

SPRÜTH MAGERS

Kara Walker
Sprüth Magers, Berlin
March 11 – April 4, 2020

Following on from the acclaimed Kara Walker exhibition at their London gallery, and concurrent with the artist's ongoing Tate Modern Turbine Hall commission in London, Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are proud to present a new exhibition of work by Kara Walker at their Berlin gallery. The exhibition in Berlin will present Walker's film work *National Archives Microfilm M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road*, 2009, alongside a monumental 2013 installation piece that is a brilliant example of Walker's silhouetted wall works – entitled *THE SOVEREIGN CITIZENS SESQUICENTENNIAL CIVIL WAR CELEBRATION*.

This film, from 2009, was developed from Walker's research into the U.S. National Archives on the War Department's Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, established in 1865 to aid former slaves in the transition to freedom following the American Civil War. The Bureau kept precise records of the brutal and senseless violence inflicted on former slaves during the Reconstruction period, and Walker's film depicts one such incident, detailed in the archives through interviews with a family who was attacked and were victims of arson. Set in Springfield, a small town just north of Nashville, Tennessee, a seemingly tranquil and idyllic scene of an African-American family quickly descends into a nightmarish vision of murder, rape, and arson, all fuelled by racial prejudice. *Six Miles from Springfield* alludes to the tradition of shadow theatre with glimpses of the human puppeteers visible throughout the film, in a playful attitude starkly contrasted with the subject and message of the film. A painful narrative with a handmade aesthetic, this colourful video is a departure from Walker's monochrome works in both video and other media.

Walker's characters are deliberately caricatured to mimic historical cartoons and silhouettes that were often used to negatively depict black people throughout much of America's history – though particularly around the time of the civil war, and in the antebellum South. Whilst silhouetted imagery was considered rather refined when used to depict white figures, it was exploited for degradation and humour with regard to the depiction of black (or indeed, non-white) people. Walker draws attention to the unjustness of racism during this period by ironically embracing such stereotypes.

Where *Six Miles from Springfield* looks back at historic racial conflicts, *THE SOVEREIGN CITIZENS SESQUICENTENNIAL CIVIL WAR CELEBRATION* brings these tensions into the contemporary realm – though still within the lens of the Civil War. Part of a body of work inspired by Walker's research into white supremacist movements and gun culture in contemporary America, this frieze work depicts an imaginary battle re-enactment scene from the anniversary celebrations that took place across America in 2011 to mark 150 years since the beginning of the Civil War. Inspired by the prevalent culture in some Southern states that actively forges the myth of the 'Lost Cause of the Confederacy' (a pseudo-historical ideology advocating the idea that the Confederates' cause was not

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only justified but also heroic), and the associated mindset of white supremacy, this is an intricately cut-paper silhouette wall work on an enormous scale at approximately twenty metres in length and five in height.

Featuring silhouettes rendered in white against a deep grey background, Walker's classically composed and inspired frieze adopts a tympanum-style triangular format, however the depicted silhouettes are crude and distinctly un-classical in style. Employing similarly explicit caricatures as in *Six Miles from Springfield*, Walker uses this historically inspired yet rudimentary iconography to demonstrate how attitudes towards race are still a prevalent issue in the contemporary United States. Through characters drawn from American popular culture – both historical and contemporary – she exposes the darker side of human behaviour, presenting a panoramic vista of clichés of America's Deep South, moving clockwise from celebration morphing quickly into civil war-style racial violence and finally victory, or conquest. An acerbic nod to the nostalgia still felt by some for the antebellum, colonialist days, this work is exemplary of Walker's typically candid and polemical dark comedy. Appearing whimsical, upon closer inspection there are disturbing and violent scenes of sexual harassment, fighting, torture, and even death, exploring themes of race, violence, sexuality, and gender.

Ultimately Walker's work is a candid examination of power through the exploration of racial and cultural myths and stereotypes, articulating the agonising suffering from within American history that continues to reverberate through contemporary culture – visually, socially, economically, and politically. It is a damning commentary on the current state of society that is recognisable across the globe, not just in America, and asks uncomfortable but vital questions about personal and collective attitudes towards issues of race and inequality.

Kara Walker (*1969, Stockton, USA) was raised in Atlanta and lives and works in New York. A retrospective of her work was organised by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA (2007) and traveled to ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris; Whitney Museum, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth, Texas. Other solo exhibitions include those at the Domino Sugar Refinery, Brooklyn, organized by Creative Time, New York (2014); Camden Arts Centre, London (2013); Art Institute of Chicago (2013); Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland (2011); and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2006). Walker's *Katastwóf Karavan* was recently presented as part of Prospect.4 (2017-18), New Orleans, and other major group exhibitions include ones at the Whitney Museum, New York (2015); MAXXI, Rome (2013); the 11th Havana Biennial (2012); the 2007 Venice Biennale and the 1997 Whitney Biennial. An extensive exhibition focused on her films was recently presented at Sprüth Magers London (2019), and Walker's Hyundai Commission for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the monumental sculpture *Fons Americanus*, will be open to the public until April 5, 2020.

For further information and press enquiries, contact Silvia Baltschun (sb@spruethmagers.com).

Public reception: Tuesday, March 10, 6 – 9pm

Opening hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm