

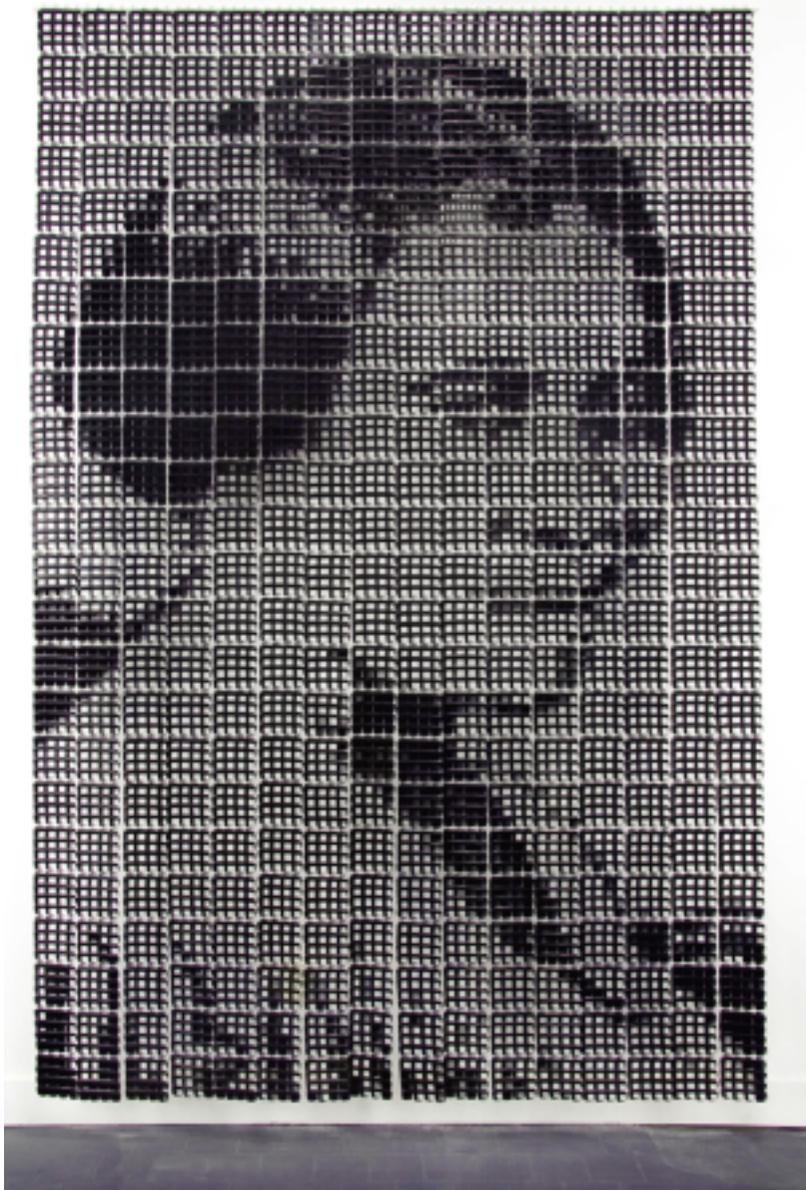
Reviewed by
J. Susan Isaacs

Sonya Clark
Snyderman-Works Galleries

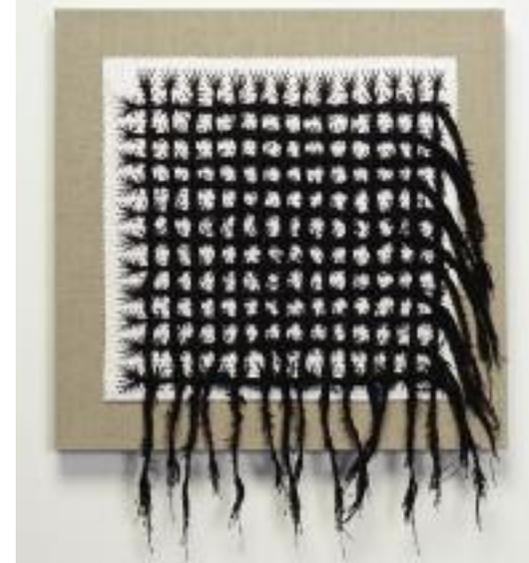
Sonya Clark is not only a hardworking artist with sensitivity to materials, but also one who approaches her practice intellectually and conceptually. Her exhibition at Snyderman-Works Galleries (October 1, 2011-November 19, 2011) demonstrates all of these qualities, and the gallery staff is clearly sympathetic to Clark's particular and unique vision, devoting the entire first floor to her work, presenting a museum-quality exhibition and installation. Many of the new works are the result of a recent Smithsonian Institution Artist Research Fellowship. Clark acknowledges both the Smithsonian and her academic institution, Virginia Commonwealth University, for their support in the excellent accompanying catalogue, which includes the artist's statement: "I investigate simple objects as cultural interfaces."

Hair is defined as "a slender threadlike outgrowth of the epidermis of an animal ... especially the coating of hairs on a human head." Clark's drawing of her husband Darryl's head, with its indication of the points of outgrowth, intimately and intricately expresses this definition. Hair as subject and concept are fundamental to Clark's vision.

Hair is a shared physical characteristic, and its accessories represent everyday objects. However, there is nothing simple about the symbolism of hair, especially in the United States. For Clark, hair is both material and concept, and represents power. A number of the works in the exhibition demonstrate her investigations. The first and foremost of these is the large, velvet appearing *Comb Carpet* composed of thousands of small dime-store type black plastic combs. This is the first work that the viewer confronts upon entrance to the gallery, and it is a large piece that sits on the floor, demanding tactile attention. Clark employs combs as a medium, indicating her interest in collective cultural meanings. Combs tame hair. Taming is a loaded term that indicates that hair can be wild and unruly, connotations that connect to the history of slavery, of black hair vs. white hair, of bad hair vs. good hair.



SONYA CLARK *Madam C.J. Walker Combs*, 10' x 7', 2009.
BELOW: Detail. Photos: Taylor Dabney.



SONYA CLARK *Basketweave Cornrows* Handwoven, embroidered and braided cotton, 17" x 15", 2011.

In Clark's work, combs suggest other meanings as well. One of the very large works in the exhibition is a portrait in combs of the black entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker, who earned millions by creating and promoting a series of hair products specifically for the African-American consumer. This work indicates the ubiquitous presence of the small plastic comb and its suggestion of the huge and unexplored market that Walker tapped into when she began selling her products. A technical *tour de force*, the Walker image represents the creation of a readable image by removing the teeth of combs and then installing them into a controlled pattern.

While Clark is very well known for these large comb images, she has worked with hair as a medium since her graduate school days. Some of the most fascinating new works that are the result of her recent research include *Flat Twist On Remnant Of Idyllic Days* and *Basketweave Cornrows*, both of which appear upon first viewing to be hair applied to fabric, but are in actuality thread on fabric. In *Flat Twist*, Clark sewed thread in a flat-twisted braid pattern onto a popular historical (and still in production) toile-printed Waverly Fabric with images of wealthy white people in 18th-century dress in a pastoral setting. This kind of idyllic life depended upon the labor of enslaved peoples. The contrast of the "hair" sewn onto the surface links the comfort of the wealthy to the labor of the enslaved. The work encompasses the width of the fabric with selvages intact, while the bottom appears torn or unevenly cut with a rough and purposely awkward non-beautiful edge. The surface appearance of the idyllic life masks its underlying brutality.



Flat Twist On Remnant Of Idyllic Days Printed cloth and embroidery, 48" x 53", 2010.

Basketweave Cornrows similarly explores hair as a cultural identifier. Creating cornrows with embroidery thread, Clark indicates the complexity of hair patterns and the relationship between hair and fabric techniques, such as weaving. Cornrows are a traditional African style of hairdressing where the braids are very close to the scalp. In this work, the rows form a pattern that indicates the weft and warp of weaving at the same time that the ends of each row across and down end in frayed forms that strongly suggest real hair.

Black Hair Flag is even more politically overt in its content. Other artists have employed the American flag as the subject of their work. Clark builds upon David Hammons's and Faith Ringgold's politically charged images. Here she brings together the highly controversial Confederate flag and the American flag in blue and red paint on canvas. Clark adds the American stars and stripes with braided and sewn thread that looks like hair. This work is so incredibly loaded with history and meaning that an entire article could be written on it alone.

Abacus and *Heritage Pearls* suggest such ideas as the human toll of the institution of slavery and the beauty and wealth of the African-American heritage. Sonya Clark is a master at joining aesthetic considerations with significant content.

Sonya Clark exhibition catalogs can be purchased for \$10 from Snyderman-Works Galleries; (215) 238-9576; kat@snyderman-works.com; www.snyderman-works.com.

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