“Kara Walker’s institutional critique of the museum and Hollywood in *Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*

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Prior to the 1980’s, most cultural institutions and museums were considered a predominantly white space in terms of the artists as well as the audience. African American and other minority artists began overturning Eurocentric ideas on art in their artwork. Artists became attuned to questions of identity. Kara Walker, an artist on the rise at this time, took up the subject of slaves’ struggles in pre-Civil War America. Her troubling silhouettes depict violent and overly sexualized fragmented narratives of deep south slaves in antebellum America. Walker pastes her black silhouette figures directly onto white museum walls. Her silhouettes do not exist outside of these institutional spaces, making them site-specific to the museum and more specifically the white museum walls. While the installations blatantly address the derogatory stereotypes of black slaves, there appears to be a deeper intention to Walker’s silhouettes. Her silhouette installations wage an institutional critique on the museum as a “white cube” in terms of its racial exclusions. The white wall in her pieces acts as a synecdoche for the museum as a whole and its tendency to be a predominantly white space. Her murals convey a dialogue that links racial issues of the past and racial issues of the present to express the institutional critique on the museum space as a primarily white space.

Walker’s first silhouette mural was Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart (Figure 1) at The Drawing Center in 1994. Walker wanted to create an artwork influenced by her experience of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind. The broad cultural popularity and influence of the film show a continuation on some level of white-supremacist values in popular culture. Walker completely wreaks havoc on that mythologized society by releasing her derogatory, disturbing,

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overly sexualized silhouettes onto the film’s narrative. Walker draws a parallel between popular culture and the museum culture. The combination of mural being directly on the museum wall and the recognizable reference in her title to the film and book is how she connects the two cultures. Walker creates this connection because both of these institutions maintain a predominantly white perspective that defines blacks in stereotypical terms. Popular culture and museum culture also both reflect American views and influence society’s beliefs. She seems to want to identify their faults and open the floor for people to question and eventually change how these aspects of American culture. By placing her stereotyped silhouettes in her new narrative of Gone with the Wind, she confronts the distortions and values of the story that remain in our culture. Similarly, her mural challenges the ‘white’ values of museums that have excluded African American artists and audiences as being part of their sphere. Thus, Walker’s mural is a critique on the institutions of Hollywood and the museum. By imposing her troubling silhouettes and fragmented narrative in Gone directly on the white space of the museum, Walker’s installation exposes as well as undermines the white genteel narrative of the antebellum south in Hollywood’s Gone with the Wind and the deeply rooted racial issues in American museums.

Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart was a fifty-foot long installation from floor to ceiling of black paper silhouette cutouts pasted directly onto the white wall. The narrative places the figures between two mossy trees that evoke the setting of the Old South. Walker creates not only the historical and geographically setting of the film but also a psychological landscape of an antebellum plantation, where the silhouettes of masters and slaves personify the repressed prejudices and cravings that contemporary Americans normally refuse to acknowledge.3 The far

left depicts what one at first assumes is the romance from the title. A southern belle in a hoop skirt and a gentleman suited for battle lean towards each other in what is about to be a farewell kiss. This normal exchange is interrupted though by the extra pair of legs sticking out from underneath the woman’s skirt. A hoop skirt in Walker’s art can be seen as a symbol of morality and the fashion of southern women before the Civil War. In *Gone*, the southern belle’s hoop skirt is lifted exposing another set of legs and also a series of lustful events throughout the rest of the mural.⁴ Walker seems to be invoking the character Scarlett from the story, but the other pair of legs presents a darker sexual side not in the film.

Moving rightward, a young black boy tightly grips the neck of a limp duck. He seems to be having an ambiguous exchange with the floating black woman in the water, who has a disproportionate, boat-like body. Floating in the water behind her is a double-faced profile head of a white man. Walker incorporates water with the floating head and the disproportioned slave woman. This can be interpreted as a reference to the transatlantic journey that brought Africans to America.⁵ Therefore, the female figure embodies the boat metaphorically and physically. Her stretched out lower half is shaped like a ship. The head next to her appears to be the profile of a white man, which represents the white man taking Africans and leading the boat across the water. The interaction between the woman and the child holding the dead duck still remains unclear. However, their exchange forms an association between brutal violence, the act of the boy strangling a dead bird, and the transatlantic journey, the boat-shaped female slave led by the severed white man’s head. On the cliff of land following the water, a young white boy gestures upward while having his penis sucked by a young black figure. In the sky, a boy floats higher by his erect genitals. These two aspects of the narrative emphasize the hyper-sexualized and

disturbing fantasies Walker strives to attack in her exaggerated stereotypes. By blatantly embellishing the imagery, Walker directly engages in the issue of wrongful stereotypes, forcing the viewer to see it through her eyes.

Moving further along in the narrative, a lively black woman births two babies by simply lifting her leg and popping them out. This could be in reference to Prissy in the film, who was a house slave that didn’t actually know how to birth babies despite saying she did. The babies tumble out of the woman. One even lands on his head showing her carelessness or stupidity. The woman also is the only slave wearing shoes. This could symbolize the power dynamics between masters and slaves as submissive property to her master. It then raises the question of the sexual relationship between the female slave and white master, and who’s the father of those babies. Next to the birthing woman, a white gentleman hides under the skirts of a black house slave holding a broom. This last set of figures seems to portray the dusky thighs of a young Negress that the title refers to. The romance here is a purely sexual encounter though. Thus, the mural is framed by two different versions of ‘romance’ with sexual escapades and fantasies stuck in the middle.

Walker’s fascination with Gone with the Wind came from the grotesque yet thrillingly rich and titillating storyline. Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind and the film adaptation depict an agricultural based society of the South during the Civil War from the perspective of a privileged white southern belle that distorts the true reality of the American South for slaves. The story follows a young, strong minded, white southern belle Scarlett O’Hara on her journey of love, adventure, and tragedy centered on events prior to, during, and after the American Civil War.

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Walker found herself wanting “to be the heroine yet wanting to kill the heroine”. She brings this underlying turmoil to her silhouette mural. The central focus of the story is not on slaves. However, they do appear throughout the story because as a southern woman from a plantation home, Scarlett, had them around her often. The issues in the novel and film are how the depiction of slavery is decidedly naive and slaves are depicted as stupid and childlike. The film shows slaves as well-treated, blindly happy people loyal to their compassionate masters. Big Sam only leaves Tara, the plantation, when ordered to and even risks his life to save Scarlett in a later scene. In the film, the slaves are portrayed as regular employees who seem part of the family. Big Sam’s grammar is chopped down to an extremely simple level and the house slave Prissy acts stupid, squeamish and hysterical over everything. Walker takes these already existing negative stereotypes, reproduces them, and makes them visible as derogatory stereotypes through her additional exaggeration.

In *Gone*, Walker challenges the film’s depiction of slavery and history. She does this by deconstructing the idea of a narrative. The installation cannot be read from left to right or vice versa. It is a collection of discrete vignettes. Walker’s *Gone* pretends to follow the linearity of a narrative when in fact the characters and occurrences are broken. This undermines its ability to represent a common history. Therefore, *Gone* draws attention to the inherent problem of the film’s historical fiction. The two create a conflicting outcome, which Walker amplifies rather than mends. Through undermining the historical fiction of the film, Walker seems to critique Hollywood as an institution for its depiction of slavery as a benign institution. This could be

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taken one step further in that she addresses the issue of slavery depiction in popular culture as a whole. The issue being it’s falsification of the reality of slaves’ situations and maintaining that dominant white perspective that shifts one’s understanding of slavery and the characterization of black people, which then continues to have resonances in American culture today.

The focus of Walker’s fragmented narrative is the fictional experiences of slaves because the silhouettes represent how white people perceived black people in the antebellum south. The silhouettes embody the fantasy of black people being violent and hyper sexualized. While exaggerated and hypersexual, the central narrative is still the slaves. The choppy, fragmented sections seem to mirror the chopped down speech of Big Sam in the film. The incomplete story also establishes the idea that the full narratives of the violence and horror the slaves endured often went untold in a white world. Pieces would be missing. The black silhouettes represent how white people perceived black people in the antebellum south, and thus, how black people were defined. The white background is the white world that slaves lived in and the world that created the stereotypes Walker portrays in her satirical fantasy. The southern white stereotypes and values control the story because it’s not about how blacks viewed themselves but how whites perceived black people. The same way the white wall overwhelming encompasses more space than the black silhouettes. This forces the viewer to consider the implications of Walker placing these murals in a historically predominant white space. Her art poses the question about the dialogue she’s trying to create between the viewer, her art, and the museum.

Her figures portray black people as primitive. In Gone, the silhouettes do not engage in behavior of the noble savage, but rather animalistic behavior.\(^{11}\) The mural enacts the kind of primitivism historically attributed to African American art. The woman birthing babies lacks humanity by simply letting her babies drop to the ground carelessly. The black boy floating by

\(^{11}\) Walker, My Complement, 55.
his erect penis seems controlled by his sexual nature. The little boy or girl holding the dead duck appears has hair that seems to act as little horns as well giving him animal-like qualities. The two romantic encounters that frame the narrative juxtapose each other. The encounter between the two white individuals is civilized and controlled despite the extra legs sticking out from under her hoop skirt. The exchange between the black woman and white master is all about the physical encounter lacking any true romantic ideas. All these aspects and the other sexual escapades characterize African Americans in Eurocolonial concepts of primitivism that Walker exaggerates and fills with heavy sarcasm.\textsuperscript{12}

If the silhouettes represent white perceptions of the enslaved and the primitivism that has often been associated with African and African American art, the walls of the museum offer a critique of this point of view. The function of the white wall in Gone adds to the questioning and critiquing of the museum as a white space. The museum wall physically acts as Walker’s canvas. She pastes her larger than life silhouette narrative directly against the white wall. The sheer size of the mural against the white wall lends itself to the avoidance of the subject. The viewer is unable to look at the narrative directly, yet there it is staring the viewer in the face on the white wall.\textsuperscript{13} The mural explores a story of the raw intersection of race, gender, and sexuality on a scale that tries to overwhelm the viewer rather than entertain.\textsuperscript{14} Her silhouettes do not come to life without the wall. The white background acts as the white racial context in which Gone’s racial stereotypes originated. She draws on the idea of how the stereotypes came from white peoples’ beliefs. Walker is placing them back in the context in which they were created by pasting the black silhouettes against a white background. This makes her black silhouettes and

\textsuperscript{12} Walker, \textit{My Complement}, 55.


\textsuperscript{14} Walker, \textit{Narratives}, 93.
the white museum wall mutually contingent in this mural. The wall then acts as a synecdoche for the museum as whole. The museum uses the strategy of stripping all distracting ornamentation and having immaculately white walls for their settings. This is intended to promote intense concentration on that artwork alone, away from its outside context. Therefore, the white wall of the museum acts as a neutral setting. The same way a museum strives to neutralize its atmosphere. However, Walker shows how the wall was never neutral by making it part of her art and giving it a racial, and therefore, political context. She’s merely emphasizing how the museum as a whole cannot act completely neutral and has rooted racial issues that still permeate the museum today.

The primitive portrayals of her silhouettes add to the critique her mural makes on the museum as a predominantly white space. By placing her primitive black silhouettes directly against the white museum wall, she demonstrates that ‘blackness’ is only visible in and against the ‘whitening’ of the background. The same way that primitive is only visible when a culture, specifically white Western culture, decides another culture is inferior to itself. Outside of that white context, the other culture is no longer classified as primitive. Primitivism would not exist. Thus, Walker is signifying that the museum’s historical classification of African American art as primitive occurs because of it being a white institution with white supremacy values. She’s calling attention to the issues by questioning the museum’s classification of African Americans and their art. The silhouettes are reductions, and racial stereotypes are also actual reductions of real people. Therefore, Walker’s material practice also correlates to the museum’s lessening of African American art. Gone’s primitive silhouettes on the white museum wall show how the past

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16 Walker, Narratives, 96.
has had inescapable consequences for the content and formation of the present-day selves especially in the museum.

Therefore, Walker’s mural *Gone* stages an institutional critique on the museum as well as the film. The museum and Hollywood share a commonality of being predominantly white. Both institutions play a significant role in American culture, often influencing how society perceives the world or reflecting society’s views. She draws a parallel between them by identifying their perpetuation of stereotypes. Walker uses a comparable approach of site-specific art with her silhouettes. Her chosen site is museums. While her sites are on a broader scale than just slave sites, she is taking up a similar stance of critiquing the limitations of the white cube of the museum that previous artists did. After exploring the relationship between race and museums in the past few decades, Walker’s mural can be viewed as more than commentary on racial identity in the past.17 *Gone* addresses the lack of recognition of African Americans within institutional and spatial frames by critiquing the museum space as well as the film now embedded in our popular culture. *Gone* and her other murals are only ever pasted directly on the museum wall. She doesn’t make her own artificial white background. By using the white wall as part of her mural, she’s placing this idea of ‘blackness’ right on it, thus making it quite literally part of the museum. She’s utilizing the museum practice of the immaculate white walls as her critical medium, but in terms of race because of how it functions in her murals.

Initially, Walker’s murals seem to form an allusion simply about the past events of slavery and then attack them through her satirical imagery. However, after further observation, there seems to be something bigger at play in relation to the history of African Americans’ presence, or lack of, in museums. In the last few decades, museums have been under scrutiny for their treatment of African American art and culture. Art historians such as Carol Duncan and

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17 *Art21, Season 2.*
Douglas Crimp have explored the politics of the museum. They are not accusing the museums of being duplicitous but rather exploring how politics play a role in the museum. They link it to the imperialistic history of European and American world domination since its European creation. The modern museum of the 18th century then expressed the dominance of class, meaning the knowledge in museums could not be neutral in an elitist environment.\(^{18}\) The Eurocentric ideas about art often still permeate museums today. These values classified most African American and other minority art as primitive, inferior, or not significant enough for museum spaces.

The modern museum has often been defined as the white cube, referring to its immaculately white walls.\(^{19}\) However, others, even Walker, seem to interpret this terminology as a reference to race. The art museum tends be a predominantly white sphere in the art, the artists, the museum staff, and even the audience. Prior to 1967, fewer than a dozen museum exhibitions had featured art by African American artists. When African American art was shown, it was often segregated from the rest of the museum’s art. In the 1960’s and 70’s, emerging artists began to address the relationship between race and museums as well as in our culture as a whole. These artists focused on the tension between art based on racial identification and the desire to break out of the race-based constraints.\(^{20}\) African American art began making progress in the late twentieth century, but there were still many issues like the infamous exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. This exhibition did not acknowledge modern European artists’ gratitude to African and other indigenous arts for their own artwork. The main issue of the exhibit was that the African and indigenous arts were presented as primitive rather than as sophisticated forms in their own right. Art was described as the

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\(^{19}\) Duncan, 110.

\(^{20}\) Cahan.
establishment of white European and American artists. African Americans were ignored as makers of such objects displayed and as modern artists. Many negatively critiqued this exhibition. One critic Rasheed Araeen stated that “those who have been seen as ‘primitives’ are in fact part of today’s society and to ignore their actual position in this respect is to indulge again in imperialist fantasies”.  

These institutional spaces offer up values on social, sexual, and political identity through experience. Art museums provide information on our culture to us. Museums are not the neutral space they may claim and strive to be. They have limitations. They are controlled. To control a museum means to control the representation of a community and its ideals. This thus gives museums the power to define the standing of individuals within that community. The question is then who has that power to define its identity. It is not the public. Art museums are top-down institutions with the public often having little voice in its establishment. It is not yet a true public space that supports genuine discussion. Museums seem to be spaces of exclusions and refinements. Other artists such as Michael Asher and Andrea Fraser were also using institutional critique on museums, but not in relation to race. These artists were using museums’ own strategies against themselves not to condone it but to question it. Some museums have a new openness and institutional endorsement towards multiculturalism compared to the movements in

21 Cahan.
22 Duncan, 3-8.
23 Carrier, 211-212.
the 60’s and 70’s. Museums have made progress in their representation of those constituencies, but there’s still more to engage in in order to push further. Walker’s Gone engages in the racial site-specificity and critique that the African American artists use as well as the critically reflexive concepts. Walker forms her critique through the content of the silhouettes.

In addition to Walker’s intention to overcome African American oppression and classification in museums, Walker uses Gone for her personal and professional investment of understanding where she fits into the art historical canon, which ties into her institutional critique of the museum space as not being politically neutral. Walker explains that the large scale of her silhouettes had to do with her love of history painting in the grand tradition. She found the process of history painting of making a stage, placing characters on that stage, and giving them a freeze-frame moment full of pain and blood and drama relevant to her silhouettes. Traditionally, history painting was a European male dominant artistic genre. Rarely did women engage in this genre, especially not African American women. By making Gone the grand scale of a history painting, Walker challenges the traditional artistic hierarchy of genres in terms of race and gender.

For Walker, Gone explores what it is to be an African American female artist. She hopes to define her identity. She takes the material of black paper, a practice originally with no artistic authorship, and raises her mural to the level of traditional high art in composing its large scale based on history painting. The mural also incorporates race in how it uses the white wall. She quite literally pastes her black figures and herself as the artist against the white wall.

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28 Sollins, 60.
29 Walker, Narratives, 93.
museum wall, which signifies her as an African American artist placing herself in the same genre as the historical white male. She’s thus redefining her art of an African American woman as part of the high art in a museum. High art is socially marginal compared to mass art and culture. It reaches a narrower, specific audience within the museum space. It is that audience, a predominantly white group or of higher class, and that space, the museum, that Walker chooses to overwhelm with her immense, large-scale mural Gone. Therefore, Gone is site-specific to the museum, its values and its audience.

In conclusion, Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart reveals and questions the deeply rooted racial issues in American institutions and popular culture by placing primitive, troubling racial stereotypes on the white space of the museum. Walker uses the popular culture story of Gone with the Wind in her narrative to evoke a disturbing problem of representing a past that includes slavery in a critical present of ‘post-blackness’ that faces similar prejudices still. Her artwork refers to the struggles African American artists have faced in the museum world. The primitive, derogatory, large-scale silhouettes of Gone against the white museum wall present an institutional critique of the museum as an exclusive white sphere. These formal aspects of her mural work together as well to critique how the white space affects her as an African American female artist. Walker is not only critiquing the museum, but also incorporating herself into the predominantly white world of the museum.

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30 Carrier, 214.
31 Walker, Narratives, 142.
Bibliography


Figure 1. Kara Walker, *Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War As it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994. Paper.