



OATHS AND EPITHETS:

Works by
Sonya Clark

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Society for Contemporary Craft
2100 Smallman Street
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222
412 261 7003

www.contemporarycraft.org



Skein

Sonya Clark: In Power, Precision & Poetry

Bill Gaskins

In each encounter I have with the work of Sonya Clark, I am always struck by her continuing evolution, and the importance of considering her images and objects on non-Western terms. Clark's work is not limited to the academic question of what art is. Clark is also focused on harnessing what Curator Sarah Lewis calls "aesthetic force,"¹ and exploring what that force can *do* as a producer of informed images and objects. Clark also draws upon an assortment of visual traditions and philosophies, from what Robert Farris Thompson calls "a certain people specially armed with improvisatory drive and brilliance."²

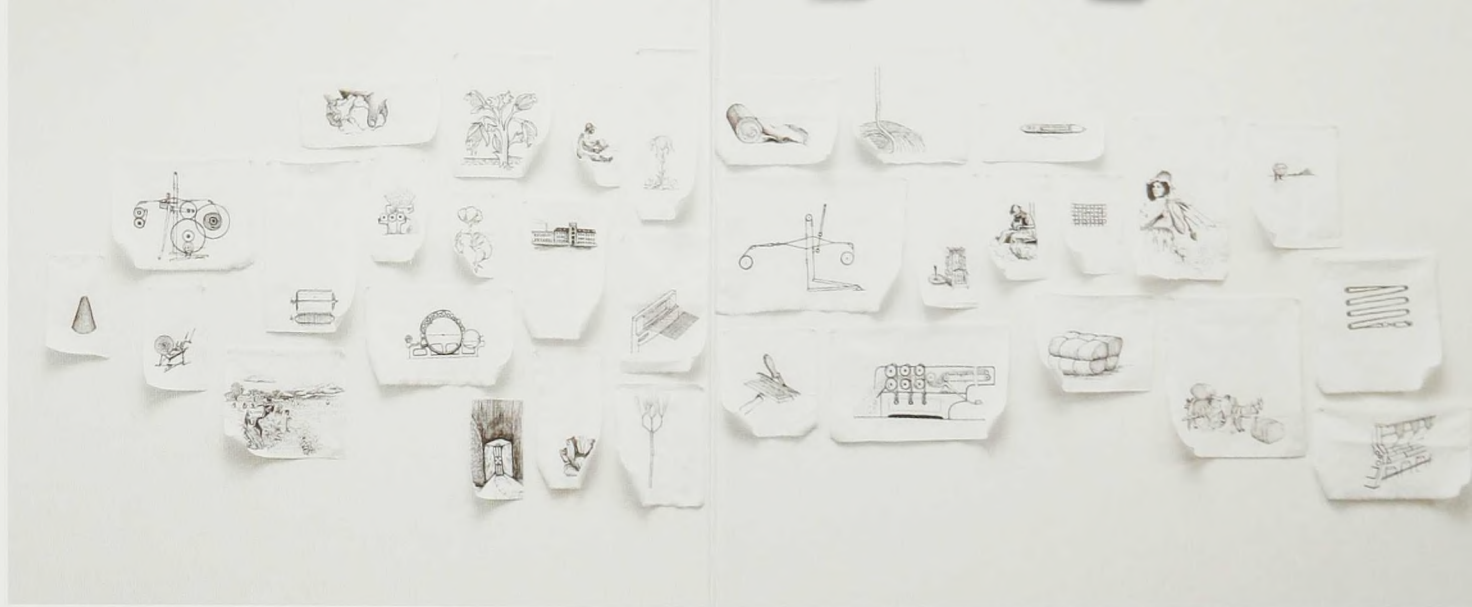
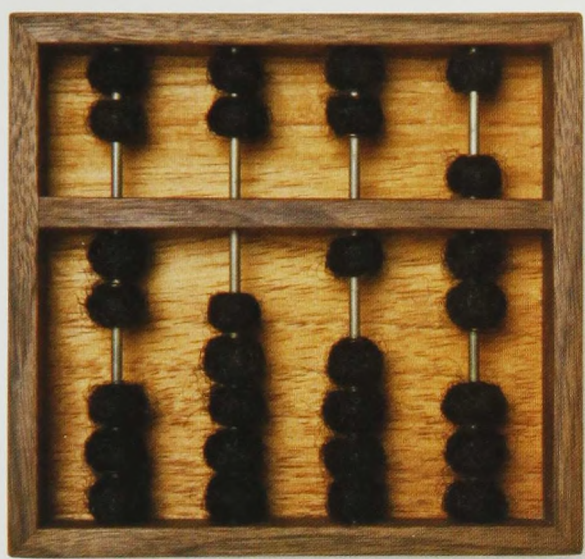
In *Oaths and Epithets*, Clark makes intrepid demands on an assortment of materials that engage the viewer with an appealing beauty and skill of execution through her expanding, technical and formal vocabulary. Beyond the beauty is a peerless conceptual rigor, at once nuanced and dynamic, exploring and extending the terms of contemporary art, and laying bare the false distinctions often made between formal, conceptual, and social concerns in the production and evaluation of visual and material culture. At the same time, Clark is boldly wrestling with the question of what it means to be an American citizen in the twenty-first century.

Prior to the 2015 shooting of nine members of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina by 21 year-old Dylan Roof, Clark began *Unraveled*, a celebrated project that invited people to assist her in physically dismantling the Confederate Flag thread by thread and learn how hard it is to accomplish. *Unraveled*, through its elegant complexity and simplicity is the most powerful work in the show, and a fitting metaphor for the collective work required to dismantle the symbols and substance of white supremacy in the United States.

The works *Abacus*, *Cotton Drawings*, and *3/5ths* are subtle and rebellious meditations on issues associated with pre- and post-Civil War America. The works reflect upon the ideological war in the United States over the Trans Atlantic trade in human beings from the continent of Africa, the "original sin" of slavery in America, the fractional political value placed on the African in America, the economic foundation and the legacy wealth slavery produced for corporations, colleges, and families in the United States, and the time between 1863—the year of the Emancipation Proclamation—and the present.

Through the work titled *Monumental Cloth Old Truce Flag*, Clark as social historian, textile scholar, vexillologist (one who studies flags), and artist, produces a replica of the towel used by Confederate soldiers who surrendered in early April of 1865 to end the Civil War. This less muscular and humble emblem of the defeated Confederacy, and her careful recovery of its warp and weft is the most surprising work in the exhibition.

This group of works from *Oaths and Epithets* reminds this viewer of the sobering fact that the post Civil War reunion of the dis-United States was based on subversively restoring the system of slavery by shifting its shape from the plantation to the penitentiary, and through the political alchemy of *interposition* and *nullification*. For while the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution ended slavery, President Lincoln required only ten percent of the population of the Confederate States to pledge their allegiance to the United States of America, nullifying the 13th Amendment in those states.³



Considering how that nineteenth century American political alchemy is being amplified in the twenty-first, the relevance and cultural currency of *Oaths and Epithets* cannot be overstated.

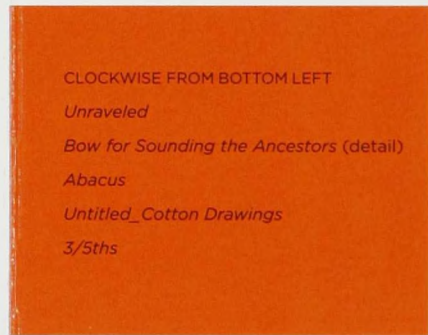
The work of Sonya Clark rewards viewers seeking an encounter with contemporary art that offers engaged and engaging points of entry through its power, precision, poetry and puzzles. *Oaths and Epithets* also offers a bridge for anyone seeking freedom from fear and ignorance about the complexities, contradictions, and consequences of slavery in America—then and now.

Bill Gaskins is an artist and an associate professor in the Department of Art and the Program in American Studies at Cornell University. His body of work as a photographer, filmmaker, and essayist, has garnered critical attention through books, journals, and solo and group exhibitions at major venues including the Crocker Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Detroit Institute of Arts, and The Smithsonian Institution.

¹ Lewis, Sarah, "Introduction," *Aperture Magazine* #223 *Vision & Justice*, May 24, 2016, New York

² Thompson, Robert, Farris, "Introduction," *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, First Vintage Books 1984, New York

³ Anderson, Carol, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, May 31, 1916



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Unraveled

Bow for Sounding the Ancestors (detail)

Abacus

Untitled_Cotton Drawings

3/5ths





Photo: Taylor Dabney

SONYA CLARK

Born: Washington, DC, 1967
Lives: Richmond, VA

EDUCATION

1995—M. F. A., Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI

1993—B. F. A., School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

1989 B. A., Amherst College, Amherst, MA

SELECTED ONE & TWO PERSON EXHIBITS

2016: *Follicular*, Taubman Museum, Roanoke, VA; *Bitter, Sweet, and Tender*, Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville, VA, *Generations: Joyce Scott and Sonya Clark*, Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD • **2015:** *Sonya Clark*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI • **2014:** *Same Difference*, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA, *Black and White and Thread All Over*, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA • **2013:** *Boxes, Combs, and Constellations*, University of Delaware, Newark, DE; *Ahead of Hair*, Contemporary Wing, Washington, DC; *Material Reflex*, Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA • **2012:** *Converge: Sonya Clark and Quisqueya Henriquez*, McColl Art Center, Charlotte, NC; *Sonya Clark*, Snyderman Works Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

SELECTED GRANTS & AWARDS

2016: Anonymous Was a Woman Award; University Distinguished Scholarship Award, Virginia Commonwealth University, Distinguished Research Faculty Fellow, School of the Arts • **2015:** Doctor of Arts, honoris causa, Amherst College, School of the Arts Faculty Award for Distinguished Achievement in Research • **2014:** ArtPrize Juried Grand Prize co-winner, 1858 Award for Southern Contemporary Art, Gibbes Museum of Art • **2013:** Craft Research Grant, Center for Craft Creativity and Design • **2011:** Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Professional Fellowship; Culture Works Grant; Art Matters Grant; United States Artists Fellowship; Cranbrook Academy of Art Distinguished Mid-Career Alumni Award • **2010:** Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arizona State University Museum, Tempe, AZ; Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN; Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, WI; Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, Quebec, Canada; Musees d'Angers, Angers, France; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA

SELECTED RESIDENCIES

2017: American Academy in Rome, Italy, VCUarts Affiliate • **2016:** BAU Institute Residency at Camargo Foundation, Cassis, France; Gibbes Museum Artist in Residence, Charleston, SC • **2012:** Civitella Ranieri Foundation Residency, Umbertide, Italy • **2006:** Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, Bellagio Residency, Bellagio, Italy • **2005:** Red Gate Artist in Residence, Beijing, China

This biographical material is selectively compiled and not meant to be exhaustive.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

(Measurements are height x width x depth. Measurements are in inches.)
Photos: Taylor Dabney

Abacus, 2010
Human hair, wood, metal
5 x 5 x 1

Albers: Interaction of Color (#36), 2013
Fine tooth plastic pocket combs and thread
5.5 x 4.5 x 1

America Warp, Ghana Weft, 2013
Plastic combs and plastic straws
Made in collaboration with Castro Kissiedu
20 x 65 x .5

Bow for Sounding the Ancestors, 2013
Edition of 10
Found violin bows, artist's hair and blonde hair; Sound: *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing* and *Star Spangled Banner*
25 x 1 x 1 each

Braille Emancipation Proclamation, 2011
Edition of 10
Inkjet print on archival paper
120 x 60

Cornrow Chair, 2011
Upholstered chair and thread
36 x 20 x 20

Encrusted, 2016-17
Edition of 5, Five-dollar bill with sugar crystals
3 x 6 x .25

Ladder, 2013
Human hair
108 x 9 x .5

Hair Necklace (black to white), 2012
Hair of artist and her mother
28 x 4 x .5

Hair Necklace (branches), 2012
Human hair and wire
16 x 13 x .5

Hair Necklace (chain), 2012
Human hair and metal
16 x 6 x 1

In Her Own Words, 2008
Combs and thread
Edition of 3
Quotation by Madam CJ Walker
48 x 144 x .25

Monumental Cloth (sutured), 2017
Hand woven linen cloth reproduction of the dish cloth used as the Confederate Flag of Truce, tea stained linen and silk suture thread
42 x 16 x .25

Pearl of Mother, 2006
Hair of artist and her mother
3 x 3 x 1

Proclamation, 2017
Cloth with pulled threads. Printed image from the Emancipation Proclamation.
Approx dimensions 5 x 10

Oaths and Epithets: Works by Sonya Clark is made possible by the Allegheny Regional Asset District, the Elizabeth R. Raphael Fund of the Pittsburgh Foundation, The Heinz Endowments, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the Windgate Foundation. (As of February 2017)

Design—schifinodesign.com

Reconstruction, 2017
Cotton Confederate Battle Flag reconfigured as American flag
Collection of Ivan Jecklin and Allison Weinstein
56 x 16 x 5

Seven Layer Tangle, 2006
Fine tooth plastic pocket combs
30 x 30 x 8

Skein, 2016
Human hair, number of hairs (approximately 80,000) is the number of Africans forcibly migrated in one year at the height of the Transatlantic slave trade
5 x 5 x 5

Spools (Entanglements and Journey), 2016
Edition of 5
18k gold thread on ebony spool, measures inches to miles the distance from Ghana to Virginia
"blonde" hair in ebony spool, 1.75 x 1.25 x 1.25 each

Sugar Chain, 2016
Cast sugar
14 x 1 x 1

3/5ths, 2010
Men's dress shirt and cotton thread
30 x 21 x 3

Twisted Diaspora, 2011
Canvas and black thread
60 x 84

Uncurl, 2008
Black plastic combs
78 x 10 x 10

Unraveled, 2015
Unraveled cotton Confederate Battle Flag.
14 x 30 x 7

Untitled (cotton drawings), 2016
Appropriated images of cotton's production on cotton handwoven hand spun khadi cloth
Dimensions variable

Untitled (a version of history), 2017
Pencil and human hair
7 x .25 x .25

White Canvas, 2013
White canvas stitched with unraveled edges
84 x 60

ON THE COVER

Skein, 2016
Human hair, number of hairs (approximately 80,000) is the number of Africans forcibly migrated in one year at the height of the Transatlantic slave trade
5 x 5 x 5