

SONYA CLARK

Black and White and Thread All Over





S O N Y A C L A R K
Black and White and Thread All Over

January 21 - February 21, 2014

Fine Art Gallery
School of Art
George Mason University

Artist Lecture and Reception
Tuesday February 4th, 1:30 p.m.

This exhibition is supported by
African and African American Studies
at George Mason University in celebration
of Black History Month.

Front Cover: *Mom's Wisdom or Cotton Candy*, 2011
Inside Front Cover: *Long Hair* (detail), 2007
Inside Back Cover: *Aqua Allure* (detail), 2005

All images are copyright of Sonya Clark
Published By George Mason University © 2013



Long Hair
Digital print
84" x 28" x 4"
2007



Popular culture is rife with examples of the power of hair. Consider Jennifer Aniston's swift rise to fame, propelled in no small part by the layered hairstyle sported by Rachel Green, her character on the 1990's TV phenomenon, *Friends*. Or more recently, the example of Dante de Blasio, the teenage son of New York mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio, whose Afro helped make him an instant media darling. A litany of cases demonstrates, however, that hair has the ability to damage reputations as much as to build them. Consider, for example, the disturbing racist and sexist comments unleashed when the conservative site *Free Republic* posted photographs of 11-year-old Malia Obama wearing her hair in twisted braids in July 2009. Or the seemingly innocuous but insidious Hollywood trope of the ugly duckling turned swan, whose transformation is inevitably marked by the straightening of her unruly tresses (see Anne Hathaway's character in the 2001 Disney film, *The Princess Diaries*.)

Hair is a busy political and visual arena. While individual hairstyles cycle in and out of style at the tempo of other fashion trends, the political nature of hair remains an enduring constant. It is an arena where beauty entangles with power, where we construct and negotiate cultural norms, desires, and expectations about class, gender, and race. Artist Sonya Clark situates her work in this tangle: teasing out different nuances of hair's politics—specifically the politics of black hair—for us to consider. As curator Lowery Stokes Sims has argued: “Clark alerts us to the complexities of tonsorial politics—in the global black world as well as the United States—where straightened hair, ‘natural’ hair, Afros and dreads in different eras have expressed how blacks situate themselves in society and navigate strategies of assimilation, entitlement, and enfranchisement.”ⁱ Clark participates in a larger conversation about hair that is shared by contemporary artists as diverse as Robert Gober, Ellen Gallagher, Lorna Simpson, Dario Robleto, and David Hammons, but that also stretches across cultures and time periods to encompass traditions as diverse as traditional West African hats and Surrealist objects such as Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup.

The four black-and-white photographs that comprise *Balls and Cubes* (2011) pair white and black spheres and cubes—a cotton ball and sugar cube are juxtaposed with their equivalents made of black hair. While these unassuming forms seem at first to be rooted in basic geometry, in fact, the modestly sized spheres and cubes conjure the vast and insidious repercussions of the Triangle Slave Trade that operated between Europe, Africa, and Caribbean colonies from the late 16th to the early 19th centuries. For more than 200 years, European empires profited from the lucrative economic production of cotton and sugar exported by their Caribbean and North American colonies, a production made possible by African slave labor. Sugar is a quintessential triangle trade crop: European empires funneled some of the profits from their Caribbean sugar production into the purchase of west African men, women, and children, who were forced to

Balls and Cubes

4 Photographs

20" x 20" each

2011



travel to the Caribbean to work as slaves on sugar plantations, thus reinforcing this vicious cycle. In this work, Clark conjures this longstanding exploitative practice in a direct and simple, but powerful way: she denies cotton of its softness and sugar of its sweetness by offering counterparts composed of unnerving accumulations of human hair, reminding us of the human toll these trades incurred.

Clark has also explored the connections between race and currency in *Afro Abe*, a series of five dollar bills in which she stitched black thread to give Abraham Lincoln a variety of black Afros. Venerated for ending slavery, the 16th president's Afro doubles as a halo. Clark ultimately made 44 of these portraits between 2008 and 2013—numbers and dates that impart the work with even greater symbolic weight. By making 44 portraits (and beginning the series in 2008), the work commemorates Barack Obama's historic election in 2008 as the 44th President of the United States. By completing the series in 2013, Clark also offers a nod to the 150-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Clark has been working with hair since 2000. Although many of her works grapple with the politics of hair, hair is an intimate medium where the personal and political are inevitably intertwined. As an artist who has long worked with textiles, hair was a natural extension to Clark's practice as she considers it to be a fundamental fiber. She also attributes her interest in the material to her childhood. The Washington, D.C., house she grew up in was across the street from the ambassador of Benin and his large family. She and her sister were frequently dropped off at their neighbor's house, where they would have their hair done.ⁱⁱ

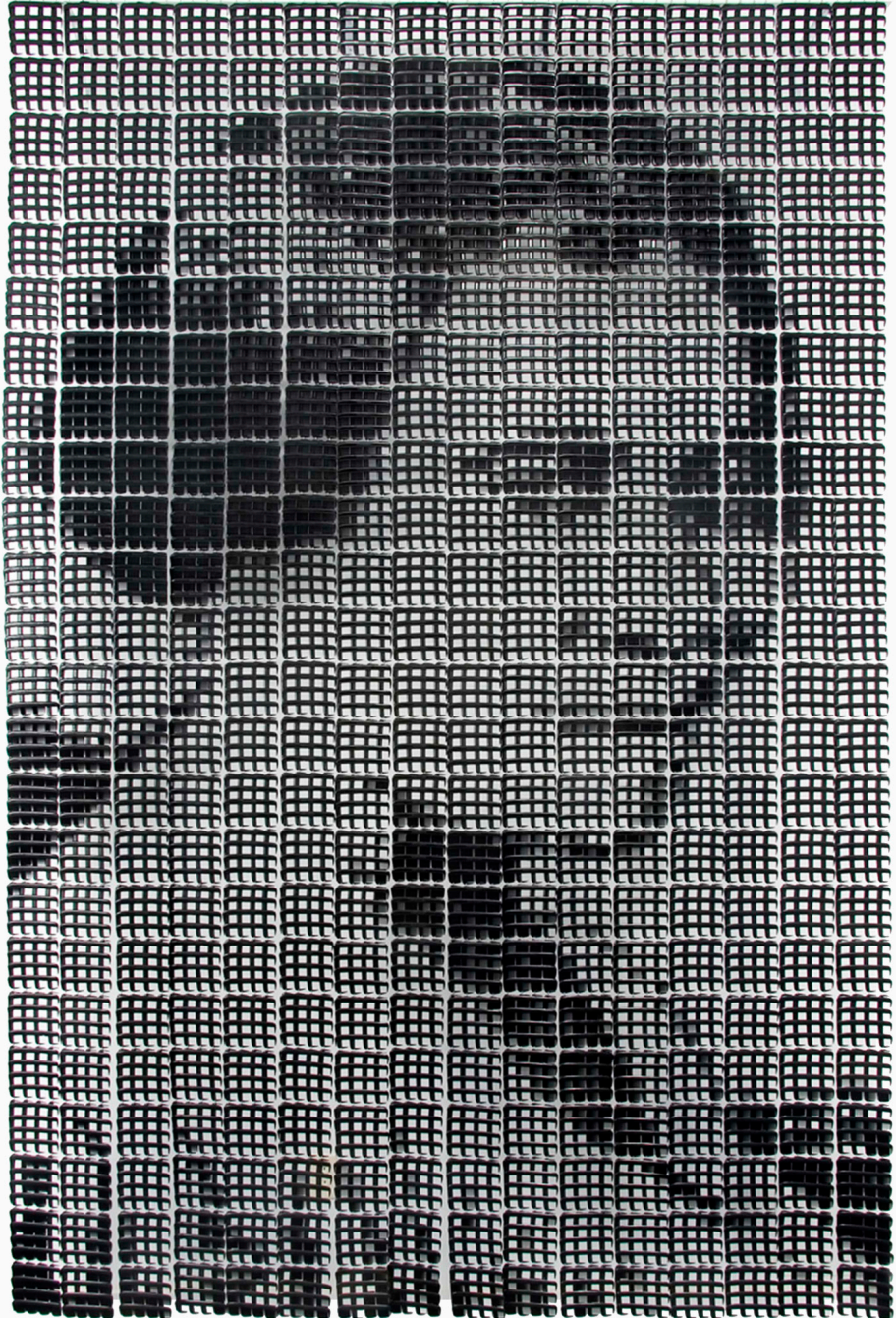
Among the works that reflects Clark's more personal connections to hair is *Iterations*, a sculptural installation that consists of 1,025 disposable pocket combs arrayed directly on the floor in the shape of a fan (or arguably, in the shape of an Afro). A single comb placed perpendicular to the wall multiplies and radiates into a dense thicket of combs. With this work, Clark has created, in effect, a sculptural family tree. The combs cumulatively represent the generations of her mother's side of the family, a family that she is able to trace back ten generations due to her Scottish/Caribbean ancestry. While paying homage to her father and this part of her heritage, *Iterations* simultaneously signals an absence, the fact that she would never be able to render as full a sculptural equivalent for her African heritage on both sides of her Caribbean family. Within the African diaspora, slavery and the Middle Passage impede attempts to trace one's genealogy. Because slaves were considered property, rather than people, often the only records that exist are bills of sale, typically listing only a person's age and gender, rather than their name. Although a sculptural family tree is arguably as personal as a work of art can get, ultimately *Iterations* addresses larger questions surrounding our abilities (or inabilities) to identify, map, and untangle our own histories.

Madam CJ Walker (large)

Combs

132" x 96" x 12"

2006



Although disposable hair combs are an inexpensive material, Clark has harnessed them to powerful symbolic effect in many of her works. As she recently explained her relationship to much of her source material: “I am instinctively drawn to objects that connect to my personal narrative as a point of a departure: a comb, a piece of cloth, a penny, or hair. I wonder how each comes to have meaning collectively. The object’s ability to act as a rhizome, the multiple ways it can be discovered or read, draws me in.”ⁱⁱⁱ Clark’s formidable eight-foot-tall portrait of *Madam C.J. Walker (large)* (2006) is composed entirely of black, plastic hair combs. Born shortly after the end of slavery, Madam Walker is said to be the nation’s first self-made female millionaire. She earned her fortune and fame through a burgeoning beauty empire she built, best known for its hair-care products. As a business-woman, she employed thousands of African American women (“beauty agents,” as she called them) who would have otherwise been relegated to low-paying jobs. She flourished as an entrepreneur despite the odds, before Women’s Suffrage and long before the Civil Rights Movement. As she described her life: “I am a woman from the cotton fields of the South. I was promoted to the washtub. I was promoted to the kitchen. I promoted myself to the business of hair...on my own ground.”^{iv}

In addition to her sharp business acumen, Walker was also deeply committed to philanthropy and political activism.^v Walker’s legacy compelled Clark to make this portrait. As Clark explains, “I used fine-toothed pocket combs to assemble this image of Walker, based on a photo taken toward the end of her life. Combs speak to Walker’s career as a pioneer of hair care. I also used them because they capture our national legacy of hair culture, and the gender and race politics of hair. As disposable objects, they parallel the low social status of African American women born in the late 1800s. But together, the thousands of combs become a monumental tapestry, signifying Walker’s magnitude and success despite her humble beginnings.”^{vii} Clark harnesses the culture and politics of hair to reveal the restless, ever-shifting signification of hair and the ways it historically has been connected to bodies both disenfranchised and empowered.

Veronica Roberts is curator of modern and contemporary art at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin.

ⁱ Lowery Stokes Sims, “The Currency of Craft,” *Fiberarts*, Sept/Oct. 2009: 41.

ⁱⁱ Sonya Clark, lecture, University of Texas at Austin, October 31, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sonya Clark, artist statement, *Converge*. McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, N.C., ex cat., January 27-March 24, 2012, 17.

^{iv} Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker*. New York: Scribner, 2001.

^v Although Booker T. Washington and several other prominent male African-American public figures initially snubbed her, in 1913, Washington introduced her at the National Negro Business League Convention: “I now take pleasure in introducing to the convention one of the most progressive and successful business women of our race—Madam C.J. Walker, of Indianapolis, Indiana.”

^{vi} The sculpture is based on the most famous portrait of Walker taken in 1912 by African American photographer Addison Scurlock. In 1998, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp bearing the image.

^{vii} Sonya Clark, correspondence with author, 2012.

Iterations

Combs

120" x 60" x 96"

2008



Iterations (detail)



Albers Interaction Series

Combs, Thread

5 1/2" x 4 1/2" x 1/2" (each) (14 total)

2013





Constellation

Installation with hair and pins

Dimensions variable

2012

Below:

Constellation (details)



White Noise

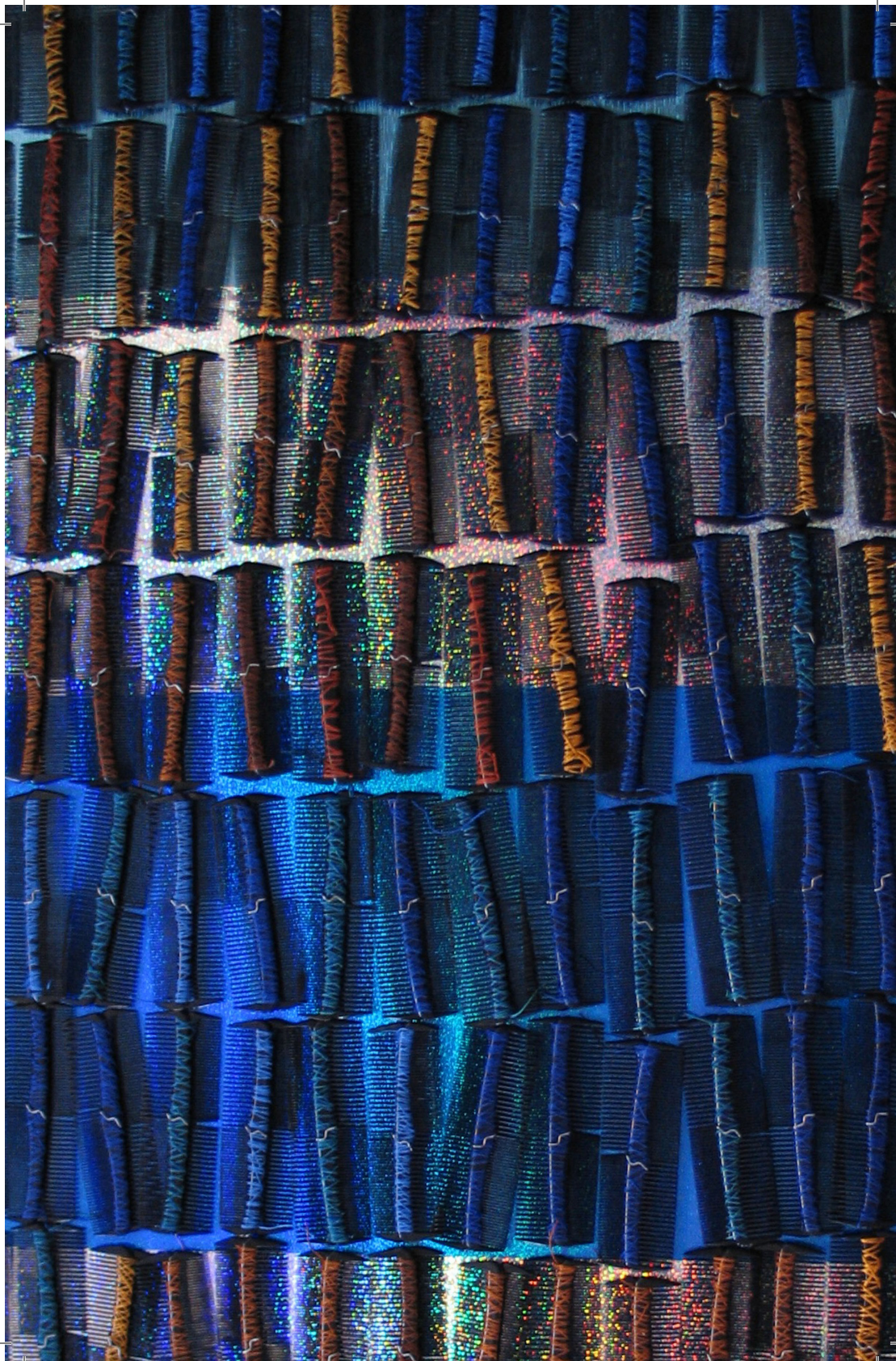
(pictured: #4 of 14 part series)

Folded paper

36" x 26" each

2009 - 2013







WHERE INNOVATION IS TRADITION

Fine Art Gallery · George Mason University · 4400 University Drive
Fairfax, VA 22030 · Phone: 703-993-8950 · soa.gmu.edu/gallery