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### Film Noir

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Kara Walker's work seems to have always brought out the worst in her. Sadoomasochistic. drunken, sexist, child-molesting racial profiles from some dawn time of rococo premodernism mingle and cavort, locked in unaffirmative action. One wonders if even she initially grasped the range of pictorial and associative possibilities in her signature resuscitation of the eighteenth-century silhouette portrait nearly fifteen years ago. What began as a way to paint without painting evolved quickly through the reciprocal feedback of process and subject into a Rorschach typology of horrible and seductive master and slave archetypes, embedded in twisted social rituals and opaque narratives. By 1994, with mural-size installations like *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, the silhouettes had become life-size projections of a parallel dimension, existing both on the surface of our world and somewhere far beyond. In some more recent installations, Walker has added opaque projectors throwing colored light, which distort space and complicate figure-ground relations while literalizing the metaphor of projection. *Darkytown Rebellion*, 2001, features a jaunty company of banner-waving hybrids that marches with uncertain purpose across a fractured landscape of projected foliage and luminous color, a fairy tale from the dark side conflating history and self-awareness into Walker's politically agnostic pantheism.

As her work with silhouettes has developed, Walker has also made paintings and drawings employing more common syntax. In her current survey exhibition, curated by Philippe Vergne at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, there are numerous loosely organized groups of these, some deploying black-paper silhouettes across atmospherically painted fields, others eschewing the silhouette entirely in favor of collage or more illustrational rendering, often interspersed with elements of language. Other works involve language alone, such as the energetically nasty *Letter from a Black Girl*, 1998, a text applied directly to the wall in typewriter font, or *Many Black Women (Certain Types)*, 2002, whose presentation on small index cards is a reminder of the Conceptual-art roots of some of Walker's thinking. These text pieces bring one in to direct contact with the hostile, raunchy, ironic consciousness driving Walker's art but without the creepy and playful seductiveness of the murals, while the more conventional paintings and drawings are, well, more conventional. Despite their treatment of complex and frequently discomfiting subjects, they lack the silhouettes' density of allusion and capacity to unearth repressed disconnects.

The three short films Walker has made since 2004, however, obliterate these categorical and critical distinctions. They display a dizzying inclusiveness, in which the various threads of her activities come home to roost in a kind of ur-form, both self-evident, when seen in the context of the Minneapolis exhibition, and unnerving in their potential. They internalize what we customarily regard as

public cultural history while exposing the deepest imaginings of the consensually private self. By the standards of "real" cinema, they embrace decidedly crude production values, and are basically puppet theater with touches of stop-action animation. The lurching, segmented narratives are enacted by cutout black-paper puppets, articulated versions of Walker's silhouettes whose movements are controlled by strings and sticks. Their human operators come in and out of view as the action unfolds before stage flats and rear-screen projections of schematized vistas. The films are scary and depressing yet weirdly innocent, as if a saucy but traumatized ten-year-old were playing with her parents' old movie camera. The touch is very specific, not the knowing ham-handedness familiar as a signifier of avant-garde intentions but rather something evocative of much earlier movies. The rough film quality and use of silence or extremely dated sound, even the embrace of the slavery/plantation genre, all contribute to the sense that these are artifacts, warmly comforting in their hazy familiarity but, like recovered memories, disturbing to any status quo of shared mythology. The use of inanimate substitutes for actual people, which has become a commonplace in recent art, regains its primitive strangeness.

*Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions, 2004*, Walker's first film, is only about nine minutes long. Shot in scratchy black and white and devoid of any sound track, the film involves a fantastic plot inversion-what science fiction writers call "alternative history"-whereby black women become the masters of enslaved white men. It opens with a vaguely organic black shape, which nearly fills the screen, more abstract and obscure than anything previously in Walker's image bank, and then, as the camera pulls away, we realize we are seeing the edge of a monolithic black female effigy whose periodic utterances appear as intertitles in the tradition of silent film, both clarifying and advancing the story. A skinny, dreadlocked young black woman more or less supervises the institutionalization and subsequent unraveling of the slave/ master arrangement, as the white men become despondent, escape, and must be captured and dealt with harshly. This horrific tale of enslavement, anal rape (with a broom), depression, alcoholism, torture, spiritual corruption, and death (and necrophilia) bounces along while the narrator seems genuinely bemused that the whites don't get how good they have it and our heroine dutifully throws herself into the job of maintaining discipline.

The initially uninterpretable image of blackness, a creation moment in construction paper, is symmetrically balanced by the film's "climax" in an image of whiteness. The warrior heroine performs fellatio on the lynched corpse of the white men's leader (whose penis seems to grow out of his navel) and her face is inundated at close range by successive loads of viscous, milky fluid that slowly fill up the screen. Whether this represents her degradation or a final exploitation of discarded chattel is impossible to sort out, and perhaps both are true. There is a jarring shift in representational modes as the flat space of the silhouettes is violated by the photographic explicitness of the perversely painterly money shot, which epitomizes the spirit of play that activates these films. This final scene and the ambiguous image of consuming blackness that opens *Testimony* suggest disconcerting affinities with the uses of black and white in modernist abstraction, collapsing harsh and satiric fantasy into the visual strategies of nonobjective painting in a way not previously seen in Walker's work. The framing edge of the projected image establishes compositional limits very different from the floating, graphically disconnected elements of the murals and paintings, and she seems to have recognized that film affords her access to greater scale, density, and (paradoxically) gestural immediacy.

Walker's second film, *8 Possible Beginnings*; or *The Creation of African-America, America a Moving Picture* by Kara E. Walker, 2005, is longer and marginally more sophisticated, in that it has a sound track and at several points departs clearly from the space of animation (though the term *animation* is not really accurate to describe what Walker is up to here, as she never allows the presence of the human manipulators to be forgotten). Its approximately sixteen-minute duration is broken into eight episodes, which present different aspects of the arrival of Africans in the New World and the development of slavery as a social and economic institution. This sounds reasonable enough, but Walker's imagining of these events unfolds in a fractured dream space of anthropomorphized landscapes and bizarre couplings, all to the accompaniment of poignant shards of minstrelsy, black jazz, and haunted human voices.

There is an almost mystical personification of place in *8 Possible Beginnings*. The "Motherland," a carnivorous version of the totemic female in *Testimony* (but with a palm tree growing on her head), rises up from the sea and devours the unfortunate "negroes" who have been cast off their slave ship and are then digested and magically defecated as one virile male specimen into a new world of fertile fields.

There follows an orgy of hot gay sex between master and slave, the impregnation of the slave when the master shoves a cotton plant into his ass, and the birth of some trans-species being that is thrown to the winds and eventually grows to become a hangman's tree, attended by the craven fox and hare from the *Tales of Uncle Remus*. About midway through the film, a representational rupture occurs, and a "real" black woman appears in period slave dress, cutting a silhouette portrait of a white male sitter—a wry comment on Walker's method, ending with the title GOOD JOB, BESS! A shift to the "normal" space of movies occurs again near the end of the film, during the Uncle Remus sequence, when the puppeteer manipulating the animals suddenly becomes fully visible, bouncing the puppets across the stage in an agitated fashion and obviously making quite a bit of noise, none of which is heard on the sound track. In these intervals, codes of representation and codes of behavior become entangled through Walker's improvisatory approach.

No authoritative voice advances the story in this film; it holds together by association. The musical background sounds like it 's emanating from an old record player, generically if not specifically familiar, and the spoken parts feel captured, almost overheard, from some shared, history-driven nightmare. At the end, an embarrassingly clichéd Uncle Remus has a chuckle at the expense of folks who don't understand the lessons about human affairs to be gleaned from the study of animals, as his little furry friends busily attend to lynchings and torture.

While *8 Possible Beginnings* pushes even further into an atmosphere of pre-modernism than *Testimony*, Walker's most recent filmic work, " ... *the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea*," 2007, achieves a rather different mood. Premiered in the exhibition in Minneapolis, it is the first of her films to use color, which suffuses the backgrounds in lurid tints of red, orange, green, and blue. The puppets here are true shadows, betraying far less of their physicality than in previous works, and this dematerialization joins with the acidic chroma in an atmosphere of apocalyptic insubstantiality.

Unlike its predecessors projected directly on the wall, the *angry surface* is presented as a rear-screen projection on a freestanding screen within an installation of tall, black-painted plywood cutouts of moss-laden trees, which literalizes the puppet theater sources of Walker's approach. Set in a Halloweenish graveyard, the action concerns (the burial of a dead black woman and her subsequent resurrection and fornication with a white slave master, which is interrupted by a one-legged slave boy who attacks and kills the lovers before copulating with the dead woman, who may or may not be his mother (a possibility implied by an earlier shot of a gravestone marked MOTHER) and which may or may not bring us full circle to the cause of death of the woman whose burial opens the film. At one point, we are shown the white slave owner sawing the leg off a small boy, which probably explains the one-leggedness of the older necrophiliac youth. The ambiguous chronological structure and themes of death and resurrection encourage the interpretation that these shadow beings are doomed forever to return to their archetypal acts of erotic destruction in a perpetual two-dimensional afterlife.

The inventiveness of the filmic component of this work may be somewhat undercut by the central-casting Southern heaviness of the larger installation, yet one can understand how Walker would be driven to try it. Several years ago she presented a performance of live puppet theater with herself and several assistants as the puppeteers and voices, so her interest in the physical experience of theatricality is explicit and consistent with the transparent devices and effects within the films themselves.

One of the primary strengths of her films is their apparently naïve embrace of movies as a kind of folk art, gently twisting earlier paradigms of entertainment to their own subversive ends. As a child of the 1950s, I clearly remember the caricatures of black jazz, musicians and plantation workers that frequently appeared in the cartoons we watched on television, not-so-distant cousins of the bizarre icons that inhabit Walker's beautiful little movies. Her repurposing of popular forms obviously connects her to many artists working today, but few deal with the kind of painful and collectively shameful material that she does, or approach such things with her combination of let's-get-on-with-it sweetness and merciless candor.

Given art's dubious ability to really effect anything other than itself, artists have the luxury, if not the duty, denied many others to represent the true multivalence and anarchic lust that characterize much of human inner and social experience, without the limiting- and comforting-construction of being "right." If Philip Guston's Klansmen were objectifications of his (and our) deeply compromised construction of self, then Walker's characters define a psychic terrain of almost unbearable conflict and contradiction. As with the work of artists as different as Otto Dix, Roy Lichtenstein, and Barbara Kruger, Walker's art participates in the condition it proposes to deconstruct. Criticality and desire collapse into a synthesis of means and ends, propositions of novel pictorial possibilities that mercilessly state the obvious while we (and she) are denied a standpoint from which our "values" will provide solace.