Black and White, but Never Simple

By HOLLAND COTTEROCT. 12, 2007

"Slavery! Slavery!" (1997) is among the more than 200 paintings, drawings, collages, puppetry, videos and light projections by Kara Walker at the Whitney Museum of American Art. CreditRuth Fremson/The New York Times

If you have any doubt that racism is alive and well and on a continuous shooting spree in the American psyche, why not ask the experts? Clarence Thomas will have an opinion on this. So will Madonna. G. Constantine, the Columbia University Teachers College professor whose office door was defaced with a noose this week. Or ask the African-American artist Kara Walker, whose exquisite, implacable, loose-cannon retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art is about race first and last.

Ms. Walker first came to art world attention in 1994, when she was 24, with a mural she produced at the Drawing Center in SoHo. It was a narrative panorama with a long, goofy, old-timey title: "Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart." And it was made in an unusual way, from black-paper silhouette figures cut by hand and affixed to the gallery wall.

With its mock-antique form and Old South flavor, the piece had the airy, Valentine's Day prettiness of a romantic ballet. But this was no love story. It was a danse infernal of sex, slavery and chitlin-circuit comedy. Moms Mabley and the Marquis de Sade were the choreographers. Margaret Mitchell did sets. Flannery O'Connor cued the lights.

“Gone” was an instant hit. And placed at the beginning of the survey, “Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love,” it still packs a punch at the Whitney. The scene is set, with the sparest of linear means, on the banks of a bayou with a full black moon overhead. Under a swag of Spanish moss, a Southern belle leans toward her courtly suitor for a kiss. But something’s wrong: an extra pair of legs, thin and bare, emerges from beneath her crinoline. To whom do they belong? And what can their owner be up to under there?

So much for romance. Nearby a child strangles a duck and offers it to a woman whose body doubles as a boat. A second woman lifts a leg and two infants drop to the ground as if she’s defecating babies. Seen in profile, she has caricatured Negroid features, as does a man who floats in the sky above her, buoyed by balloonlike genitals. In the center of the picture, a prepubescent black girl fellates a white boy, possibly a slave-master’s son. Nearby the master is caught in a slapstick coupling with a black woman who spits out her corncob pipe in surprise.

We stay in this freakish world, or its environs, throughout the exhibition, which includes, along with other, larger, more elaborate panoramas, dozens of drawings, collages, prints, text pieces and shadow-puppet film animations. The consistency of the imagery — hapless masters, uppity slaves, tragicomic violence, uncensored sex — is one reason the show feels so concentrated and absorbing. Once you’re in it, you’re really in it. You can’t just stroll through.

Ms. Walker’s style is magnetic. Whether in large cutouts, or notebook-size drawings, or in films that are basically animated versions of both, her draftsmanship is excitingly textured — old-masterish here, doodlish there — and all of a piece. Brilliant is the word for it, and the brilliance grows over the survey’s decade-plus span.

And then there is the theme: race. It dominates everything, yet within it Ms. Walker finds a chaos of contradictory ideas and emotions. She is single-minded in seeing racism as a reality, but of many minds about exactly how that reality plays out in the present and the past. For her the reliable old dualities — white versus black , strong versus weak, victim versus predator — are volatile and shifting. And she uses her art — mocking, shaming, startlingly poignant, excruciatingly personal — to keep them this way.

Nothing about her very early life would seem to have predestined her for this task. Born in 1969, she grew up in an integrated California suburb, part of a generation for whom the uplift and fervor of the civil rights movement and the want-it-now anger of Black Power were yesterday’s news.

When she was 13, her family moved to Atlanta, and her life changed. There, she discovered, integration had not been fully internalized. As she stumbled her way through the mortifications of adolescence, she was constantly reminded, in large and small ways, that she was black, and she was made to hurt for that.

After high school she studied art, first in Atlanta, then at the Rhode Island School of Design. She became aware of artists who influenced her deeply. There was Andy Warhol, with his omnivorous eye and moral distance. And the painter Robert Colescott, who inserted cartoon blacks — grinning Dixie sharecroppers — into van Gogh's Dutch peasant cottages. And there was conceptualist Adrian Piper, who played with her identity as a light-skinned black woman to flush racism out of hiding.
By the time of the Drawing Center show Ms. Walker was clear on her subject and had found a nervy visual language to apply to it. She had success. She found a gallery; she received a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant.

She gained an avid audience, though not necessarily a friendly one. Several African-American artists of an older generation, with careers dating to the 1960s, publicly condemned her use of racial stereotypes as insulting and opportunistic, a way to

A detail from "The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven" (1995).
CreditRuth Fremson/The New York Times

ingratiate herself into a racist white art industry. In 1997 one of these artists tried to organize a museum boycott of her art.

The written attacks on her, which included comments on her marriage to a white man, are sobering reading. They are like made-to-order illustrations of a specific aspect of racism she depicts in her work: black-on-black. Having this perspective was scant help. The accusations stung, and Ms. Walker responded to them in 1997 with a vehement outpouring of diaristic drawings titled "Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?"

Some are text-heavy, direct-address and issue-specific: "What you want: negative images of white people, positive images of blacks." Others are angry, funny, obsessive notes to self, examining race, racism, her own racism, her rejection of it and her dependence on it from many angles and various personas. By moving among these personas — black woman, young Negress, rebellious child, artist under attack — she lets herself operate beyond the risk of personal humiliation. This means that she can draw and say anything and do what she's always trying to do: embarrass us into wisdom. All her work is, in a sense, a form of thinking

out loud, and here it really feels that way, though the thinking is more controlled than it seems. She is an extremely open artist, but she is not heedless. She's careful, fastidious even.

At the Whitney drawings form interludes between more structured work, like the cut-paper installations and projected film animations, one of which, "8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker" (2005), is a highlight of the show.

Like the 19th-century moving panorama paintings on which it is modeled, this film is epic in theme and clearly handmade, with silhouette puppets manipulated by sticks, strings and fingers. It opens with a ship in a stormy sea and bound slaves being pitched overboard. They float to an island called Motherland, which turns into a giant mouth. It swallows and excretes them into the American South, where they are put to work as slaves in cotton fields.

There, in a typically hard-to-interpret scene, one black male slave is impregnated by his white male master after they share a tender embrace, and has a child. In an ordinary film the birth might signal hope, change, a brighter future. Not here. Instead we get lynched slaves hanging from a tree and the recorded voice of Ms. Walker's young daughter saying, "I wish I was white."

So, no answers. History remains this weird, tragic vaudeville show, a free-for-all shootout with everyone gunning for every one else. Some people will object to this as too open-ended a view: art should give answers, yes or no, bring closure. Others will find Ms. Walker's work too narrow: same themes, same images tweaked from piece to piece, show to show.

For me these are not problems. In refusing conclusions, Ms. Walker draws an important one: The source and blame for racism lies with everyone, including herself. It seems we are addicted to it. We claim to hate living with it, but we cannot live without it.

As for variety, if Ms. Walker retired today she would leave behind one of the most trenchant and historically erudite bodies of art produced by any American in the last 15 years, only a portion of which is in the Whitney show, originally organized by Philippe Vergne, deputy director and chief curator at the Walker Art Center, and Yasmil Raymond, assistant curator at that museum.

So fiercely imagined and resolved is her work that one tends to forget she was only in her 20s when she first startled us with its newness. Now she is two years shy of 40, and she is certain to do so again.

"Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love" runs through Feb. 3 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.