

INTERNATIONAL AWARD FOR PUBLIC ART

Artist : Kara Walker

Location : Brooklyn, New York

Year : 2014

Researcher : Jessica Fiala

Kara Walker's work has long been known to trigger discomfort and incite controversy; indeed, the very experience of unease is part of the strength of her work. Best known for her use of silhouettes, through black and white cut paper panoramas, animation, and shadows, she presents viewers with a blunt depiction of violence in the Antebellum South. Stereotypes, degradation, sexual violence, manipulation, and racial satire merge into tableaux that are visually striking, meticulously crafted, and deeply troubling. Walker's trenchant depictions also play at the edge of humor, using caricature, bodily functions, and sexuality to disturb and disrupt passive viewing.

A 2014 commission from Creative Time provided Walker with the opportunity to shift her process dramatically to create a large-scale public artwork to mark the closing of Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Factory. Constructed in 1856, the factory was an active player in the burgeoning sugar industry. Within a decade it was the largest sugar refinery in the world and by 1870 it was refining more than half of the sugar produced in the United States.¹ The seeming purity of bright white sugar stands in contrast to the violence of sugar production that traces a long history through slavery to harsh working conditions that continue today.²

Following a rigorous research and development process, as well as internal debates over how to respond to the massive space (5 stories high and over a football field long), Kara Walker created the sculpture, *A Subtlety*, fully titled: "A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant."

During the Middle Ages, when sugar was a particular luxury, diminutive subtleties molded to represent key persons and events were crafted for admiration and consumption by guests at lavish aristocratic banquets in England and France. Walker's subtlety stood 35 feet high, extended 75 feet long, and was constructed from a polystyrene core coated with 80,000 pounds of sugar. *A Subtlety* combined the figure of a sphinx with a caricatured face, reminiscent of a Mammy archetype with tied kerchief. The powerful figure dominated the space but was also sexualized by exposed breasts and vulva. One hand was held in a figa gesture—a symbol that can either convey good luck or serve as a crude gesture of insult. *A Subtlety* was joined by 15 attendants based on curio objects of young servant boys hauling baskets or bananas. Standing almost 5

¹ Thompson, Nato. "Curatorial Statement." Creative Time.

<http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/>

² Danticat, Edwidge. "The Price of Sugar." Creative Time. May 5, 2014.

<http://creativetimereports.org/2014/05/05/edwidge-danticat-the-price-of-sugar/>

feet tall and crafted in resin and candy, these attendants were designed to melt during the exhibition, with more stable basket-bearers containing remnants of earlier smashed candy compatriots.

As with Walker's previous works, the piece inspired controversy. Expected concerns over whitewashing slavery³ and a lack of context⁴ were here coupled with local opposition to the redevelopment itself⁵ and questions about the for-profit initiatives of nonprofit board members.⁶ The largest debates, however, arose as a result of the actions of visitors turning the exhibit into a stage for selfies, and the sexually explicit aspects of *A Subtlety* into the butt of internet jokes.⁷ The behavior provoked "We Are Here," a group/action that offered timelines, a space to note comments, and stickers with the phrase as a reminder of the presence of descendants of slaves as well an encouragement to get more people of color to attend the installation.⁸

The redevelopment is now underway, but *A Subtlety* remains in memory as both an homage to the neighborhood's past as well as a sugary web connecting the site to histories of slavery as well as tensions, violence, and privilege that linger today.

³ Silverman, Coral. "Does Kara Walker's 'A Subtlety' Sugarcoat a Bitter History?" May 21, 2014. Culture Crux. <http://www.culturecrux.com/does-kara-walkers-a-subtlety-sugarcoat-a-bitter-history/>

⁴ Mullarkey, Maureen. "Riddle of the Sphinx, Part I." June 3, 2014. <http://studiomatters.com/riddle-of-the-sphinx-part-i>

⁵ Yee, Vivian. "At Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Site, Waning Opposition to Prospect of Luxury Towers." New York Times. October 16, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/nyregion/at-brooklyns-domino-sugar-site-waning-opposition-to-prospect-of-luxury-towers.html?_r=0

⁶ Mullarkey, Maureen. "Riddle of the Sphinx, Part II." June 6, 2014. <http://studiomatters.com/riddle-of-the-sphinx-part-ii>

⁷ Powers, Nicholas. "Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit." The Independent. June 30, 2014. <https://independent.org/2014/06/30/why-i-yelled-kara-walker-exhibit>

⁸ King, Jamilah. "Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx Evokes Call from Black Women: 'We Are Here.'" June 23, 2014. <http://www.colorlines.com/articles/kara-walkers-sugar-sphinx-evokes-call-black-women-we-are-here>