Meuron: In Process; coordinated artist residencies with Joep van Lieshout, Christian Marclay, and Nari Ward; and oversaw, with Richard Flood, the collection exhibitions inaugurating the Walker's expanded facility.

He recently curated the first retrospective of the work of Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping, a traveling exhibition that premiered at the Walker in October 2005. Other projects include the 2006 Whitney Biennial with Chrissie Iles; a Cameron Jamie exhibition that premiered at the Walker in July of 2006; and the Kara Walker survey Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love which premiered at the Walker in February 2007. Vergne has brought to the Walker collection important works by artists Andre Cadere, Dan Graham, David Hammons, Thomas Hirshhorn, Huang Yong
Vergne was Director of the Musée d’art Contemporain (MAC), Marseille, from 1994 to 1997. In April 2004 he was honored with the medal of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters, a prestigious citation recognizing individuals who have distinguished themselves in the field of art and literature and have made significant contributions to furthering the arts in France and throughout the world.

Yasmil Raymond, Assistant Curator, Walker Art Center

Currently Assistant Curator at the Walker Art Center, Raymond received her B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999 and her M.A. from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in 2004. As a graduate student at the Center for Curatorial Studies, she organized The Happy Worker and co-curated Framing the Real: Works from the Marieluise Hessel Collection. She is assisted with the exhibitions ANDY WARHOL/SUPERNOVA: Stars, Deaths, and Disasters, 1962-1964, Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005, Sharon Lockhart: Pine Flat, Cameron Jamie, Eva Hesse - Drawing and Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love. She is currently curating the exhibition Brave New Worlds with Doryun Chong to open at the Walker in October 2007.

Whitney Curator-in-Charge Chrissie Iles, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art

Chrissie Iles has been a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York since October 1997. Iles was co-curator of the 2006 Whitney Biennial 'Day for Night', and the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Other recent exhibitions include James Lee Byars, 'The Perfect Silence', 'Jack Goldstein - Films and Performance', and the survey exhibition 'Into the Light' The Projected Image in American Art 1964 - 1977', which was awarded a prize for the best exhibition in New York City in 2002 from the International Association of Art Critics.

Forthcoming projects include an exhibition of Michael Heizer's large scale work 'Actual Size: Munich Rotary' (1970), a retrospective of Dan Graham, and an exhibition of Piotr Ukanski's film 'Summer Love'. Iles is preparing a book, 'Art and Film', for the Themes and Movements series by Phaidon Press.

Iles is an adjunct Professor in Columbia University's department of Art History, a member of the Faulty of the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, and on the Visiting Faculty of the Sculpture Department at Yale University.

Editor's note: RL readers may also enjoy:

- African American Art

Read more articles and essays concerning this institutional source by visiting the sub-index page for the Whitney Museum of American Art in Resource Library.