

Art

At Georgetown University, artist Kara Walker turns in a new direction

Known for her antebellum-themed cutouts, Walker shows off her protean range and righteousness in two concurrent gallery shows

October 4, 2023 More than **1 year ago**



Review by [Kriston Capps](#)

Kara Walker is her generation's Andy Warhol.

It starts with materials: Where Warhol elevated the silk-screen to the status of fine art, Walker, 53, has salvaged the paper silhouette from antique media. Warhol held up a mirror to a culture of mass consumption; Walker explores a visual vocabulary rooted in social reckoning. He wreathed himself in celebrity. She summons poetic justice. Warhol lived at the bleeding edge of the present moment. Walker loops from the past to the future.

The figures in her antebellum-themed cutouts often resemble characters from children's tales from a storybook American South. But the knowledge of a dark history runs deep beneath the surface of her deceptively innocent silhouettes. There's nothing more Warholian than a superficial gloss that disguises great depths of meaning.

Yet drawings by Walker on view in Washington show little of her (or Warhol's) playfulness. At Georgetown University, Walker is giving us Goya: rich, unyielding depictions of pain and resistance.

At a glance, the watercolor paintings and drawings that make up "Back of Hand" at Georgetown's de la Cruz Gallery — one of two Walker shows concurrently on view at the school — look so little like Walker's storybook silhouettes that they could be the work of a different artist altogether. Organized by Katie Geha for the [Athenaeum](#), the gallery at the University of Georgia, the show comprises several large drawings in muted colors as well as a group of smaller, brightly colored watercolors hung salon style. They were all made during the same pandemic time span, but they cover a range of emotions.

“Tar Pit” (2021) reveals a forest scene, composed with barely-there gestures of graphite, watercolor, gouache and sumi-e ink. Within the scene, a standing figure entreats a seated woman, who is Black and wears a dress and head wrap. The antebellum garb is an unmistakable Walker signature, but the scene is expressive and foreboding — not the archly comic and subversive work for which the artist is best known. Both figures in the forest hover above the lip of a void, the titular tar pit; it could be a painting of Virgil and Dante on the verge of their descent into hell.

Walker has always invested her work with a haunted sense of history, using irony and anachronism to mine the historical trauma of white supremacy in the American South. For these watercolors, she has taken off the smiling mask of the comedian, painting with rich expressionism instead of her typical allegorical remove. Walker’s watercolors are moving: “Hardly Needs to Lift a Finger” (2021) shows figures who might be children climbing on another who might be their father, their faces obscured and abstracted. The face of one of the smaller figures is dominated by a pair of oversize lips, a use of Black stereotypes that is common in Walker’s work; here, this child’s depiction seems vulgar yet also, somehow, tender.

Even in these rawer pieces, Walker is still working with history. Both her brushstroke and figures resemble the caricatures of Honoré Daumier, a political cartoonist who skewered the bourgeoisie in 19th-century France. But the mood in these works is much darker. A large ink drawing called “First Effort” (2022) reveals two childlike figures standing over the figure of a Black girl or woman whose body lies in an open pit. The setting is placeless, a void within a void; from afar, Walker’s composition reads like a grimacing skull.

This funeral picture looks like something Goya might have painted late in life, after the artist, wary of madness, retreated from court duties to a farmhouse outside Madrid to produce his so-called Black Paintings. Walker’s watercolors have the tenor of Goya’s depiction of “Judith and Holofernes” (1819-1823) or the famous “Saturn Devouring His Son” (1819-1823): hopes and horrors recalled from a dream, conveyed with mythic proportion. For “Untitled” (2020), Walker conjures a placeless space in which she has drawn and rubbed away several words, including “beauty” (or is it “cruelty”?). The word “clean” is obscured but still visible. The only word that is plainly legible is “future.”

“Back of Hand” gives the sense of an artist pushed from the controlled remove of social caricature to a disorienting realm of expressive rage. Two oversize paintings convey cabin fever: Both “The Ballad of How We Got Here” (2021) and “Feast of Famine” (2021) are covered in tightly drawn text. Sometimes funny, sometimes righteous, the artist’s chaotic diatribes on history, politics and race flow like abstract gestures over paper. A series of asides about the great painter Bill Traylor, who was an untrained Alabama sharecropper, make these pieces read like studio diaries.

If Walker’s watercolors from this current era reveal an artist giving in to despair, who would blame her? Not only did the pandemic totally upend daily life, but episodes of police brutality sparked a social justice movement in 2020 so explosive that Walker’s work — ever archivally minded yet always far-reaching and prescient — seemed finally of the moment. How did she respond? She responded by drawing.

A second project, on view at Georgetown's Spagnuolo Gallery, finds Walker returning to familiar form with a new medium. "Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies" (2021) is a video short made with cutouts that the artist animates by hand, like shadow puppets. The piece makes visual references to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the lynching of James Byrd Jr. in 1998, tying these episodes to the Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021, through "The Turner Diaries" — a conspiratorial novel beloved by perpetrators of each of these acts of violence. Throughout Walker's film, fantastical images of centaurs and other creatures (and a lilting score by the Minneapolis artist Lady Midnight) give "Prince McVeigh" the feel of a myth meant for children, told from the wrong side of history.

The evolution of her drawings just goes to show how protean Walker's work can be. With her range, her register, her righteousness, she's a Warhol for our times.

If you go

Kara Walker: Back of Hand

Georgetown University, Maria and Alberto de la Cruz Gallery, 3535 Prospect St. NW.
delacruzgallery.org.

Kara Walker: Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies

Georgetown University, Lucille M and Richard F.X. Spagnuolo Gallery, 1221 36th St. NW.
delacruzgallery.org/spagnuolo.

Dates: Both shows on view through Dec. 3.

Admission: Free. Open Wednesday-Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m.
