
Through her art, Kara Walker has placed herself at the controversial intersection of art, racism, pop culture, and stereotype. It is difficult, if not impossible, to view her graphic work and not experience a strong reaction. Her imagery, often in the form of silhouettes, carries messages that provoke, confound, and offend. The intensity of her vision challenges, and perhaps, changes one’s perceptions and opinions.

This catalog, published in conjunction with an exhibit of the same title, is beautifully produced and divided into six parts: Essays, Visual Essay, Artworks, Lexicon, Thesis, and Epilogue. While the artwork is the true focal point of the catalog, its five essays are thought-provoking and they offer insight to the artist’s work and its socio-cultural commentary on mainstream American culture.

The lead-off essay by exhibit curator, Vergne, “The Black Saint Is the Sinner Lady,” speaks to the relationship of Walker’s work to other artistic renderings of African-Americans and contextualizes the humor of Walker’s work within contemporary pop culture. Other essays include; “Confessions of an Academic Pornographer” by Sander L. Gilman; “Triangular-Trade: Coloring, Remarkings, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker” by Kevin Young; “Primitivism in the Works of an Emancipated Negress” by Thomas McEvilley; and “Spooked” by Robert Storr. The Visual Essays and Artworks sections present a chronological overview of Walker’s oeuvre, with concentration on her iconic silhouettes. Walker has said, “The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that’s also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as linked.” These silhouettes reflect the present and past history of the United States and Walker dares us to face the racism and misogyny in our culture.

This is a highly recommended purchase for academic, museum, and large public libraries that support programs, in contemporary art, sociology, gender studies, and cultural studies. The catalog’s extensive bibliography and selected exhibition history add to its research value. Librarians may also wish to consider purchasing Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker (Durham. NC: Duke University Press, 2004), for additional information on the artist and her work.

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