



KARAWALKER  
KARAWALKER  
KARAWALKER

On a wall in Kara Walker's studio there's a piece of brown paper covered in sloppy block letters: "KARAWALKERKARAWALKERKARAWALKER . . ." The ink-stained cardboard printing blocks are piled on the floor nearby. Walker shows me some cutouts of riverboats, which are the beginnings of a collaboration on a new play about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and then we walk over to a wall with three memos printed in Helvetica. She's been writing herself letters of recommendation as a way of thinking about "the black woman in space and this particular black woman in this particular art-world commerce space."

One begins, "I don't know Ms. Walker very well; we met when I was standing provocatively close to her on a crowded subway train in 2004. Having brushed against her back flesh, and smelt her medium-brown skin in July heat, I can safely attest that Walker is the sort of woman who understands her own power." Another sounds more like the furious, biting voice she occasionally uses in her work to lay bare the languages of racism, misogyny, masochism: "Kara Walker is an idiot who believes in nothing but herself, that her mere existence on this planet is enough to make the world a better place." She "needs to be put out of her misery," it sneers. "Kara Walker bleeds into her own wounds, cuts for the sake of feeling, and moons over her own thoughtless actions. She takes lovers as hostages and feels no remorse when their wives pay the ransom for the lives of their beloveds. Kara Walker is a disgrace to women and to the Negro race and will be excommunicated in due time. Ms. Walker is a profound disappointment to herself, her family, her friends and her lawyers. Her gallery sales would greatly improve if Ms. Walker's demise or disappearance were to be newsworthy." The missive ends with a word of advice: "If I were you I would work to ensure Ms. Walker never holds a position higher than a floorboard."

BY JAMIE L. PARRA, PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSE SHADOAN

The letters, along with the printing of her name over and over, are part of an effort to understand who this figure, this art-world star named Kara Walker, is — the one who earned a MacArthur “genius” grant at 28, a survey at the Whitney before she turned 40, and over a decade, worth of acclaim. There’s an aura of untouchability about that Kara Walker, and Walker, the one standing in front of me at her studio, is coming around to acknowledging this other figure. “Irrespective of who I am on the ground, in my life,” she says, “there’s this entity out there called Kara Walker who resembles me in a lot of ways and in a lot of ways doesn’t.”

The 2007 Whitney show *felt* like a survey for Walker, who describes it as a display of her “whole psyche” during a 14-year period of development. “It was the first time that I felt complete,” she says. “So the two and a half months or three months that was up, I was a complete human being, and then after that . . .” She just laughs. “It does feel like there is a single thread of thought that runs through the show and a single thread in the critical response that talks mostly about race and slavery. And there’s women and sex, and there’s power, and sex . . . and sexualized bodies.”

Critics and art historians loved, and wrote raves about, the frankly deviant sex. But it also infuriated her detractors — a small but vocal group of artists and writers who have argued since the nineties that Walker naively colludes with the forces of white supremacy. Most recently, in 2009, the artist and writer Howardena Pindell published a collection of, in her words, “not necessarily flattering” commentary from 28 different writers. In *Kara Walker — No / Kara Walker — Yes / Kara Walker — ?* Pindell asks: “What does her image of a nude black woman having sex with the skeletal corpse of a confederate soldier accomplish,

covered his bedroom walls with some “very hardcore images of women” taken from magazines. So “for several years this person’s masturbatory habits were part of my landscape.” She ends this part of her message with a sentence perfectly tailored for art historians: “This kind of narcissism and exploitation is a form of power I think I continue to find intoxicating.”

Walker has recently found her interest in porn shifting toward the idea of obscenity — “where offenses really hit” — and we talk about why it seems increasingly difficult to encounter the truly obscene. She points to the computer in the studio and tells me about something she recently downloaded, an S&M website disclaimer in which the owner promises that all the models are over 18 and everything is consensual. “Even in [the world of BDSM] there’s a requirement for courtesy,” she notes. “I just think it’s really fascinating that there are worlds of brutality — actual brutality — and then there are worlds of fantasies — enactments of brutality — and then there are worlds of enactments and fantasies of brutality that are consensual and must be stated as such legally in order to have currency or legitimacy.”

Sexual consent has proven one of the most difficult, disturbing, and divisive issues in her work because, as Pindell writes, Walker gives the slaves in her art the agency to desire their masters or gleefully display their nude bodies. She lets them participate in their own objectification.

Saidiya Hartman, the author of the book *Lose Your Mother* and a commentator on the Whitney show audio tour, praised the uncomfortable position Walker is willing to take by depicting the slave’s masochism. “People constantly talk about the sadism of slavery,” Hartman said, “but if you talk about the sadism of slavery, it seems to me that you need to talk about the masochism.”

## “HER IMAGES GO OUT OF THEIR WAY TO UNSETTLE, PRESENTING A GLANCE BACK AT A GROTESQUE AMERICAN GOMORRAH, WITH SCENES SO VIOLENTLY TABOO THAT THEY ALMOST COMMAND THE VIEWER TO LOOK AWAY”

except to create a fiction that becomes a truth in the eye of the beholder eager to continue the lie of a racist?” For Pindell and the other writers who come down on the side of “Kara Walker — No,” Walker resurrects horrid, sexualized black stereotypes, drawing and cutting her figures with a blithe disregard for the political goals of the civil rights movement, including its battle for positive representations of black life.

Of course, these critics miss how profound Walker’s irony can be. Her images go out of their way to unsettle, presenting a glance back at a grotesque American Gomorrah, with scenes so violently taboo that they almost command the viewer to look away. The silhouettes, especially, display this ambivalence about looking: the desire to disclose a nostalgic, erotic, and violent fantasy while at the same time withholding, giving us no more than the absence of figures. The cutouts can read as negative spaces on the wall, like placeholders for a redacted history.

Walker’s historical sexual fantasies, full of animals, and all types of penetration, are fueled to some degree by the visual world of pornography. An untitled series of collages from 2001 to 2005 overlays pages of *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War* with erotica, like this classified ad pasted next to Alabama senator Benjamin Fitzpatrick’s mouth: “Guys Spanked by Dad, 48, over my knee, in your white T-shirt and athletic socks.” Walker is famously fascinated by porn’s treatment of power and race, to the extent that a friend at a dinner party recently complained, “Kara is the only person I know who writes off her porn.”

She says that she discovered porn at a very early age and still remembers the simultaneous horror and arousal of her first experience. And it’s the simultaneity of all those feelings that intrigues her. In an e-mail she wrote: “My ongoing ‘porn’ investigation begins (in earnest, let’s say) at age seven. [A]dd to that the presence of a good amount of ‘figurative’ art, my dad’s life drawing classes, and some interesting novels floating around. . . .” In addition, a member of her family “with some emotional issues”

For her, “Sadism is all about the sickness, brutality, and terror of the master,” and it is a testament to Walker’s brilliance and courage that she accounts for slavery’s masochism, too, “which is all about the agency of the contract and what it means to be willful and submissive.” In other words, her work improbably flaunts the slave’s power. If enslavement attempts to erase an individual’s agency by transforming her into a thing, then Walker’s work flies in the face of that logic. Her images disinter that suppressed agency, revealing what Hartman calls “the absolute rebelliousness of submission.” She recalled a piece from the series “Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?” in which Walker writes, “Make myself / Your Slave girl so you will make / Yourself my equal — if only for a minute.” For all its violence and apparent dissymmetry, the contract between the sadist and the masochist can be a kind of equality.

In her exhibit at Sikkema Jenkins last September, Walker made a striking gesture by showing several large paintings. Though they still include some cutouts in recognizable shapes — human limbs, a lock of braided hair, tree branches — the canvases look formally tortured, layered with fragmented bodies, textured papers, newsprint, and matte black or white paint applied in a seemingly slapdash fashion. There’s a ragged fury about these paintings that feels new for her, like a reaction against the neat order of her silhouettes and works on paper.

Walker says that the paintings were another attempt to “be the artist I had been crowned after the Whitney show.” She planned to create a “manageable” piece for months before finally hanging five blank panels on the far wall of her studio. Then they sat mostly untouched for another six months, staring her down, until she saw the play *Ruined* at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

A reworking of Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, the play takes place in the Democratic Republic of Congo and focuses on the brutality of war and rape, and the moral price of survival in





**Kara Walker**  
*17 Years Missoury (and Its Evening) #3*  
2009  
Mixed media, cut paper, and acrylic on gessoed panel  
84 x 72 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

dark times. Walker, who left the theater feeling destroyed, put her despair onto the canvas. "It's pointless being a woman," she remembers thinking, "it's pointless being black, it's pointless thinking you have any kind of agency in the world, it's pointless thinking any kind of thought that you have matters, it's pointless thinking anything you've ever cut out is worth looking at, it's pointless, and everything here is waste, and what is the surface but a product of some waste material of my imagination that isn't even fruitful stuff."

She thinks of her paintings as failures, but that's also the point, or at least one of them. The attempt to be the Kara Walker of the Whitney show might have been an earnest experiment, but, more likely, it was a way of setting herself up for failure in order to show the "pointlessness" or near impossibility of writing new narratives of black creativity without running up against critics like Pindell who say she is selling out her race — those who refuse to look and think with a generous imagination.

The morning of our interview she had seen a thread of comments on Ishmael Reed's Facebook page about Oprah and Tyler Perry that reminded her of those narratives yet again. "It was about this whole conspiracy with money and giving out awards to *Precious* and *Lee Daniels*. And I just thought, you know, goddamn it, there's no place for black creative anything, whether it's entrepreneurship or creative activity, without basically unleashing the same argument about authenticity or bringing down the race."

But how to make art that doesn't just traffic in negative stereotypes or visions of positive "upstanding" blackness? Creating

middle passage, triangulation, slave-trade imagery, but I don't think that's where the narrative actually sits, and maybe it's a little too open to interpretation, a little too mythological. And there's the more succinct *No Abstinence*, and it's a sexy image, and you can just look at it for its sexiness. And there's the whip and the phallus and this couple — the goddamn couple that just will not work — and I don't know if it's the couple or if it's because its too easy; if its because it's an interracial theme that I've already talked about and have no real love for." After going on for a while with increasing, half-serious exasperation, she explains: "When you're caught up in the whole fiction, it's like getting caught up in the theater."

At the moment, this is Walker's conceptual conundrum: She plays the starring role in the drama of her own work. The artist who captivated the art world and inspired a whole collection of exclusively negative criticism (not to mention many magazine profiles) is so visible at the moment she couldn't be represented as anything other than herself in big capital letters. Of course she's always made her presence known, often referring to herself ironically as an "Emancipated Negress." Now, however, she's **KARAWALKER**.

And to whomever it may concern: She recommends a demotion — in order to refocus our attention on the figures in her work, who don't have names.

When Walker addressed the Pindell book at a talk at the New Museum last year, she noted how the majority of its writers give up talking about art at a certain point to talk about her. They

"AT TIMES SHE FINDS HERSELF, EVEN, 'GETTING CAUGHT UP IN THE FUSSINESS OF PERFECTING AN IMAGE THAT MAYBE DIDN'T HAVE ANY BUSINESS BEING THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE'"

a space in between those two proves difficult because, besides the Howardena Pindells of the world, Walker hears about an alarming number of children looking at her art. Well-meaning kindergarten teachers approach her and say that they teach her art to their students. "It's like, 'you've gotta be kidding,'" she says, "or 'no, you didn't actually.'" Those moments make her worried that something about her work allows viewers to ignore the difficult stuff — the violence, the sex, the obscenity — by separating its beauty and technical finesse from its content.

At times she finds herself, even, "getting caught up in the fussiness of perfecting an image that maybe didn't have any business being there in the first place." So far now her current figurative work, a set of prints, happens at a different studio several blocks south, away from the central conceptual issues of the moment that play out on the brown paper and in the letters of recommendation. When she talks guiltily about the pleasure of drawing, how lost she gets in sketching, it's as if she keeps a mistress at the other studio. She fires off her thought process about one of the prints: "There's one scene that has all the markers of

ignore the blacked-out, invisible body she attempts to resurrect — the body transformed into a commodity by slavery, the body that's only visible in death, often in lynching photographs. She calls this an "impossible body," and she wants to hold on to it; carry it around, brutalized and further objectified by the art market; resuscitate it for a moment; show it desiring, defecating, and, yes, copulating.

At one point in our conversation regarding Walker, Hartman brought up Fred Moten's book *In the Break*, in which he writes about the sounds that haunt visual objects. He looks at, for example, the famous photograph of 14-year-old Emmett Till's disfigured corpse. Till's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, insisted on an open-casket funeral so that the world could see and take photos of her maimed son, and Moten says that the resulting picture of a body mutilated by racist violence is the record of a mother's mourning crisis. The sound of Bryant's protest, he writes, echoes through the commodity of the photograph.

"Moten talks about the commodity that speaks," Hartman said. "Walker has the commodity that fucks."



#### Kara Walker

*Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELINE Potentomic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol Nigmy's Hole" (Sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause (detail)*

1997

Cat paper on wall

Approx. 11 x 85 feet

Installation view, "Kara Walker: By Complement, My Country, My Oppressor, My Love," Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

Photo by Dana Sweeney

Courtesy of Sklensky Institute & Co., New York