

'Sonja Clark: We Are Each Other'

Frances DeVuono

Cranbrook Art Museum, Metro Detroit, 17 June – 24 September, 2023; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, 27 October 2023 – 18 February 2024; Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), New York, 23 March – 22 September 2024



Sonya Clark, *The Hair Craft Project: Hairstyles on Canvas*, 2014, silk threads, beads, shells and yarn on canvas, courtesy of the artist

Throughout the modern era there has been an uneasy relationship between what was deemed craft and what was called fine art. The art world goes back and forth. At the height of the colonial period and western expansion, all kinds of crafts were collected and placed in museums – usually unattributed to single artists. An example of the art world's varied view of craft can be seen in 1936 on the heels of the Arts and Craft Movement, when the California College of Arts and Crafts proudly chose to differentiate itself from the nearby San Francisco Art Institute by

placing 'craft' firmly in its name. Yet by 2003, as the school expanded, with equal deliberation, it dropped the term, changing its name to the California College of the Arts (CAA). Yet, around that same time, a group of Black women quilters from rural Gee's Bend in Alabama had their first museum exhibition, starting a trajectory of demand for their quilts in museums and galleries across the country. What makes for this vacillation?

Viewing 'Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other', one might conclude that the art world's ambivalent attitude towards craft is not only because much of it is associated with women's work (which is certainly not always the case), but because craft's very objects – its weavings, cups, quilts, chairs – signal community connections and needs. As that is antithetical to the idea of the individual in bourgeois art, craft has tended to receive select and measured acceptance. But in this exhibition, Sonya Clark affirms craft's intrinsic relationship to community and she privileges the people who make it. With an MFA in Fiber from Cranbrook Academy of Art, she deliberately links material objects to people, their necessities and their histories. The very title itself, 'We Are Each Other', is taken from a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks that reminds us 'we are each other's harvest... business ...magnitude and bond'.¹

'Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other', curated by the High Museum in Atlanta, the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York, and the Cranbrook Art Museum in Metro Detroit, is a critical rumination on the American history of racism and erasure, a celebration of African American culture, and a teaching opportunity seen through crafted objects and the people who make and use them. The exhibition is seductive; it is a wide mix of weavings, videos, colour photographs, sculptures and installations, large and small, alternately beautiful, odd and familiar.² As an artist, Clark takes deep cultural dives, picking apart certain areas of her country by creating several dominant themes: hope, demonstrated by a wall of a thousand amulets; hair, with its attendant connection to Black beauty and style (as well as discrimination); reading, as a way of learning and sharing; and US history as a story incompletely told.

The exhibition highlights how Clark's method of working so often involves others. The early, but ongoing, *Beaded Prayer Project*, begun in 1998, lines two walls, filled with a thousand amulets. Made in small groups akin to quilting circles, participants from all over the world have written down words of hope and wrapped them in fabric and beads. But in addition, 'We Are Each Other' demonstrates how an artist can wrestle with ideas over time to let them grow.

In one of her earliest pieces, *Gele Kente Flag* (1995), the artist designed and wove a head wrap using patterns both from the USA flag and Ghanaian Kente cloth. The original weaving is displayed in a tasteful, museal frame while a video documents Clark's interactions with several African American women who are photographed wearing the weaving. At both the High

¹ 'Paul Robeson' by Gwendolyn Brooks, in *Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other*, exhibition catalogue, Elissa Auther, Laura Mott and Monica Obniski, eds, Cranbrook Art Museum, Metro Detroit, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Museum of Art and Design, New York, 2023, p 11

² Atlanta's High Museum was able to dedicate 1,000 square feet on a single floor to the exhibition, while the much smaller Museum of Art and Design in New York had to use two floors

Museum in Atlanta and MAD in New York, one is confronted with a strikingly giant portrait of Madam C J Walker, a legendary African American entrepreneur and philanthropist who developed hair care products, salons and beauty schools. Completed in 2008, her image is woven entirely out of hundreds of small, cheap, thin black combs.



Sonya Clark: 'We Are Each Other', installation view, Museum of Arts and Design, New York (23 March – 22 September 2024), photo by Jenna Bascom, courtesy the Museum of Arts and Design

Hair, specifically Black hair, is an idea Clark explores in depth. In 2013 the artist embarked on a collaboration with eleven hairstylists. She took their designs (she credits each of them in the wall text) and carefully rendered their work in yarn and silk on canvas, as one would render a beloved work of art. Artist and historian Leslie King-Hammond points out that Clark wants to demonstrate the labour intensity of the processes used in styling Black hair.³ *Hair Craft Project: Hairstylists With Sonya 2014*, is a salutation, consisting of a series of colour photographs where the stylists stand next to the artist with her back turned so that one can see her hair coiled, twisted and braided into their creations. (Significantly, in the United States, Black women's right to wear their hair in styles such as braids or locks at the workplace is still contested.)⁴ A few years later, in conjunction with the 2016 Miami Poetry Festival, Clark offered free haircuts to patrons of

³ Sonya Clark: *We Are Each Other*, exhibition catalogue, op cit, pp 69–70

⁴ There was a famous case in 1981 where an eleven-year employee, Renee Rogers, sued American Airlines for the right to wear braids. In a thinly veiled sexist and racist statement, American Airlines, at that time, insisted that Roger wear a bun. See "Title VII's Application of Grooming Policies and its Effect on Black Women's Hair in the Workplace: Rogers v. Am. Airlines, Inc., 527 F. Supp. 229 (S.D.N.Y. 1981), University of Missouri Libraries. <https://libraryguides.missouri.edu/c.php?g=593919&p=4124519> (accessed 28 April 2024). Since that time, eighteen states (so far) have passed the Crown Act (Creating A Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) which prohibits discrimination based on an individual's hair texture or hairstyle. It has been brought up in the Senate, but has not yet passed on the national level; see www.thecrownact.com (accessed 28 April 2024).

several Black barber shops if they would read aloud a poem by Calvin C Henton. And, in what she describes as ‘a challenge to the dominance of the Latin alphabet’,⁵ Clark worked with font designer Bo Peng to turn her own curls into letters. Poet Laureate Rita Dove named this new font ‘Twist’. Clark further collaborated with Dove and seven other women poets transcribing their poems into Twist, each of which is framed and on display. Viewers are encouraged to call 1-877 OUR CURL (1-877-687-2875) to listen to the actual poems.



Sonya Clark, *The Hair Craft Project: Hairstylists with Sonya*, 2014, 11 colour photographs, courtesy of the artist

Clark’s approach, part educational, part community-affirming, is a thread throughout. *Solidarity Book Project* was begun during the COVID pandemic. As a professor at Amherst University, Clark invited her students to contribute books that moved them to action. The resulting piece is a curved and open shelf that reveals classic works by theorists such as Frantz Fanon, W E B DuBois and Noam Chomsky, as well as more popular books such as Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dime*, Anthony Doerr’s *All The Light We Cannot See*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, among many more. It becomes a witness to discussion – people sharing ideas on how to live. In a finishing touch of craft, the outer leaves of each book are laser-cut into a raised, clenched fist of solidarity.

In a more sobering series, Clark examines the history and meaning behind the Confederate flag today. As a symbol of white supremacy and division throughout the United States, this flag is stock paraphernalia at white nationalist rallies such as the 2017 White Nationalist March in

⁵ The artist mentions this in her introduction to the phone message at 1-877 OUR CURL (1-877-686-2875)



Sonya Clark, *Solidarity Book Project*, 2020–2021, books, wooden bookshelf, courtesy of the artist and Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts

Charlottesville,⁶ and more recently when Trump supporters and insurrectionists attacked the US Capitol in January 2021.⁷ The ubiquity of the flag's cultural presence is exemplified in everyday commerce with *Benjamin Moore Paint Color 2080–20 Confederate Red*. This work is a paint colour chip blown up to fill a large wall with its name and formula number printed below in a sans serif font – just as is seen in paint stores. *Unraveling* consists of a Confederate Flag that was half unwoven in an earlier performance, and next to it is *Unraveled: Persistence*, the same flag on a pole. This time it is completely – and laboriously – unwoven; its loose threads left prey to any changing winds.

In 2011, while working as a Research Fellow at the Smithsonian's National Museum of History in Washington DC, Clark came across a fragment of the dishtowel that Confederate General Robert E Lee used as a truce flag after losing the Civil War. Off-white in colour with a line of red trim, it is a surprisingly modest material object to signal the end of that war. Like her multi-faceted examination of hair, Clark works and reworks the ideas underlying this fragmented piece of fabric. She replicates it large, small and multiple, letting these material objects point to different implications of that war and what it still means today.

⁶ See Jenna Johnson and John Wagner, 'Trump condemns Charlottesville violence but doesn't single out white nationalists', *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2017 www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-condemns-charlottesville-violence-but-doesnt-single-out-white-nationalists/2017/08/12/933a86d6-7fa3-11e7-9d08-b79f191668ed_story.html

⁷ See Daniel Barnes, 'Man who carried a Confederate flag in the Capitol on Jan 6 is sentenced to 3 years', *NBC News*, 9 February 2023



Sonya Clark, *Unraveling*, performance, 2015, courtesy of the artist

Monumental is a loosely woven reproduction of the fragment. At 185 x 375 inches and spread out on a raised platform, it is a truce flag transformed into a scale to match its significance. There are many additional, smaller replications of the flag, some life-sized, some larger. *Monumental Cloth (Sutured)* (2017) appears to be a true-to-scale replica of the original, with two fragments of the cloth crudely tied together in a painful visualisation of the divisions still apparent in the United States today. There are also harness looms, where viewers can weave the truce flag and a series of school desks that have a laser-etched surface of the flag where viewers can make rubbings to take home.



Sonya Clark, *Monumental Cloth (Sutured)*, 2017, silk suture thread, handwoven and dyed linen, photo by Jenna Bascom, courtesy of the artist and Museum of Arts and Design, New York

While ‘We Are Each Other’ tackles complex social issues, it is as visceral as it is intellectual. *Finding Freedom* is a 1,500-square foot canopy made of cotton cloth that filled a separate room at the High Museum in Atlanta.⁸ Made by participants in workshops organised by the artist at various residencies, *Finding Freedom* is composed of multiple smaller panels sewn together. The piece was hung overhead in a darkened room to re-enact the starry nights that enabled African Americans to plot their course in fleeing slavery. Viewers were encouraged to use black-light flashlights to navigate the unlit room, an experience that was as disorienting as it was beautiful.

Clark is an educator in the best sense of the term. Her dual insistence on making us see objects, and at the same time recognise them as linked to actual people is her way of enlarging community. And, in the exhibition ‘We Are Each Other’, she generously includes us, the viewers, in that community.



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⁸ Due to space considerations, *Finding Freedom* was the one artwork (albeit a large one) absent from the Museum of Arts and Design in New York’s iteration of the exhibition